RIVIERA QUEEN
Story & Photography: Keith Mundy

BASKING IN THE HISTORY OF NICE.
The first time I went to Nice, they kicked me out. The second time, they hosted me. *C’est la vie.*

Back in the days of Beat, there was a gang of us – beatniks, hitchhikers, students – who hung out beside the Bay of Angels, on the grand sweep of the Promenade des Anglais, the seafront boulevard, playing guitars and drums, sleeping on the beach. It was high summer, in more ways than one, and we young sun-seekers had fetched up there from Germany or Britain, Denmark or America, drawn by the Riviera’s biggest city.

Living off *pan bagnat* – the local sandwich made of a round loaf stuffed with lettuce, black olives, hardboiled egg, tuna and tomatoes – we didn’t think we were doing any harm, but one evening the cops, thought otherwise, packed us into a black maria, checked our *papiers*, drove us up into the suburban hills and dumped us.

It was like a scene in a Western movie, where the sheriff takes undesirables to the city limits and barks, “Git outta town!”

Of course, it being well past midnight, we just walked straight back into town. Toting his conga drum, Eddie from New York laid down a beat for us to boogie back to the beach. Nearing the city centre, we came upon a dry concrete riverbed which disappeared into a tunnel. A bedroom, in other words.

Recently, I went to the Riviera’s capital again, and this time things were totally the opposite: the authorities invited me. Instead of a starvation diet and a sleeping bag, I had four-star hotel rooms and proper cuisine.

And I discovered a city with a hundred things I’d not noticed in the ignorance of youth. Those hills, for instance, must have been Cimiez, once called Cemenelum, capital of the Ancient Roman province of Alpes Maritimae. In what is now a leafy suburb, some ruins remain – an arena, amphitheatre and thermal baths – as does Cimiez Monastery, which was used by Franciscan monks since the 16th century. Great art is found in these verdant hills too: a red ochre villa which houses the Matisse Museum and lower down a modern museum dedicated to Marc Chagall. Both artists spent long periods here in Nice.

It was also in Cimiez that Nice first became fashionable. To the hills flocked winter visitors, the European aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie, who gave free rein to their whims, erecting châteaux and villas amid luxuriant gardens, fostered by an exceptional microclimate. Open to the Mediterranean’s warmth, shielded from cold northerly and easterly winds by the Alpes Maritimes mountains, Nice enjoys about 2,800 hours of sunshine a year, and its luminosity has attracted both fine painters and rich sunseekers for two centuries.

An English doctor called John Bunnell Davis set the ball rolling in 1807 with a book extolling the location’s virtues. He praised “the softness of the climate, the serenity of the sky, the brilliance of the sun, and the numerous beauties of nature that on every side surround you,” which made a place where “the breathing is free, the body light, and the same harmony seems equally to prevail in the human frame as in the circumjacent scenery.” He was boosting Nice to the upper classes in poor health.
Once Napoleon had been defeated in 1815 and peace prevailed on the continent, the British in particular began to flock to Nice, mostly for their health, and always in winter. For visitors from the icy climes of northern Europe, it was a place where winter did not exist, where autumn segued into spring, missing the cold season altogether. For the many sufferers of tuberculosis in particular, that winter warmth was crucial, and Dr Davis did wonderful PR for the city. One French historian wrote, “This physician sent to our shores a colony of pale, blonde Englishwomen and listless sons of the nobility near death,” whose deep pockets laid a firm foundation for the city’s success as a grand place of leisure.

If sickness started Nice off as a resort, by the end of the 19th century it was a destination for anybody of ample means to bask in its winter warmth for the sheer pleasure of it. In the Belle Epoque, from 1870 to 1914, Nice came into its own as the most luxurious city of the Mediterranean, filled with opulent and ornate buildings. When Queen Victoria – monarch of the world’s greatest power – repeatedly came to stay here, Nice knew it had truly made it.

The city actually built an enormous palace of a hotel specifically to suit her. In the hills of Cimiez there rose the Excelsior Regina Palace with 400 rooms and fine views over Nice and out across the Bay of Angels. The queen duly came to stay three springs running, for six weeks in 1897 and 1898, and eight weeks in 1899, confirming the Regina as one of the world’s greatest hotels as well as possibly the biggest. The great queen had given her approval – as Tsar Nicholas II did too – and Nice became the queen of the Riviera.

After World War I, however, the grandiose Regina fell victim to changing tastes, and was finally turned into apartments in 1934. People now wanted to be beside the sea, not up in the hills, and the fabulous Hotel Negresco had opened in 1912 on the Promenade des Anglais to cater to the new beach lovers, coming to dominate the luxury market and gain legendary status, its great pink cupola and brilliant white facade presiding over the seafront. Since 1957, the Negresco has been in the hands of one family, which has made it into a hotel of staggering opulence with its own unique style, including an outstanding art collection and mink bedspreads. You are welcomed by doormen dressed like 19th-century coachmen complete with red-plumed postillion hats, and Miles Davis – via a gaudy statue by Niki de Saint Phalle – trumpets you through the door.

