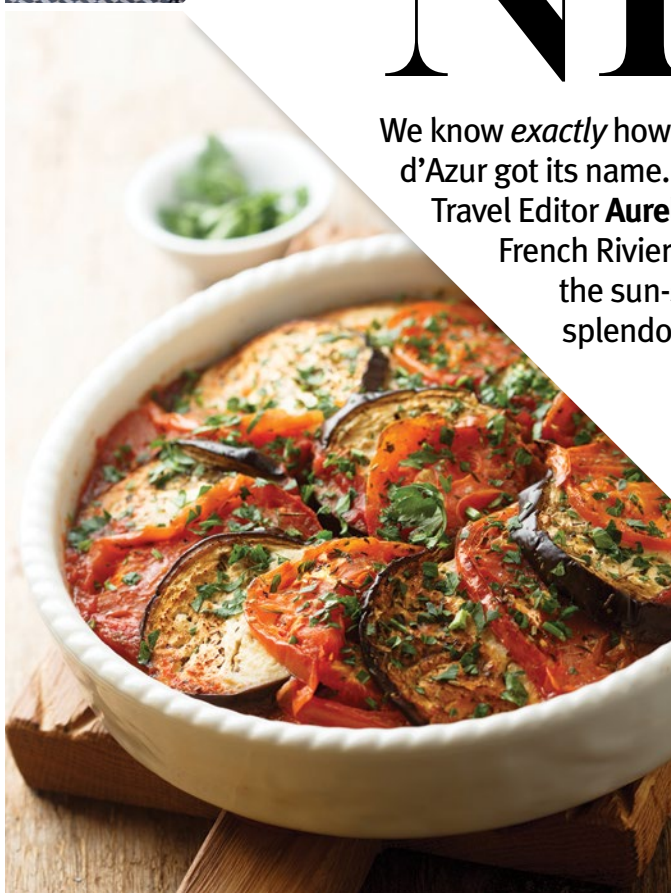




So Nice

We know *exactly* how the capital of the Côte d'Azur got its name. Come with VegNews Travel Editor **Aurelia d'Andrea** to the French Riviera and explore the sun-splashed splendor of Nice.



ON the surface, Nice, France appears to have more in common with beachside Los Angeles than its sophisticated urban cousin to the north, Paris. Along the palm-fringed Promenade des Anglais—a Mediterranean doppelganger for the Santa Monica beach boardwalk—bronzed locals whiz by on rollerblades and bicycles, joggers dodge tiny dogs on leashes held by impeccably dressed *grande dames*, and tourists hover around menus posted outside the beachfront restaurants whose open-air dining rooms offer prime sea-facing views. It's these elements—sun, sea, and fresh, salty air—that drew Victorian-era English to Nice in droves every winter to take the Mediterranean cure and escape the oppressive gray skies of home.

Today, Nice's reputation as a haven for health-oriented, sun-worshipping types of all ages lives on, with its fast-growing crop of natural food stores, juice bars, and plant-based restaurants popping up throughout the city. Unlike the northern French capital, the food traditions on the Côte d'Azur are less about rich sauces and animal protein, instead borrowing more from Mediterranean neighbors in Italy (which Nice belonged to until 1860), with a cuisine rooted in freshly grown vegetables—tomatoes, eggplant, beans, and olives—all produced on nearby farms thanks to the 300-plus days of sunshine this region experiences every year.

The SoCal similarities draw a definitive end at the waterline, where instead of soft white sand, golf-ball-sized pebbles blanket the beach, straight down to the preternaturally azure-blue waters. And very much unlike Los Angeles (or Paris), Nice is scaled down to truly livable proportions, with a culturally diverse population of 343,000. Best of all, this city is small enough that you can get by without a car or even public transportation, though if you want to venture beyond the city limits, the local bus network will take you all the way to Monaco, Cannes, or the Italian border for a mere 1.50 euros.

