

DRIVE ALONG THE CORNICHES

Snaking along the French Riviera, the three coastal roads provide a fabulous journey for anyone who enjoys Mediterranean panoramas and a thrilling drive. Highest is the Grande Corniche with its hairpin bends around cliffs, while the Basse Corniche hugs the coast and the Moyenne Corniche takes the middle route. This is a drive along the three corniches, one of the articles in the **BERLITZ HANDBOOK TO FRANCE**



RIVIERA

The three corniche coast roads abound with scenic views and dramatic settings. A day's drive from Nice will take you to Belle Epoque resorts, Roman ruins and picturesque medieval hill villages along the way

From Place Ile de Beauté on Nice's Vieux Port, take Boulevard Carnot (D6098), start of the Basse (lower) Corniche. After about 5km (3 miles), turn right off the corniche into Villefranche-sur-Mer, whose natural deep-water harbour was the main port of Nice for centuries and is now a stop for cruise ships. Fork left down Avenue Sadi Carnot and park on Place Wilson by the 16th century Citadelle.

Overlooking the harbour is the Medieval Chapelle Saint-Pierre, known as the Cocteau Chapel because of its frescoes painted by writer and filmmaker Jean Cocteau (1889-1963). Up a few steps, Place Amélie Pollonais is home to a flea market on Sundays and the pleasant brasserie Le Cosmo. Beyond the chapel, Quai Courbet is lined with fish restaurants, including la Mère Germaine.

LEFT: View over Cap Ferrat from the Jardin Exotique at Eze

(Picture: CRT Riviera Côte d'Azur / Robert Palomba)

INSET: Map of the Corniches Drive from the Berlitz Handbook to France

BELOW: Chapelle Cocteau

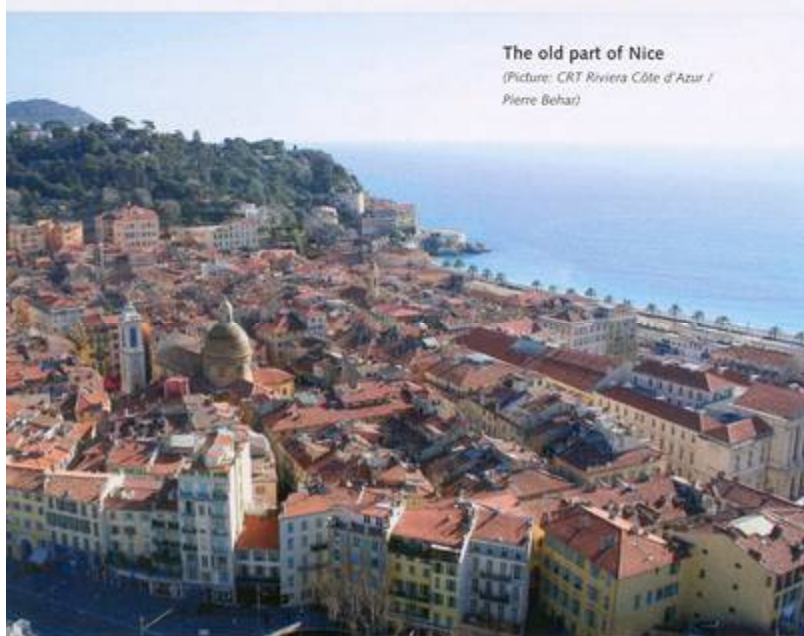
(Picture: CRT Riviera Côte d'Azur / Georges Verani)





The principality of Monaco

(Picture: CRT Riviera Côte d'Azur /
Pierre Behar)



The old part of Nice

(Picture: CRT Riviera Côte d'Azur /
Pierre Behar)



Belle Epoque casino at Beaulieu- sur-Mer (Picture: Carmen Koropka)

ALONG THE ROUTE

Prefecture of the Alpes-Maritimes and France's fifth-largest city, **Nice** was a resort by the mid-18th century. The style of its architecture, from Medieval to early 20th century, is Genoese, but it was the British who created the Promenade des Anglais, now a 3km (2 mile) traffic-clogged boulevard.

Its old town, with a colourful morning market and many terrace cafés, harbours the **Musée National Marc Chagall** (www.musee-chagall.fr; May-Oct Wed-Mon 10am-6pm, Nov-Apr until 5pm; charge), containing Chagall's masterpiece, *Le Message Biblique*. By the excavated Roman ruins in the chic Cimiez district is the **Musée Matisse** (www.musee-matisse-nice.org; Wed-Mon 10am-6pm; free), which contains the artist's bronzes.

