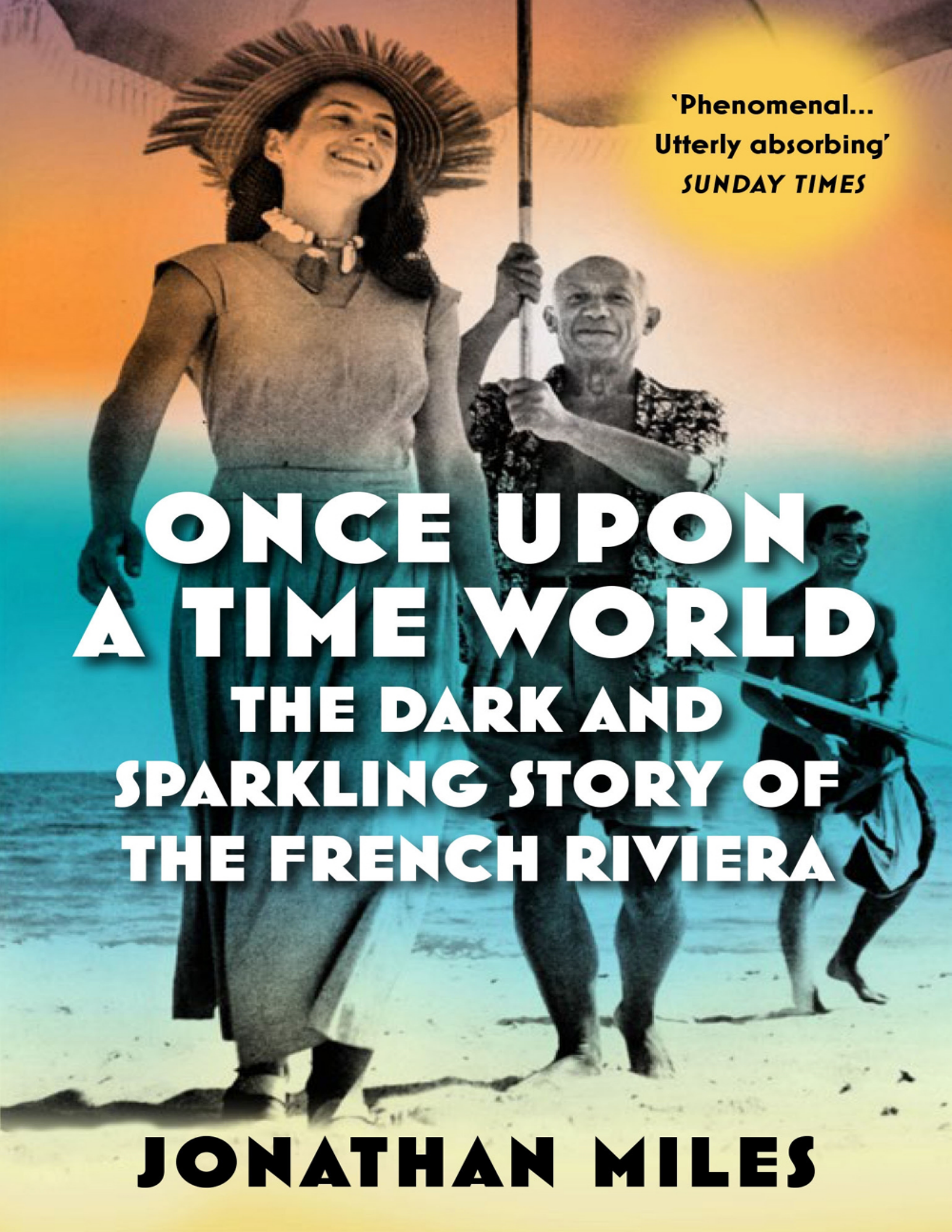
