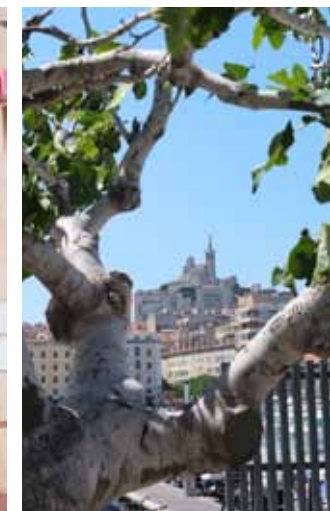


Sea, sun and culture

All this and more is on offer in Marseille, a city where bourgeois meets bohemian, as **Karen Tait** discovered when she let the train take the strain all the way to the Med



For those who find tranquil Dordogne villages too tranquil, sleepy south-west *bastide* towns too sleepy and traditional seaside resorts too traditional, Marseille could well be the place for you.

Here you will never run out of new things to do, streets to explore, restaurants and bars to sample... and when the city buzz becomes too much, just hop on a bus and head down the coast to quieter Mediterranean resorts, villages and beaches. Indeed, the nearest sandy beaches are within a short cycle ride of the old port, or you can catch a boat from there to the Frioul islands or the stunning calanques along the coast, small limestone bays which were given national park status in 2012.

Anyone interested in making this sunny southern city their second home can now get there directly via Eurostar, with no need to change trains at Lille or Paris, and without the hassle of airport security and baggage restrictions – and without having your bottle of water confiscated! Taking six and a half hours, the new route taking travellers from London all the way to the Med was launched in May along with Lyon, adding to the existing Avignon stop-off.

For the first time ever, rail passengers can travel all the way from London to the Mediterranean without changing trains

I've always thought of Marseille as interesting and a little edgy. A multicultural melting pot. Not necessarily a place for holidays, although ideal for a cultural city break exploring the many museums and art galleries. However, having recently spent a long weekend there, in and around the beautiful old port, I was surprised at how

relaxed and charming it was (a long way away from media images of the crime and drug-riddled northern suburbs). The authorities have worked hard in recent times to combat crime around the port areas, and it certainly feels a safe place to be.

Despite packing as much as possible into the relatively short space of time we were there, I was left wanting more – a pied-à-terre in this fascinating city would deliver on a lot of levels and it would never be boring.

A city on the coast

One of France's oldest cities, Marseille is also one of its most vibrant and dynamic. The European Capital of Culture for 2013 has come a long way in the last decade, courtesy of €7bn worth of regeneration works. Launched 20 years ago, and the largest urban renewal project in southern Europe,

Euroméditerranée has transformed the city, with a plethora of refurbishment projects from leading architects, including the MuCEM (Museum of Civilisations from Europe and the Mediterranean) from architect Rudy Ricciotti – a concrete honeycomb linked by walkways to the 17th-century St-Jean fort – and the esplanade of the once-abandoned J4 pier, now home to architect Stefano Boeri's Villa Méditerranée, a cantilevered building suspended over the water.

In the Vieux Port, Lord Norman Foster's Ombrière is a surprisingly simple yet effective addition – the mirrored 'umbrella' not only provides shade but also reflects the port back at you – not to mention reflecting you back at you, which in this selfie-obsessed world has proved a great success! Commenting on the project, Foster said: "I know the harbour at Marseille well and it is a truly grand space. This project was a great opportunity to enhance it using very simple means."

Old meets new

You could easily spend all your time around the port, sampling the many restaurants – seafood is a speciality, it is the home of bouillabaisse after all – browsing the artisan markets that spring up alongside the harbour or on its side streets, buying fresh fish on the quays and visiting cultural attractions such as the hugely impressive MuCEM or the museums of history, Roman docks or marine industry, to name but a few. Indeed, across Marseille there

are no fewer than 21 museums.

For more restaurants and eclectic shops on quaint squares and winding streets, head for Le Panier old town, between the port and the Romanesque-Byzantine Cathédrale de la Major. Keep on walking past the cathedral and you reach the regenerated Euroméditerranée zone; the revamped docks area is now home to swish new homes and offices, the Regards de Provence exhibition, the stylish Halles de la Major, heaven for foodies, and Les Terrasses du Port, Marseille's latest shopping offering – those seeking retail therapy will certainly not be disappointed. The city's only skyscraper, H99, can be found here too, with luxury apartments on offer from €260,000.

On the opposite side of the Vieux Port, Notre-Dame de la Garde watches over the city, offering panoramic views from its hilltop position 154m above the sea. Catch the tourist train for a fun ride up – it'll also take you on a little tour of the coast and upmarket districts such as Le Roucas Blanc, where wealthy merchants built their homes on the hillside so they could watch out for their ships coming into the port.

Even if time's short, make sure you look inside the Neo-Byzantine basilica. The lavish mosaics lining the walls and three cupolas are breathtaking, as is the 11m-tall golden Madonna and child statue atop the bell tower, believed to protect the city and its inhabitants – locals refer to the basilica as 'la bonne mère'. A new museum opened here in 2013.

