

past the roundabout

The Legendary Legacy of St. Tropez

STORY AND PHOTOS BY OLIVER SHARPE, SPECIAL TO TIME OUT



St. Tropez suits me. Then again, I guess the Côte d'Azur suits anyone, as long as they are into bountiful sunshine, large format wines and gazing at La Mer Méditerranée. Typically, I do my snacking, drinking and merrymaking in Aspen around 8,000 feet. Like so many other elite endurance athletes, training at altitude gives me an advantage when I descend from on high to ply my trades by the seashore. The French Riviera proved no different and I tackled the many challenges of excess leisure with ease.

I arrived at La Réserve Ramatuelle in early June, well ahead of the madding crowds and ignoble heat of July and August. Ramatuelle is a rural area to the southwest of St. Tropez. Vineyards, modest homes and chicken shacks dot the road to La Réserve. Just as you begin to think that the movie "And God Created Woman" might have been full of *merde*, a fashionably rusted steel gate bearing an elephant peels back and the majestic Mediterranean is laid bare.

La Réserve, Michael Reybier's luxury hospitality concept, boasts four five-star properties around the world. Each is a study in refined luxury meant to immediately put guests at ease. La Reserve Ramtuelle also has a Michelin-starred restaurant onsite which immediately put my appetite at ease. La Voile is helmed by chef Eric Canino, who artfully appeals to multiple senses by transforming the view at which you are looking into flavors on your plate. It is some next-level visual and gastronomic harmony.

My one quibble with La Reserve, and this stems solely from my deep-seeded gluten-free intolerance, was the inclusion of a "gluten-free" table at an otherwise impeccable breakfast spread. I consider this an affront to the *boulangers* and chef *pâtisseries* who toiled for thousands of years with grain products in order to perfect the bread basket. What other culinary tradition could breed the maniacal genius who would think to improve on the croissant — itself a flaky miracle of flour, butter, eggs and

air — by filling it with chocolate? Pay your respects to the pastry-maker.

St. Tropez has no shortage of signature products, among them a fine pastry. The tart *Tropezienne* comes in a multitude of sizes and flavors. A robust brioche filled with cream and sprinkled with coarse sugar is the ultimate accompaniment to an espresso while shopping in the harbor. It joins the moccasins *Tropezienne*, sandals *Tropezienne* and chemise *Tropeziennes* as local products that you must support. There are plenty of opportunities to support the usual luxury brands but it is better to encourage the local economy on Tuesdays and Saturdays when the Place de Lices is transformed into a bazaar. Everything from headdresses and Opinel knives to fresh truffles and herbes de Provence are on offer to test your haggling skills. En Français, of course.

Before the French capitulated to the influx of mega-yachts to St. Tropez, the harbor was defended by a heavily armed fortification on a hill whose cannon could crush a Spanish galleon from 1,000 yards. The dungeons of the Citadelle St. Tropez are now home to quite an impressive little maritime museum that covers everything from swashbuckling pirates to local sea life and is certainly worth a visit. The day I was there a peacock was parading the battlements, tail feathers flared. The peacock, I later learned, was Leon, resident of the mythical Byblos hotel for more than a decade.

Hotel le Byblos is also home to Alain Ducasse's Rivea restaurant. Impeccable service and simple yet extraordinary food were the highlights of this meal. My interest piqued by the roadside rotisseries I had encountered en route to Ramatuelle, I ordered the *poulet roti* and was not disappointed. Accompanied by fried potatoes in the shape of fried onions (genius) it was a juicy, delectable bird enjoyed under the scornful gaze of Leon who stood sentry on the hotel roof. My server at Rivea led me to Le Clos, my favorite wine of the trip. Produced by Clos Saint-Vincent in the Bellet appellation, which is

renowned primarily for rose, this red knocked my moccasin *Tropezienne* right off.

There is no shortage of great wine to be had, much of it unavailable in the United States. Rose is effectively cheaper than water and you might just find yourself bathing in Whispering Angel and brushing with Domaine Ott. A welcome change to the grooming routine, if you ask me. You will also be exposed to the lesser known, but equally delicious, local producers.

Agritourismo, and more specifically "oenotourisme" is alive and well in the area partly in thanks to the Routes des vins de Provence, a marketing website connecting the dots between the region's multitudinous winemakers. I visited Domaine La Touraque, which consists of 200 acres of farmland abutting the Mediterranean Sea and has been in Sebastian Craveris' family for 200 years. Once given solely to sustenance farming, the main focus now is vineyards. However, with an eye toward a warmer future that might drive the alcohol content of their wines over 15 percent, the family has recently diversified into olive trees.

Domaine Touraques is exactly the type of place on earth that will leave you cursing your ancestors for not having settled on better turf. Here's a tip for family-oriented readers: Secure fertile wine-producing land on private beaches immediately. Your grandchildren will thank you.

There comes a point on every trip during which you are no longer thinking of what to pack or hailing a taxi or disrobing to pass through security. And you haven't yet begun to ponder putting new purchases into an already overstuffed suitcase, how to combat jet-lag or parse those thousands of ignored emails. When the hotel slippers have fully formed to your foot, the view of the Mediterranean from the shower becomes pedestrian and the passing of time is measured only by the orbiting of yachts around their moorings — that, my friends, is the vacation.

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