

TRAVEL

Where do French presidents unwind? This stunning medieval fortress.

Few international visitors make it to this corner of the Mediterranean, where France's head of state has vacationed since the 1960s. From a tour of the impressive fort itself, to the surrounding villages and vineyards, here's why it's worth a trip.



Since 2014, the Fort de Brégançon has been open to the public for three-hour guided tours.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CISCARDI GABRIEL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

By Mary Winston Nicklin

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strutting the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival, super yachts cruising the Mediterranean offshore. But few international visitors frequent the idyllic stretch of coast to the west of Saint-Tropez.

Backed by hillside nature reserves blanketed in cork oak forest, this dreamy shoreline also happens to be home to the French president's official holiday retreat. What was once an impregnable fortress prized by marauding pirates is now the high-security Fort de Brégançon. When Emmanuel Macron is not in residence, it's open to small guided visits through the local tourism office. Not only is it a chance to see how the president unwinds, but it's also a showcase of French design and decorative arts, with pieces chosen specifically by the president from the vast furniture repository of the Mobilier National.

Touring the fort

Silhouetted against the sky, with 115-foot cliffs plunging into the sea, the Fort de Brégançon lords over the coast from the end of a peninsula. No wonder this strategic anchorage has been fought over since antiquity; a smitten Napoleon even kitted it out with cannons.

Established as the French president's holiday home in 1968 under Charles de Gaulle, it serves a dual function as a comfortable hideaway for relaxation, and also as the setting for diplomatic meetings.

Since 2014, the Fort de Brégançon has been open to the public for three-hour guided tours. From the gate, you'll walk across a spit of land, sandwiched between a beach and a forest owned by the Luxembourg ducal family, before passing through security. (The zone is also secured at sea;

Emmanuel Macron opted for contemporary pieces to complement the existing ensemble that includes designer Pierre Paulin's iconic tricolor banquette, resembling the French flag, that greets you in the vestibule. The oldest space is the medieval-era Chapel Room; its wood-paneled walls carved with ornamental scallop shells is a nod to the nearby Way of St James pilgrimage route.

The office is a portal into the presidential *modus operandi*: A sleek cherry desk, a stereo and Kennedy-inspired red telephone, a miniature bronze rooster that's a copy of the one on the Notre Dame spire, and bookshelves where you can sneak a peek at what the president is reading.





From cobblestone streets to islands, the French Riviera has been an appealing destination for generations.

PHOTOGRAPH BY COLIN MICHAEL BAKER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (TOP) (LEFT) AND PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM RUMBAUM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (BOTTOM) (RIGHT)

Château Malherbe, overlooking Fort de Bégançon and occupying what was once its farm, this family-owned wine domain is situated at the end of the well-named Route du Bout du Monde (“Route at the End of the World”). It’s a place of stunning natural beauty, flanked by a rare primary forest that is protected as part of the Natura 2000 network.

There are Roman ruins on the property, where vines have been cultivated for more than 2,000 years. The Ferrari family see themselves as caretakers of the land and its terroir, which produces exceptional Rolle and Sémillon whites, roses, and the Madame Ferrari red—a blend of grapes from the oldest parcels (some vines are 80 years old). All are harvested by hand, and managed biodynamically.

(These under-the-radar French Riviera towns offer quiet charm)

“We’ve never used chemical pesticides,” says Adélie Ferrari, who works alongside her father as the fifth-generation of the family overseeing Château Malherbe. “We were organic before it was called organic.”

Bormes-les-Mimosas: Classified a “most beautiful village of France,” this medieval hamlet is perched high in the hills with the sea shimmering in the distance. The tangle of cobbled lanes are flanked by sherbet-colored

Browse the galleries and boutiques (La Maison du Bonheur sells hand-crafted fragrances and candles made with local mimosa) and then settle into a long, leisurely lunch. If you're traveling in February, note that the village pulls out all the stops for the annual Corso fleuri (Flower Parade).



Route des Crêtes travels through Massif des Maures, a small mountain range.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RENAN GICQUEL/ GETTY IMAGES

Route des Crêtes: Arguably one of the world's prettiest roads, this mimosa-magic route winds through the densely forested Massif des Maures, with overlooks offering pinch-me panoramas of the Mediterranean far below. It's the best of *terre* and *mer*, with the gnarled cork oak trees evoking the wilderness just a seagull's swoop from the coast.

minute journey to Rayol-Canadel-sur-Mer. Access is limited in summer due to the risk of forest fires.