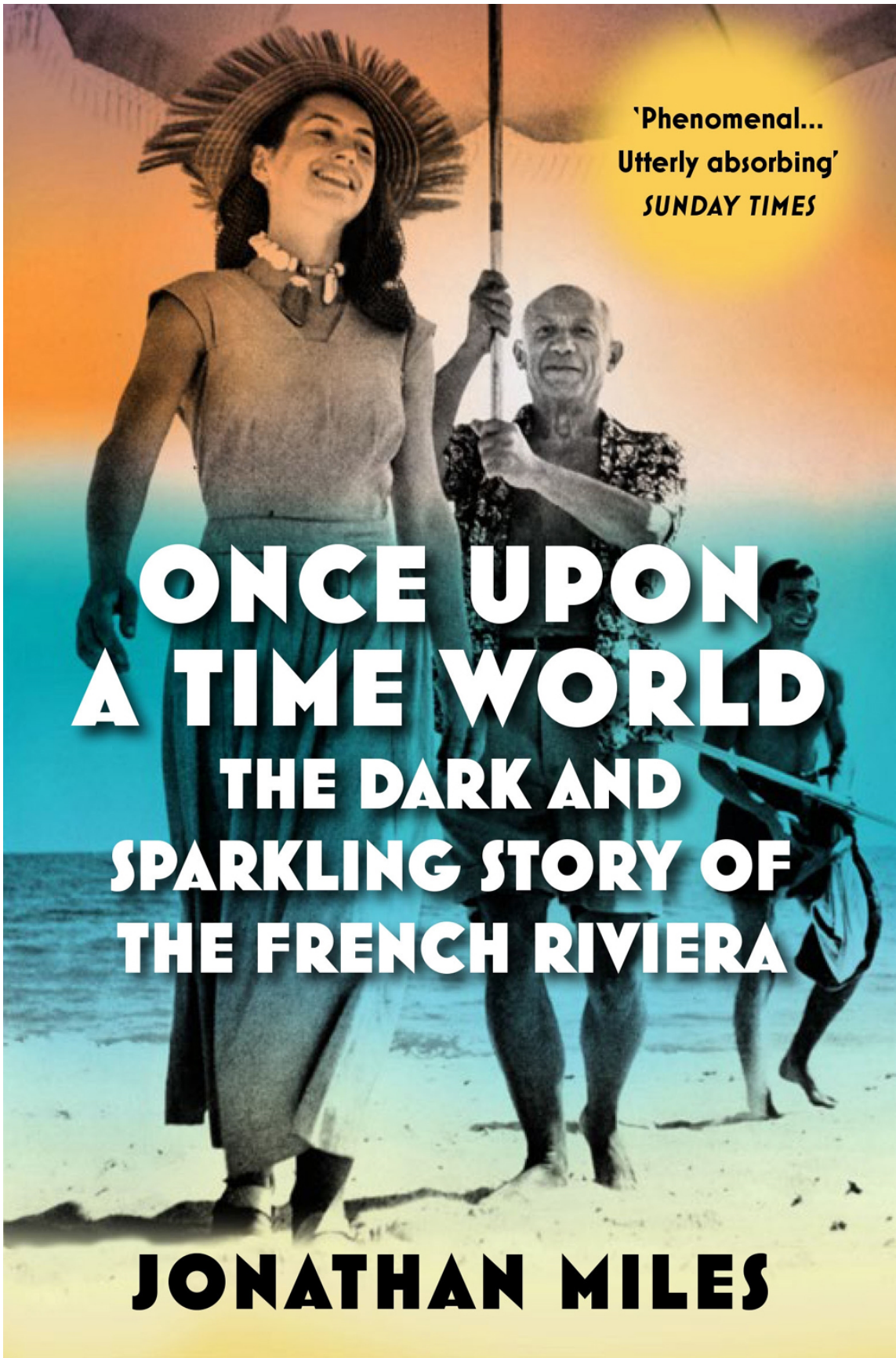