To maximize your fun in this sun-dappled gem of a city, bring a pair of comfy walking shoes (sneakers are finally *de rigueur* in France), your most fashionable pair of sunglasses (you need them, even in winter), and your recyclable shopping



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bags (markets are a huge part of the fun here), and allow yourself to roam without a particular destination in mind—to become, in the local parlance, a *flâneur*. Soon, you'll settle into the city's gentle rhythms, discover its hidden quarters, and maybe even find yourself plotting your own annual winter escape to the South of France.

Market meandering

The charming heart of Nice is its old town, a pie-shaped slice of the city crammed with stately 17th, 18th, and 19th century buildings painted in vivid shades of terra cotta and lemon-meringue yellow. The maze of narrow streets leads to exciting finds, from vintage boutiques and fragrant boulangeries to old-timey *confiseries* vending *fruit confit*—the candied fruit this region is famous for. Eventually, you'll wander into the Cours Saleya market, a lively hive of activity, seven days a week. On Mondays, the market transforms into a *marché aux puces*—otherwise known as a flea market—where hunting for treasures is the name of the game. Every other day of the week, it's a food lover's paradise, with locally grown produce displayed in enticing mounds at stall after stall after stall.

The sunny terrace cafés that straddle the vegetable vendors' stands are ideal spots for surveying the activity, but even more fun is roaming through the market on foot and exploring the edible bounty. Look for the booth piled high with sun-dried eggplant slices and tiny jars of spicy chili sauce made from the previous season's harvest, then search for the vendors selling plump olives floating in brine and thick slices of focaccia bread smeared with fresh tomato sauce. This is also the place to procure small burlap bags stuffed with dried Herbes de Provence to bring back home to friends, and to stockpile the enormous, extra-juicy lemons grown in nearby Menton. Here,



You haven't had socca until you've had it fresh in Nice's revered street markets.

you'll find all the fixings for a bright, fresh meal made *à la provençal*.

Another market must-try is the beloved local snack known as *socca*, and Chez Thérèse's stand (you can't miss it beneath an arc of red umbrellas) is the ideal spot to introduce your tastebuds to this delectable treat. Made simply from chickpea flour, olive oil, salt, and water, socca was once a working class snack—the Niçoise version of the NYC hot dog—that is at once cheap, filling, and ultra-tasty. At Theresa's stand, the lines are long, and sometimes, you have to wait for the bicycle porter to arrive from the kitchen a few streets away trailing an enormous round pan of still-warm socca. For a quintessential Nice experience, order up a serving, douse it with black pepper, and wash it down with a glass of the local rosé served in tiny plastic cups.

Culture club

Nice might be pretty on the outside, but there's substance beneath that postcard-perfect exterior. Culture hounds on the Côte d'Azur looking for a fun fix have no shortage of options in the compact city center. The Chagall and Matisse museums are favorites, but MAMAC, Nice's contemporary art museum, offers visitors a modern take on French art. The 10-euro entry fee not only gives visitors the chance to explore four floors of exciting works, but also allows 24-hour access to several other museums throughout the city, including the Natural History Museum and the

Museum of Archeology. After roaming through the eclectic avant-garde works at the MAMAC, work your way to the top floor and take a spin around the outdoor terrace with birds-eye views of the old town.

Setting off from MAMAC toward the port, with its luxury yachts and ebb and flow of ferries to Corsica and Sardinia, it's a pleasant 10-minute walk to Badaboom, a beloved plant-based bistro. Franco-American owners Barbara and Nicolas Basalgete share duties in the kitchen (him) and dining room (her), and offer a warm and friendly welcome to all who enter. Order the *plat du jour*, which might consist of a generous serving of organic grains drizzled in creamy homemade dressing, carrot croquettes *à l'orange*, ratatouille stewed in coconut milk, colorful in-season salads, and hearty dollops of rich, homemade hummus. The fresh-pressed organic juices are a delight here, as is the locally produced chickpea beer. Leave

The neighborhood around the port is dotted with tiny cafés, beer bars, and adorable boutiques

room for the luscious raw cheesecakes and housemade banana bread served with aromatic almond-vanilla cream.