The Promenade des Anglais – Promenade of the English – was first laid out and named in 1822, by the English themselves. By the 1920s, it was a broad sidewalk extending in a gentle curve all along the new seafront, the place to take the sea air and to be seen, for visitors from all over the world. By the 1930s, the Riviera as a whole had become more of a summer destination than a winter one, and Nice was basking in year-round popularity – with Art Deco the modish style, extravagantly exemplified by the huge Palais de la Mediterranée casino and entertainment centre which rose up on the Promenade.

It’s a city whose character was...
**FACT FILE**

**Air France** flies via Paris to Nice; special fares are available to many French cities, starting at 27,280 baht inclusive. For more, visit www.airfrance.com/th or Tel: 0 2610 0808.

**Hotel Negresco**, 37 Promenade des Anglais; Tel: +33 04 9316 6400; www.hotel-negresco-nice.com. The most opulent hotel on the Riviera.

**MAMAC**, Place Yves Klein; Tel: +33 04 9713 4201; www.mamac-nice.org. Modern art museum.

**Nice Tourism Office**, 5 Promenade des Anglais; Tel: +33 08 9270 7407; www.nicetourisme.com

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1. Arcaded buildings of the Place Massena, Nice’s main square.
2. The Fine Arts Museum inhabits a Belle Epoque mansion.
3. The narrow streets of the old town.
4. TDisplay in the famous Flower Market.
5. Sunny apartment blocks typical of central Nice.
6. Relaxing on the pebbled beach.
7. Shellfish and crustaceans displayed outside a restaurant.

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defined by the building booms of the Belle Epoque and Art Deco eras, which gives it a grandeur unlike anywhere else on the Riviera. It has weight too, as a prosperous commercial hub boasting a population nearing 400,000 and France’s busiest airport outside Paris, as well as the glamour of some legendary film studios. Nevertheless, its historical core is of a completely different kind.

Walk east along the seafront towards the Castle Hill that ends the bay, and you enter another, older world. Old Nice is a warren of narrow alleys and little squares, packed with tall tenements painted in bright colours, washing hanging out from shuttered windows. Strolling these shady streets, you find the city’s soul, its Italian roots as a port of the Duchy of Savoy; called Nizza in Italian, Nice only definitively became French in 1860.

Old Nice also hosts many grand buildings of the Savoy period, its ducal palace, opera house, law courts and senate, indicating its former power, as well as the baroque gems of St Reparata Cathedral and Miséricorde Chapel. Come night time, in a big change from its poorer past when it was a decidedly dodgy area, the old town takes on its new role of party animal, its pedestrianised streets pulsating with lively bars and clubs, while in the broad Cours Saleya — in daytime the location of the famous Flower Market — are some of Nice’s best restaurants, where the tasty local cuisine can be sampled.

**Cuisine niçoise** features specialities like *salade nicoise* containing hardboiled egg, black olives and anchovies; *pissaladière*, an onion tart with olives and anchovies;
International Klein Blue is that dazzling cobalt blue patented by Yves Klein, Nice’s most prominent modern artist, who used it as the sole colour in many of his sculptures and paintings. A leader of the New Realism movement of the 1960s, Klein has a section at MAMAC devoted to his works of electric vividness. It’s mesmerising.

A city of pleasure that climaxes in a flower-decked carnival each February, Nice is not a very serious place, felt Klein – also famous for painting with naked women as “living brushes”, daubed in IKB. “Holidaymakers come to where we live, but we inhabit the holiday land, which gives us this feeling for doing idiotic things”, he once said.

So be an idiot and go to Nice. And get arrested if you like. It’s all part of the fun in the Riviera sun.

socca, a large crepe of chickpea flour; ratatouille, a stew of bell peppers, courgettes, aubergines, tomatoes and onions, spiced with garlic and Provencal herbs; farcis, stuffed tomatoes, courgettes and bell peppers; and tourte de blettes, a tart with a sweet filling of Swiss chard, pine nuts and currants, laced with pastis. And if you want to get local with the wine too, the city has vineyards within its limits with the appellation of Bellet.

Exiting the old town on the north side, I found a broad plaza running way down to the seafront, and realised this was where the River Paillon had been covered over, providing me that bedroom long ago. A huge concrete and glass structure dominates the scene, MAMAC, Nice’s modern art museum. This is the chance to catch some IKB, second only to the Flower Market as the best colour show in Nice.