A vintage photograph of a woman in a large straw hat and a man holding an umbrella on a beach. The woman is in the foreground, smiling, wearing a light-colored dress and a large, wide-brimmed straw hat with a feathered band. The man is behind her, holding a large, light-colored umbrella. He is wearing a patterned shirt and dark shorts. In the background, another man is walking on the beach, carrying a surfboard. The scene is set on a sandy beach with the ocean in the background.

**'Phenomenal...
Utterly absorbing'
SUNDAY TIMES**

ONCE UPON A TIME WORLD THE DARK AND SPARKLING STORY OF THE FRENCH RIVIERA

JONATHAN MILES

A vintage photograph of a woman in a large straw hat and a man holding an umbrella on a beach. The woman is in the foreground, smiling, wearing a light-colored dress and a large, wide-brimmed straw hat with a feathered band. The man is behind her, holding a long-handled umbrella. In the background, another man is walking on the beach. The sky is a mix of orange and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall tone is nostalgic and elegant.

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SUNDAY TIMES

**ONCE UPON
A TIME WORLD
THE DARK AND
SPARKLING STORY OF
THE FRENCH RIVIERA**

JONATHAN MILES

ONCE UPON A TIME WORLD

Jonathan Miles received a first from University College, London, before being awarded his doctorate from Jesus College, Oxford. Among his books are *Medusa*, which was published to international acclaim and is now in pre-production for a full-length film, and *St Petersburg*, a *Times* History Book of the Year and the first volume in an informal trilogy about iconic places created by strangers. *Once Upon a Time World* – the second in that series – is born of Jonathan's engagement with the French Riviera stretching back over three decades. He and his wife divide their time between France and Italy. www.jonathanmiles.net

'Jonathan Miles's evocation of the French Riviera is as fascinating in its historical sweep as its devotion to gossip and misbehaviour... *Once Upon a Time World* is a phenomenal work of research across hundreds of histories, biographies, memoirs and letters. It shifts with masterly control across a dozen arenas, from high art to low scandal, taking in fashion, sport, ballet and motor racing. It's utterly absorbing, indelicate to a shocking degree and I devoured every page of it.' *Sunday Times*, 'Book of the Week'

'An entertaining roller-coaster ride through the region's glamorously decadent and licentious history.' *Daily Telegraph*

‘The French Riviera emerges from this well-researched, enthusiastically shaped book as a constant temptation.’
Financial Times

‘In this fabulous romp of a book, Jonathan Miles tells the story of how an 80-mile stretch of rocky shoreline from St Tropez in the west to Menton on the Italian border became history’s first international playground for the rich and famous... Miles’s hectic and choppy narrative gets this star-spotting mood perfectly.’ *Mail on Sunday*

‘Entertaining and wide-ranging... Effortlessly readable, Jonathan Miles’s portrait of the sparkling but shady Côte d’Azur is complemented by a clutch of images gorgeous enough to grace a small guestroom on any Riviera oligarch’s superyacht.’ *Literary Review*

‘Seemingly all the people who made history passed through at some stage. Distant conflicts, revolutions and financial crises, as much as the oscillations of Paris fashion, all echoed on the Côte-D’Azur. Miles chronicles all this with a keen eye for piquant details.’ *The Economist*

‘Jonathan Miles captures the glitzy hedonism of this decadent playground in the sun for the rich (and fake rich)... A lyrical history of the region that so beguiled the world, Jonathan Miles’s compelling book features tale after tale which show us the madness that lies at the heart of the Riviera.’ *Irish Independent*

‘Whichever phenomenal place Miles visits next, it will be worth accompanying him.’ *Washington Examiner*



Also by Jonathan Miles

St Petersburg: Three Centuries of Murderous Desire

Medusa: The Shipwreck, the Scandal and the Masterpiece

The Nine Lives of Otto Katz

Try the Wilderness First

The Maker Unmade

Backgrounds to David Jones

**ONCE UPON
A TIME WORLD
THE DARK AND
SPARKLING STORY OF
THE FRENCH RIVIERA**

JONATHAN MILES



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London

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Map: Detail from map of the French Riviera, 1890s. (*duncan1890/Getty Images*)

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For Katiu

Following *St Petersburg: Three Centuries of Murderous Desire*, I offer the second volume of an informal trilogy dedicated to phenomenal places created by strangers.