Facing page: The spectacular view along the coast from the city **This page top:** Notre-Dame de la Garde watches over Marseille and can be seen from the Vieux Port **Above left:** Le Panier old town, situated between the port and the Cathédrale de la Major, offers plenty of restaurants as well as quaint squares and winding streets to explore **Above right:** If you don't fancy the walk to the top, why not take the tourist train for a fun ride up to Notre-Dame de la Garde, and you can enjoy a little tour of the coast too

Up-and-coming areas – where bourgeois meets bohemian – include Le Cours Julien, with its large square lined with bistros and bars, and trendy side streets – we tried to get a table in a few restaurants that had been recommended to us, but without reservations there was no chance, showing the increasing popularity of this area with locals. Luckily, with such a wide choice of restaurants we didn't go hungry!

Marseille also has the elegant boulevards you'd expect to find in French cities; beautiful Haussmanian buildings line the main roads of Le Canebière and Rue de la République.

The nearest beaches are Prado, Prophète and Catalans – unsurprisingly they get very busy in summer, but there are plenty more a little further afield. The rocky Frioul islands have their own mini calanques too, which are popular with families, and less crowded the further you're prepared to walk from the restaurant-lined harbour (there's a tourist train too).

Marseille factfile

- The oldest city in France, founded 2,600 years ago
- The second most populated French city: 850,636 inhabitants
- **Surface area:** 240km² including 100km² of natural areas and 57km of seafloor
- **Average temperatures:** spring 19°C / summer 25°C / autumn 14°C / winter 12°C
- **Transport:** two subway lines, three tramway lines, 1,000 bicycles in 130 stations, 88 bus lines, two shuttle boats (one between old port and Pointe-Rouge and the other between the old port and l'Estaque)
- France's leading cruise port (1,315,000 passengers in 2014) and freight port
- World Water Capital since 1996
- European Capital of Culture in 2013
- Capital of Sport in 2017
- 5.5m tourists in 2013
- **Local specialities** – bouillabaisse, *navette* biscuits and pastis (Paul Ricard created the Marseille pastis in 1923)



*The City Pass is a great way to explore the city, offering access to museums, tours and other tourist attractions as well as transport (including boats to the Frioul islands) – marseille-tourisme.com

Getting there:

- **By train:** Eurostar from London St-Pancras or Ashford International to Marseille (six and a half hours); or TGV from Paris (just over three hours) – find out more on the eurostar.com website
- **By air:** Flights from various UK airports including Manchester and London
- **By road:** Marseille is 1,072km from Calais
- **Where to stay:** We tried the New Hotel Marseille by the port, which has an arty vibe and is a mix of contemporary and old (part of it was the Institut de Pasteur); the swimming pool is great for relaxing by after all the sightseeing – new-hotel.com



On the market



In a new development in the 4th 'arrondissement', studios to two-bedroom apartments are available from €103,155 to €226,941 (sextantproperties.com)



This renovated three-bedroom villa with pool is tucked away in the hillsides above Marseille, €736,700 (leggettfrance.com)



Four-bedroom house in the 12th 'arrondissement', Le Village Montolivet, €765,000 (squarehabitat.fr)



Overlooking the Vieux Port, this duplex loft has been created from several apartments on the top floor of a character building, €890,000 (home-hunts.com)



The boat stops first at the Château d'If, the prison island where truth and myth mingle – it's best known as the location that inspired *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas. The honey-coloured stone of the château, the graceful domed ceilings and ancient circular stone stairways, not to mention the azure blue sea views from the windows, can make it easy to imagine the castle being converted into a boutique hotel. But you only have to spend a few quiet moments in the cells, imagining what it must have been like to be a prisoner here all those years ago, for chills to run down your spine, no matter how hot the sun outside.

Music and museums

Marseille is the sum of many parts, maybe even villages – locals say the city has a village spirit. Le Panier, for example, still has that sense of community – when we visited in July they were celebrating their Fête d'Été, with children's games in the pretty squares, a heart-throbbing drumming band travelling through the narrow cobbled streets, and gentle folk music under the plane trees.

There was music everywhere, with food and drink (including some lethal brews) appearing from doorways as well as numerous bars and restaurants, and the revelries went on late into the night. I didn't see a single policeman, there was simply no need. Perhaps not the image you have of Marseille (it's certainly not *The French Connection*).

The following day was the Fête de la Musique, celebrated across France but particularly well suited to Marseille. We stopped for everything from a lovely lady singing and playing piano aboard a gorgeous old yacht to fiddle bands that made you want to dance a jig in the street, an Arabic band whose appeal transcended nationality and

race, and deep booming bass surrounded by a youthful crowd – everywhere you looked people of all ages were joining in the celebrations. Of course, the Fête de la Musique is an annual happening across France (and other countries) and not unique to Marseille, but I get the feeling that whenever you visit this southern city, you will always be able to find music.