The neighborhood around the port is dotted with tiny cafés, beer bars, and adorable boutiques, including Wakey, a vegan beauty mecca just steps from Badaboom. This is the place to procure cruelty-free cosmetics, natural-bristle toothbrushes, and luxurious soaps and creams produced by vegan brands around the world. Twentysomething owner Méganne Monteillet hand-selects each product in her store, and is an expert in her field. Visitors are encouraged to sample the products before buying, and to ask Monteillet for advice and suggestions on how to acquire some of that fabled French allure for yourself.

Day tripper

Though you could easily spend a month in Nice and never run out of fun things to do, most visitors are unable to resist the urge

to set off and explore the magical places that dot the rest of the French Riviera. In less than an hour from Nice, it's possible to test your luck at the tables at Monte Carlo's famous casino, clamber up the rugged path named after one-time resident Friedrich Nietzsche to a charming *village perché* with sweeping views over the Mediterranean, or hop a train to the Italian border and spend the day in San Remo relishing pizza and sipping Aperol spritzes. Choosing between the many options is a challenge most visitors are happy to make, but when in doubt, keep it simple, which means taking the bus or train to Antibes, a seaside village just west of Nice.

Strolling through the old pedestrianized streets of Antibes' charming downtown, you get the sense that you're in a provincial town in rural France instead of a small city a stone's throw from the glamorous meccas of St. Tropez and Cannes. While roaming the cobblestone roads, keep your eyes peeled for the Absinthe Museum—a tiny-but-sweet subterranean temple dedicated to *la fée verte* (the green fairy)—and the Picasso Museum, where visitors get to experience not only a riveting collection of the famous Spaniard's expansive works, but also unparalleled views across the sparkling sea.

A five-minute promenade from Antibes' Port Vauban takes you to Graze, a little plant-based oasis with a menu that might make you think you've been teleported from France to the Southern California coast. Los Angeles transplant Ivy Dai opened her 20-seat restaurant in 2017, and the menu reflects the City of Angels' culturally dynamic sensibilities. Antibois have Ivy to thank for introducing them to foreign concepts such as "ramen" and "tacos," but it's her sweets (she's a Cordon Bleu-trained pastry chef) that dazzle diners and keep them coming back for more. Try the spiced hazelnut loaf, the rich chocolate cupcakes, and the raw raspberry cheesecakes, and let your senses revel in the dreamy textures and complex flavors.

Paris, according to Audrey Hepburn, is always a good idea, but Nice—according to everyone who's ever visited—is perpetually nice, from the long and balmy days of summer straight through those sunny, 60-degree days of winter. When the call of the sea and the cure of the sun beckons,



Cuisine Niçoise

There's more to Niçoise cuisine than fabulous shopping and stunning seascapes. Give your taste buds a treat and seek out some of these local edible specialties.

Pissaladière This to-go snack is served at takeaway stands throughout Nice. Essentially a square pizza topped with caramelized onions, it's both savory and mildly sweet. Look for slices *sans anchois* (without anchovies), an option that's becoming increasingly popular.

Ratatouille This sumptuous local dish melds tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, olives, and garlic, then applies the chunky concoction to rice or noodles, or serves it *toute seule* (all by itself). All the flavors of the Côte d'Azur in one vegetable-packed dish!

Soup au Pistou Imagine a tomatoey broth loaded with hearty white beans and al dente pasta, topped with a fragrant pesto made simply of basil, garlic, and olive oil. It sounds amazing because it is, and we recommend savoring it with chunk of the local crusty bread.

pack your bags for this welcoming corner of France and let yourself fall under its spell. The history, natural beauty, and vegan food are worth the price of admission, but it's the Riviera's magical *je ne sais quoi* that will keep you dreaming of coming back again and again, year after year. **VN**

VN Travel Editor **Aurelia d'Andrea** loves Nice so much she's decided to move there—at least for part of the year. Learn more about her Niçoise adventures at veganepicuretravel.com.



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Images from top: MooShoes, a class field trip stop; Graduation luncheon site, Candle Cafe West; Victoria Moran, graduate Dianne Wenz, and instructor Fran Costigan