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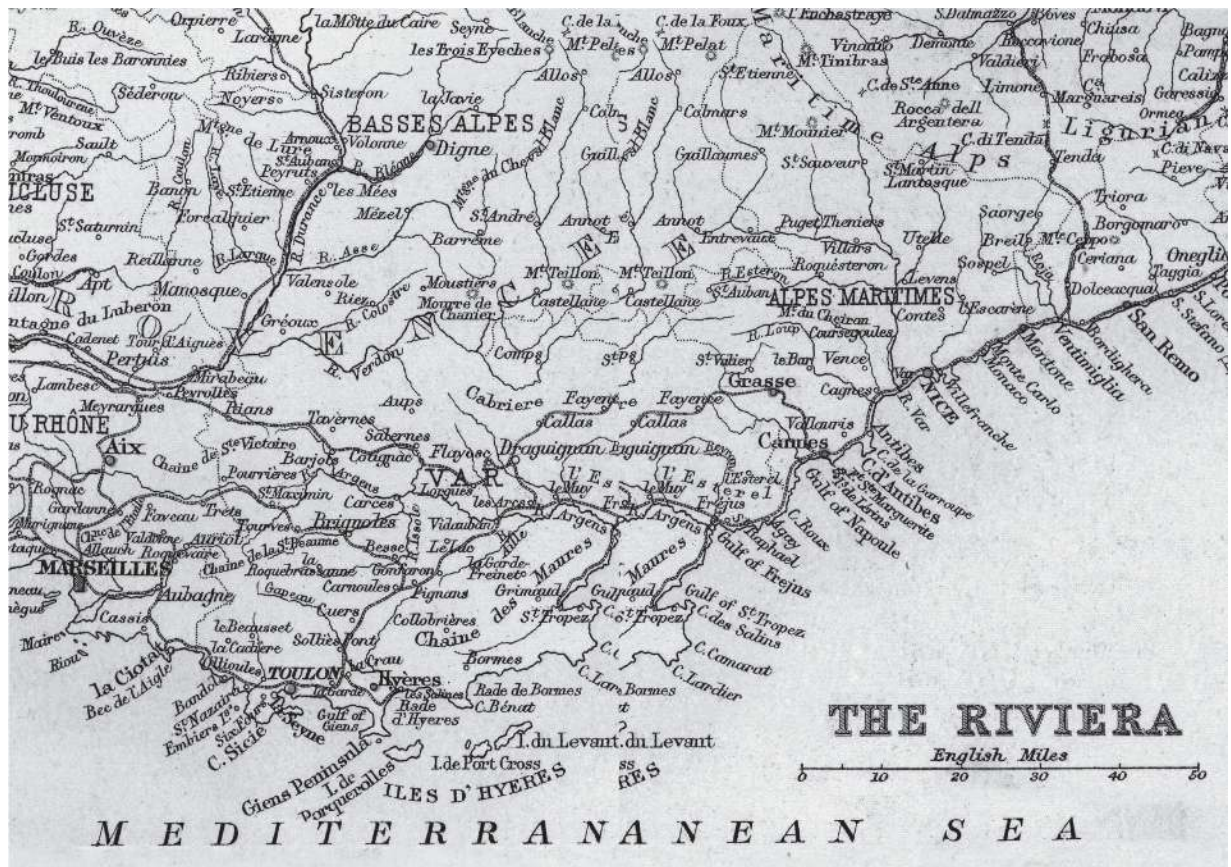
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The Voices of Paradise



A secret for centuries, the south-eastern coast of France became the Riviera. It brazenly created and recreated itself in the image of successive visitors attracted by its sun, sea and fragrant air. To become so famous, so desired, and yet prove incapable of satisfying everybody's dreams, is a tough destiny. Paradise was threatened – but there was much passion, wit, intrigue and splendour along the way. This strip of land hosted cultural phenomena well in excess of its tiny size. A mere handful of towns and villages transformed by foreigners enticed the talented, rich and famous – as well as those who wanted to be. For two centuries of opulence, scandal, war and corruption, the Riviera was a temptation.