You will also not go short of cultural activities. Top of the list is surely the MuCEM, a wonderful coming together of the old fort at the harbour mouth and the new landmark building. Together they sum up the city itself, the old and the new, both looking back and looking forward. We also caught the Futurs exhibition at the Centre de la Vieille Charité, with artwork from Matisse, Mondrian and many more – I particularly liked Bruno Peinado's huge silver balloon installation. If you're visiting Marseille next month, don't miss the Septembre en Mer festival, offering a variety of sea-themed events.

Where to buy

Unlike the more glitzy Riviera resorts, Marseille offers a more affordable route to Mediterranean property. The city has an average square metre property price of €2,445 for apartments and €3,111 for houses, compared to €9,445 and €14,836 in St-Tropez, for example.

That's not to say it's the poor cousin, it just has a different kind of appeal. In recent years many Parisians have bought here, perhaps inspired by the popular TV soap *Plus Belle la Vie*, set in Le Panier, and no doubt attracted too by the value for money on offer when compared to the capital and Riviera resorts.

Recent research from Credit Foncier reports that the Marseille property market slowed in 2014 and is expected to fall a little further in

2015, suggesting now could be a good time to pick up a bargain. The most sought-after neighbourhoods performed the strongest, with just a 5% fall in prices last year.

Marseille also appeals to investors, who have a choice of old town pieds-à-terre, Belle Époque mansions or contemporary developments, all of which rent well.

"The face of Marseille has completely changed," says François-Xavier de Vial, Director of *Home Hunts*, who has lived in Marseille for more than a decade, "it's quite bourgeois now. Although once associated with drug crime and violence, a quick walk through the pulsing heart of Marseille today would quickly quash any negative assumptions one might make. France's second city is economically thriving, socially magnetic and architecturally celebrated."

He explains that the most popular locations in the city itself include the old port, the 7th, 8th and 9th *arrondissements* (like Paris, Marseille is made up of *arrondissements*) and places such as L'Estaque, a fishing village to the west of Marseille and officially the city's 16th *arrondissement*.

Further afield, locations such as Cassis – 35-minutes' drive from Marseille – and the Côte Bleue, are sought after as they offer buyers more for their money than better-known resorts on the Côte d'Azur.

"International buyers tend to seek large villas with sea views, although they are very difficult to find," explains François-Xavier. "They are also keen to buy apartments or pieds-à-terre around the Vieux Port, as a second home or to rent out seasonally." Those

wishing to relocate permanently opt for the "beaux quartiers", he adds, such as the areas around Avenue du Prado and Boulevard Périer (Monticelli Square), where most of the foreign consulates are located.

Cours Julien is the place to be for "young, hip, music/art lovers and Londoners" suggests Nicole Cook of Leggett Immobilier. "An artsy quarter of town with concert halls, shops of all kinds, painted walls, bars, theatres, and packed with a diverse range of delicious restaurants, this reasonably priced area is mostly tourist free," she explains. "The smaller streets lead you to cool stores selling locally hand-crafted items and clothing, record shops, and tea salons."

For "young families who want a garden and security but to remain in the city and be close to public transport" she recommends St-Barnabé: "It's said to resemble a typical small Provençal town right in the city of Marseille, or a *village dans la ville*, boasting numerous boutiques, butchers and bakeries. It has a modern

Métro station that takes you to the Vieux Port in about 10 minutes, but has nearly everything you need within the village including a good-sized grocery store.

"Château Gombert is home to the Marseille Provence Technology Park – or Technopôle as it's known. It is an area that benefits from great economic development within Marseille's city limits, and is drawing a lot of the researchers and other employees to buy property there."

For "classic upscale city living" choose Perier and Prado, says Nicole. "These areas feature classic French city style. Perier is a sought-

Facing page clockwise from top left: The prison island of Château d'If; the honey-coloured stone is particularly attractive; the fort at the mouth of the harbour **This page top:** Marseille is the second most populated French city **Bottom:** The MuCEM museum was designed by the architect Rudy Ricciotti

after residential area with many beautifully renovated apartments, private homes, bakeries, restaurants and shops. Prado is the banking district and is often filled with people at the large outdoor market or going to one of the many businesses in the area.

"These bustling centres spread to neighbouring quarters Castellane and Baïlle as well. Castellane, recognised for its celebrated fountain, has two movie theatres that regularly play films in English, and is lined with traditional cafés and restaurants. Baïlle is a charming business and residential area with language schools, yoga studios, offices, great lunch spots and coffee houses.

"For coastline living, look at La Corniche, a long stretch of coast where the houses look out over the sea, or Vallon des Auffes, an adorable old fishing village with converted summer homes and a three-Michelin-star restaurant."

Thinking about Marseille after my visit (and wishing I was still there), I realised that it is not just a city; it's a port (two in fact, the old and the new), it's seaside, it's islands, it's a jumble of vibrant communities, it's a sense of history that goes back further than most places in France and yet it's one of the most modern destinations you could wish for. I doubt I would ever tire of it – and surely for a second home (and indeed a main home), that's got to be worth thinking about. ■

tourisme-paca.com
visitprovence.com
eurostar.com