(How to explore Paris from the seat of a bicycle)

Villa Noailles: Queen Victoria was an early trendsetter in the 1890s, with a stay in Hyères that helped launch it as one of the original Riviera resorts. It was here where another pioneering pair, the influential 20th-century art patrons Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles, would build a dream home on a plot of land received as a wedding gift. Designed in 1923 by Robert Mallet-Stevens, the villa was one of France's first modernist buildings, its experimental spaces ornamented by avant-garde icons.

These days, Villa Noailles is an arts center that hosts exhibitions, workshops for kids, and two major annual cultural festivals: the Design Parade Hyères and the International Festival of Fashion, Photography, and Accessories.

Îles d'Hyères: Also known as the Îles d'Or, these “golden islands” include Île du Levant (reserved for the military, except for the naturist colony at Heliopolis), Port-Cros (part of **a national park**), and Porquerolles (white sandy beaches, trails, and the **Villa Carmignac contemporary art center**).

Domaine de Rayol: Owned by the Conservatoire du littoral (Coastal Protection Agency), this botanical garden was designed by revered landscape designer Gilles Clement. The property is a protected paradise—extending to the beach and into the sea where you can even snorkel through the marine garden on a guided tour. There are surprises in every



The Eden Rose is located in Bormes-les-Mimosas, classified as a "most beautiful village of France."

PHOTOGRAPH BY GAUTIER STEPHANE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Where to stay

More than a place to sleep, the 37-room boutique Lilou Hotel is a Hyères hot spot. The restaurant—awarded “best wine menu 2025”—is a lively scene with music and DJ sets on the weekends. In the corridors, Roman-style mosaics spell out author Robert Louis Stevenson’s words: “I was only happy once: that was at Hyères.”

What was once a salt production site has been transformed by a local family into the five-star Le Hameau des Pesquiers eco-lodge after a meticulous restoration of the historical buildings.

The stately 43-room Eden Rose Grand Hotel was reborn as the Eden Rose in 2021 after a big renovation. The spa offers customized retreats and detox escapes in the winter months.

Where to eat

Jérôme and Patricia Masson welcome diners like house guests for a sea-centric, fixed-price dinner menu at [La Rastègue](#) in Bormes-les-Mimosas.

With white parasols set in the sand, [Tropicana Club](#) has been a beach destination in Canadel since 1965. Stake your claim to a sun lounger for the day (you can also do half-day rentals), or reserve for dinner. Toast the sunset with a chilled glass of local rose, then tuck into grilled fish pulled from the sea by local fishermen just hours before.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a better vantage point to admire the views while immersing yourself in the Provençal good life then at [Le Relais du Vieux Sauvaire](#). The restaurant sources ingredients from local producers and the property's own vegetable garden.

Not far from the Fort de Brégançon, the Parc d'Estagnol is a protected, family-owned estate with a crescent beach edged by pine forest. Regional specialties—including bouillabaisse, lobster, and Provençal *anchoïade*—are cooked in a wood-fired oven at [Restaurant L'Estagnol](#).

A single five-course tasting menu—a celebration of local terroir—is served on a leafy terrace at [La Farigoulette](#) in Le Lavandou. Chef Cyril Marécaux and his partner Kristina Hucke have created a warm, friendly destination that's open year-round.

Gil Renard established La Tonnelle in 1998 and it's been a locally loved favorite in the heart of the medieval village since. He works directly with market gardeners and fishermen, exalting Mediterranean cuisine which he accents with exotic spices from his travels. There's a panoramic terrace, and a toy shop inside.

(How Black culture has shaped Paris—and where to experience it)

When to go

Summer is high season in the south of France, and the fort is closed to the public during the presidential *séjour*. With fewer crowds but ample sunshine, September is sublime. However many locals will tell you that winter, empty of tourists, is especially appealing: Temperatures are mild and the mimosa trees burst into bloom.

How to do it

The price is 12 euros, booked 72 hours in advance, for a maximum group size of 20, and you must bring a passport or government-issued photo ID.

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