Nineteenth-century visitors came south to keep themselves alive or to die on a temperate coast that one Belle Époque writer called 'an outdoor hospital'. These winter residents were often overbearing. Foreigners with spending power, they imposed their will and their languages. There was palpable xenophobia on all fronts. The English mocked their hosts, while the French were amused by English self-importance, German pedanticism and Russian bombast. By 1870, Nice – a medium-sized town of 50,000 plus – hosted consulates and therefore visitors from countries as widespread as Turkey, Chile, Mexico and Uruguay. The list grew.¹ The early quest for self-preservation was succeeded by a drive for dangerous living

that reverberated through the first decades of the twentieth century. High-octane, the Riviera was spurred by hedonism and cultural frenzy as the English and American impact on the region made waves across the world.



The territory had been frequently contested. The French and Italians had been bickering over the frontier for centuries. When Antonio de Beatis visited in 1517, he recorded the prevailing wisdom that Nice, being on the border, was so-called because it was ‘neither here nor there’ – ‘*ni ici, ni là*’. The claim has been questioned, but it is significant that, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Nice coat of arms displayed an eagle whose raised claws seemed undecided about what to clutch.²

The area’s motley and squabble-ridden past is echoed by its medley of voices. Before the French Revolution, the astronomer Jérôme Lalande observed Nice’s linguistic indecision. Polite society spoke French, the laws were in Italian, and the ordinary people spoke a verbal salmagundi. The larger Provençal dialect has been described as ‘French rubbed with garlic’,³ whereas the local lingo – Nissart – derives from almost any language but French. If ‘laundry’ is *lessive* in French, in Nissart it is *bugada* – as it is in Catalan. The Niçois use *cabossa* for ‘head’ – close to the Spanish *cabeza*. Spanish *agua* for ‘water’ is corrupted into *daigua*, and so it goes on.⁴ The philosopher and art critic John Ruskin, visiting briefly in 1845, heard the Greek *ara* for ‘now’ and *Aspai ma picciota?* – ‘Where are you going, my little girl?’ – in which he considered *aspai* to be a corruption of *apercevoir*, and *picciota* from the Italian *picciola*.⁵ There were also borrowings from Arabic, the

Provençal *langue d'oc* and a slow corruption of Latin.⁶ As foreigners came south, the babble of sounds became even more diverse. Travelling to Genoa in 1878, the French writer Laurent Germain's train stopped in Nice to pick up gamblers bound for Monte Carlo. His compartment was invaded by a gaggle of aristocratic gentlemen who rattled away in English, German, Russian, Spanish – even French. No matter which language they used, their discourse was predictable. 'Did you win yesterday?' 'No, I lost a lot of money.'⁷

In autumn 1922, James Joyce – about to have leeches applied to drain the pressure of his glaucoma – took a room at Nice's Hôtel Suisse and began to assemble ideas for what became his huge and forbidding multilingual pun, *Finnegans Wake*. He took inspiration from a polyglot city which, throughout its chequered history, hosted languages that came and went according to political circumstance. Russian diminished after the 1917 Revolution only to reappear on restaurant menus in the 1990s. German vanished after the Second World War and came back in the early 1970s, as hordes of West Germans came south to grill themselves lobster orange.

Earlier ages largely ignored the potential of the southern French coast. It took the British desire for a sympathetic climate for bronchitis and the Romantic attraction to untamed nature to make the Riviera a destination. The British saw paradise in a wilderness and created a pleasure ground. Over the decades, other nations followed and turned this thin strip of Shangri-La – snow-capped mountains towering on one side, the azure Mediterranean on the other – into a singular treasure. The Aga Khan spoke of meeting members of the aristocracy and plutocracy 'over

and over again' in London, Rome, Berlin, Monte Carlo, Cannes and Nice⁸ – three capitals widely separated and three resorts only miles apart.

There was an Anglo-Saxon land grab aided and abetted by the Russians, Germans, Belgians, Americans and a scatter of Scandinavians. The Parisian French also colonized the coast – seeking either commercial opportunity or enjoyment in resorts that boasted a wonderful winter climate and an international reputation. They found no indigenous high-cultural tradition – just a convivial lifestyle and a landscape in which to create a modern paradise; one full of temptations in which those who fell were rarely doomed to expulsion. As entrepreneurs recognized the commercial scope of the Riviera, they built restaurants and hotels in the grand French style while cunningly making strategic concessions to foreign tastes. Later, American improvisations on the themes of Gallic style and bohemianism modified the character of the coast. Later still, all levels of the French population grew to love and hate the Côte d'Azur.