Until 1860, when France annexed Nice, the Var river was the French border. The Var Corniche (Avenue Auguste-Renoir from Cagnes) follows the west bank of the river, and three corniches, one above the other, traverse the 30km (20 miles) from Nice to Italy.

Merging with Nice to the east, **Villefranche-sur-Mer** is a surprisingly unspoilt little town, built around one of the deepest harbours in the world. Beyond is the refuge of the seriously rich, **Cap Ferrat**, where the **Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild** (www.villa-ephrussi.com; Feb-Oct daily 10am-6pm, July-Aug until 7pm, Nov-Jan Mon-Fri 2-6pm, weekends and schools 10am-6pm; charge) gives a hint of the 1920s millionaire lifestyle.

Just the other side of the Cap is **Beaulieu-sur-Mer**, with some of the best hotels on the Riviera, and which lays claim to the best climate on the coast, protected from the north wind by a great rock face. The **Villa Grecque Kérylos** (www.villa-kerylos.com; same opening hours as Villa Ephrussi; charge) is a complete reconstruction of an ancient Greek villa with cool courtyards open to the sea.

The tiny perched village of **Eze**, high above the sea with the finest views on the whole Riviera, is restored to the last stone: a bijou museum of Medieval detail. High up on the Grande Corniche beyond Eze there is a dramatic view of Monaco from the Roman monument **Le Trophée des Alpes** (mid-May to mid-Sept Tue-Sun 9.30am-1pm, 2.30-6.30pm, mid-Sept to mid-May 10am-1.30pm, 2.30-5pm; charge) at La Turbie.

Between the 1870s and 1980s, **Monte-Carlo** was the roulette capital of Europe, and the wintering place of the very rich and of mothers with eligible daughters. Today, the administrative area of the principality of Monaco has become the Miami of the Mediterranean. A stroll from the Palace through the old quarter leads to the cathedral and **Jardin Exotique**.

Further along the coast on the Italian border, **Menton**, pretty and well protected, remains more reserved than its neighbours, with a good beach, several exotic gardens and a lively lemon festival before Lent.

RIGHT:
Villa Kérylos,
jutting out
over the sea
below the
cliffs (Picture:
Carmen Koropka)



BELOW:
Villa Ephrussi
(Picture: Carmen
Koropka)



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Return to the D6098, then shortly after, take the D25 right towards Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, a millionaires' enclave. A side road turns left to the Italianate Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild with beautiful gardens, and the tiny port has some upmarket restaurants, such as la Voile d'Or.

The D25 continues east into palmy Belle Epoque Beaulieu-sur-Mer, where you can visit the Villa Grecque Kérylos.

Back on the Basse Corniche, another 7km (4.5 miles) east of Eze-Bord-de-Mer, Cap d'Ail on the right has some Belle Epoque gems, such as the former Eden Palace Hotel, where a footpath leads down to Plage Mala, a beautiful beach with the trendy Eden restaurant.

Continue through Monaco, taking the Tunnel du Serrouville to Port Hercule and follow signs for Menton. At the end of Boulevard d'Italie return to France on the D6098; fork left onto the D6007 and left towards Roquebrune-Cap-Martin on the D2564, the Grande Corniche. Turn off right to Roquebrune Village, clinging to the hillside in a network of alleys, and park at the foot on Place Birigliano, from where steps lead up to the square for lunch in La Grotte, or smarter Les Deux Frères. At the top sits a 10th century chateau, enlarged by the Grimaldis of Monaco, who ruled Roquebrune until 1860.

Heading west, the Grande Corniche zigzags for 8km (5 miles) to La Turbie, where the Café de la Fontaine is a superb place to eat. Park on the square and walk through one of the medieval gateways along narrow streets to Le Trophée des Alpes, built up high in honour of Emperor Augustus.

Continue westwards along the D2564, and turn left on the D45 which joins the D6007. This is the Moyenne Corniche, built in the 1920s. Park below Eze Village, a well-restored tourist village, perched on a rocky crag and accessible only on foot. Its Jardin Exotique is a feast of cacti and succulents.

It's another 10km (6 miles) along the D6007 to return to Nice.

TIPS

- Distance: 43km (27 miles)
- Time: one day
- Start: Vieux Port, Nice
- End: Eze Village
- The Basse and Moyenne Corniches are now D roads, but you may still find road signs and maps indicating the N98 and N7
- Part of this tour is possible by public transport; frequent trains between Nice and Menton stop at Villefranche-sur-Mer, Beaulieu and Cap d'Ail
- Eze station is at Eze-Bord-de-Mer and not Eze Village; similarly, the nearest station for Roquebrune Village is Carnolès, followed by a steep footpath