As the 'outdoor hospital' became a pleasure ground, it grew famous for its frivolity. The Riviera was a world of indolent aristocracy and Noël Coward's poor little rich girls. It was also an attractive destination, where important decisions could be taken by powerful people relaxing at a remove and out of context – Winston Churchill was addicted. The Riviera provided a haven where the Duke and Duchess of Windsor went to escape reality. The landscape and the influx of international visitors made for a potent cultural cocktail that worked its magic on the likes of Hector Berlioz, Friedrich Nietzsche, Pablo Picasso, Coco Chanel, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Baldwin, Katherine Mansfield, Jean-Paul Sartre, Igor Stravinsky and the Rolling

Stones – to name but a few. Colours and forms cut by the strong Mediterranean light were inspirational to modern painters. The Riviera hosted the exceptional. ‘Out of time’s monotone’, recorded the American writer Allen Tate in a poem honouring a picnic at which 16 adults – in an act of intoxicated inversion – downed 61 bottles of wine.⁹ Tate and friends put into a small cove full of ‘amethyst fishes and octopuses darting, like closed parasols’. Over a driftwood fire, they started to cook a bouillabaisse – its ingredients lately caught. Lurching down the craggy goat track of the red cliff came an eighty-two-year-old peasant on a horse carrying all those bottles.¹⁰

Drink has always been a feature of this festive enclave. Celebrated lush F. Scott Fitzgerald arrived hours late for a dinner with the writer Michael Arlen. The delay had been caused by Fitzgerald’s inability to pull himself away from a bottle. He sat down and declared, ‘This is how I want to live... This is how I want to live,’ laid his head on the table and fell asleep.¹¹

This wayward coast – once a temptation for pirates and brigands – has attracted profiteers, corrupt politicians and the mafia – Italian and Russian. David Dodge’s book *To Catch a Thief*, which inspired Alfred Hitchcock’s film of the same name, demonstrated that wealth lavishly displayed provided great opportunities for crime. The coast, wrote Dodge elsewhere, was ‘lousy with situations and characters’.¹² Among these were notable crooks, from the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo to the famously corrupt mayor of Nice, Jacques Médecin, and the underworld that sustained him. Somerset Maugham’s celebrated quip ‘a sunny place for shady people’, believed to have targeted Monte Carlo but perhaps provoked by the

unsavoury quarters of wartime Marseille – or by his disreputable lover Gerald Haxton – has become the motto for a dark yet sparkling coast.

The locals were swept up into the international scene that engulfed them. The 1960s *École de Nice* was a group of artists inhabiting the worlds of Pop Art and Conceptualism. In one of Nice's most surprising hotels, some rooms are decorated by local artists. I remember standing in the foyer, listening to an American guest despair about the room she had been given. In true Pop style, the walls were covered with American license plates. 'That's what I came away to escape,' the guest groaned. 'Perhaps the Louis XIV room would suit Madame better?' Indeed. I also overheard a couple of travelling companions suggest that having the bathroom facilities creatively exposed in the middle of their room was a teensy bit too 'modern'.

This sunny coast lifts the spirit. Picasso found that Antibes and Golfe-Juan rekindled his delight in the joyous visual pun which had lain largely dormant during the years of the Second World War. Marc Chagall let his antic spirit loose in the installations he made for the Musée National Message Biblique. Yves Klein of the *École de Nice* signed the air above the Mediterranean, calling it a work of art.

Verbal wit has also embellished most aspects of life on the Côte d'Azur. Charlotte Dempster, who lived near Cannes in the second half of the nineteenth century, mocked the energetic attempts of Protestants to establish their own churches: 'At Nice and Monte Carlo I dare say there are not many persons as devout as the Praying Mantis'.¹³ Even when they were ill, visitors could be witty. The ailing author of *Treasure Island*, Robert Louis Stevenson, wrote to an old friend from Hyères in March

1884: 'Dover sounds somewhat shiveringly in my ears. You should see the weather *I* have – cloudless, clear as crystal... aromatic air, all pine and gum tree. You would be ashamed of Dover; you would scruple to refer, sir, to a spot so paltry... pray, how do you warm yourself?'¹⁴ Comparisons of southern sun and northern chilliness are legion. Vita Sackville-West suggested that 'her lover, Violet Trefusis, was the Mediterranean while her husband, Harold Nicolson, was Kent'. Ford Madox Ford thought the south of France was Eden whereas the north meant Brussels sprouts.¹⁵

Social observation was spiked. The French writer and archaeologist Prosper Mérimée spoke of the arrival in Nice of a certain Madame de Vogué, 'who left her husband somewhere en route but who has replaced him with impressive specimens from here or there'.¹⁶ Etiquette often gave rise to risible situations. A shabbily dressed, socially diffident and absent-minded Englishman attempted to enter the Casino in Monte Carlo. He was asked for his passport. 'A passport? I'm sorry but I haven't got one.' 'No passport! Then you cannot enter.' 'You see, I am the man who issues them.' 'You! That's a good one.' The Englishman left. When it was discovered that the thwarted visitor was Lord Salisbury, thrice prime minister and – at the time of the incident – Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, the fear of bad publicity sent a frock-coated, top-hatted deputation from the Casino administration to Salisbury's villa in nearby Beaulieu to apologize.¹⁷ The Foreign Secretary had merely been amused by the rebuff.

As performers began to adorn the coast in the 1920s and '30s, the homosexual contingent – often fleeing from the stringent laws that pertained in England – prompted the actress Maxine Elliott to refer to the coast as an 'Adamless

Eden'. She sometimes found it refreshing to invite heterosexuals like Douglas Fairbanks Sr or Johnny 'Tarzan' Weissmuller. True to character, Tarzan dived from her top terrace, over the dining patio, into her huge pool.

A legend about the lemon-scented border town of Menton claimed that its citrus trees were a gift from Eve. Expelled from paradise for eating the forbidden apple, the mother of us all grabbed a lemon and - wandering over the earth - threw it down in the countryside near Menton, where it created a new Eden.¹⁸ Unlike Eve, many later visitors arrived not with lemons, but with oodles of their own forbidden fruit.

1

Jagged, Tormented and Tiny



In 1902, a French writer suggested that it was ‘cruel to use barbaric scientific terms’ to describe the dazzling landscape of the Côte d’Azur.¹ Yet such description helps to explain how a shy strip of coast, inaccessible for millennia, possesses qualities to attract both the ailing and the pleasure-seeking. This difficult terrain was made alluring by the way philosophers, artists and writers helped people to look at landscapes differently. It was chosen for its life-giving properties by doctors seeking a cure for consumption, their efforts aided by improvements in transport. For the first rich visitors, the very seclusion of the Riviera made it a privileged ‘space apart’ – a place where people could recover their health or misbehave. Once a wilderness, this coast became a place where people could go wild.

This secluded paradise was created just over five million years ago – at the outset of the Pliocene epoch – when the flooding of the Mediterranean started. Our ancestors had already begun to separate from the chimpanzee, and modern mammals and bird families had developed into species recognizable today. The creation and mutation of the Alps had been ongoing for hundreds of millions of

years. In the western part of that range, towering above the coast from Nice to Menton, there was tremendous volcanic activity. This created a geological mash-up, a crush of different rocks, resulting in a region of powerful beauty. Folds and faults made for a jagged, tormented and tiny coastal shelf, the drama of which is diminished to the east beyond the Italian frontier, and hardly exists to the west, beyond Cannes. It is a hectic stretch of coastline, an exciting space for hedonistic, frenzied eruptions.

The physique of modern Europe became recognizable in the Pliocene, during which Alpine regions became glaciated and formed an imposing frontier between the creatures and vegetation of the north and the south. In the twentieth century, holiday-makers who visited the Riviera would delight in this climatic confrontation, which permitted skiing on the slopes of the Alps and water-skiing on the adjacent Mediterranean. Orogeny sculpted paradise – it was only left for man to discover, enjoy, exploit and ruin.

One of the earliest indications of human habitation in Europe was found in a small cave at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, towards the eastern end of the Riviera. Dating from about one million years ago, when the level of the Mediterranean was a hundred metres higher than it is today, the cave contained – along with the rudimentary tools of scavenging humans – remains of panthers, sabre-toothed tigers and jaguars.

Another ancient site is now buried beneath a 1960s apartment block in central Nice. Terra Amata – hastily excavated so as not to delay the construction of the modern building – dates from about 400,000 years ago. By then, hunters had established homes and summer camps. Round cabins were assembled with branches dragged onto the shore – only thirty metres higher than today's pebble

beach. The denizens hunted rhinoceros, deer and elephants.

In the hills at Tourrettes-sur-Loup, there are remains dating from the end of the Neolithic period – about 3000 BC. These include evidence of burials, suggesting ceremony. Other Bronze and then Iron Age sites reveal the beginnings of a tribal society – the Ligurians, who were land-dwellers. They stretched along the coast from south-eastern Gaul to south-western Italy. Among their tribes, occupying what is now the Riviera, were the Oxybii and Deciates to the west of Nice and the Vediantii east of the Var, a river which would act, for many centuries, as the natural barrier between Italy and France.² The Ligurians left clear signs of ‘Man the Maker’. They were the first artists to work on the Côte d’Azur, carving horned animals, geometrical figures and rare human forms on rocks. When Picasso sketched his head of a faun in Antibes in the aftermath of the Second World War, he was the heir to Prehistoric stylization, but his subject matter drew on the mythology of the region’s invaders from the eastern Mediterranean.

After founding Carthage in 814 BC, the Phoenicians – who generally hugged the North African coast to trade with Iberia – appear to have settled in several well-chosen havens along the Riviera. At Monaco and Villefranche they built temples to Melkarth, protector of the universe, god of the underworld and lord of their richest city-state, Tyre. At Antibes, where much pottery originating in the eastern Mediterranean has been found, Astarte – the Phoenician goddess of fertility, sexuality and war – guarded the port.³ Most significantly, the discovery in Marseille of coins and medals from Tyre and Carthage, along with an acropolis and stone shrines in a pre-Greek style, confirm a Phoenician presence predating the Greek founding of

Massalia – the ancient name for Marseille – around 600 bc.⁴ The Phocaeans – Ionian Greeks from Asia Minor – created a settlement in Massalia and smaller ports at Nice and Antibes, planting olive trees and vines along the coast.⁵ They called their settlement at Nice *niki*, which means ‘victory’. It proved an ironic choice for a city that stood close to a shifting frontier and was frequently invaded or crushed.

As a busy trading port, Massalia absorbed foreign pleasures and vices. It fell into a moral decadence witnessed by the Romans called upon to help the Greeks after Antibes and Nice were harassed by the Oxybii and Deciates in 144 BC. When the Ligurians threatened Massalia itself nineteen years later, Rome provided further assistance and established a greater presence. Although subsequently robbed of its political role, the old Phocaean city remained a thriving port, and its school of philosophy and rhetoric tutored young Romans from patrician families.⁶ The hectic pace of life and racy morality persisted down through the ages. In 1786, the English botanist James Edward Smith noted that nothing struck a visitor to the city as much as the omnipresence of business – ‘In this respect, Marseilles resembles Amsterdam’.⁷ Sounding a rare note of approval for the city, an American businessman, visiting in 1869, wrote that the ‘women are handsomer, houses taller, streets wider and people look more like New-Yorkers than I have seen elsewhere’.⁸ Its port and frenetic commercial activity ensured that Marseille would remain beyond the bounds of the serene appeal of the Riviera. However, given its importance in opening up the south coast to foreigners – and given the proximity of Bandol, Sanary and Hyères – it is reasonable to claim Marseille as the original gateway to what we call the Riviera. In 1938, the Compagnie des



Juan-les-Pins.



The Riviera – trading off its past.



Casino Ruhl.

