



Pics: courtesy

IN FRANCE, BUSINESS (ALMOST) AS USUAL

Despite November's terrorist attacks and renewed reports of anti-Semitism, an Israeli couple sets out to experience the Riviera -- and gets a little more experience than they bargained for

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Hours before newsflashes first interrupted TV and radio programming around the world with reports that something wasn't right in Paris, my husband and I had booked our first vacation alone in 15 years. Along with the rest of the world, we watched the coordinated terror attacks unfold, culminating in a bloody massacre of 130 people. Most were in their 20s. Many died together with the wounded friends they wouldn't leave, some holding hands. Nearly 400 more were wounded in one of the deadliest attacks against Europe since WW II. The next morning, my husband looked at me through narrowed eyes. "Should I cancel?" he asked in reference to the trip we had booked, of course, to France. Even before the attacks, our destination had been a topic of discussion: him not wanting to support tourism in a country

that's seen its share of anti-Semitism, me just wanting to see the glamorous French Riviera.

I thought for a moment. On one hand, it seemed self-involved to even be thinking about a vacation the day after so many people were gunned down. On the other hand, we did have four kids to consider. On a proverbial third hand, as every Israeli worth his Bamba knows, no good comes from giving in to terrorism. "Nope," I replied, and tried to narrow my eyes back at him.

A month later, we were in labyrinthine Charles de Gaulle Airport, contemplating five floors' worth of tangled escalators encased in transparent tubes the likes of which I'd seen only on *The Jetsons*. During the 10-minute escalator ride to collect our luggage, we went over The Plan:

Day 1 - Check out Paris

Day 2 - Catch the early flight to Nice,

which takes an hour and 20 minutes and costs roughly NIS 400.

Days 2-5 - Explore the Riviera -- locally known as the Cote d'Azur -- including the inland countryside, and hopefully play some blackjack at the world-famous Monte Carlo Casino.

Day 6 - Return to Paris by train, a six-hour trip that sounded scenic and economic to boot, at NIS 125. Enjoy a last fancy French dinner in Paris and leave at the crack of dawn for the flight home.

Not surprisingly, some parts of The Plan went off as anticipated, while others didn't. The following are a few things I learned along the way that might come in handy for anyone planning a trip to the region.

So Paris actually has two airports

With only a few hours of daylight to spend in Paris, we were determined to cover the basics: selfies in front of the



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Eiffel Tower, a dash through the Louvre Museum looking for *The Mona Lisa*, and a somewhat lazier stroll down the city's main shopping drag, the Champs Elysee. The roasting chestnuts smelled delicious, but the streets were conspicuously empty for the week before Christmas, a time of year when you can't even see the sidewalk on New York's Fifth Avenue, and a sobering reminder of last month's carnage.

"It's not that anyone is afraid," Alain the taxi driver explained on the way to our hotel, "it's just that no one is in a holiday mood." Alain, like everyone else we encountered, was more welcoming and helpful than we'd expected. We rode in silence until he turned on the radio and we reached the Mercure Hotel. We unloaded our stuff, congratulating each other for booking a hotel by the city's edge for a quick getaway back to the airport in the morning. Luckily, Alain chose that moment to warn us about rush-hour traffic to Orly Airport - apparently Air France's domestic hub located at the polar end of the city - or no doubt our plane to Nice would have taken off while we were still wandering around Charles de Gaulle.

There's more to the coast than the coast

After some negotiating at the Budget rental counter at the Nice-Cote d'Azur International Airport -- where one can fly in directly from Tel Aviv -- we heaved our bags into our upgraded car and headed north to Nice's Old City. The Mediterranean sparkled on our right, and on our left distant mountains rose through clouds. Ten minutes later, we were in Nice and circling La Perouse Hotel, which hangs off a small cliff across from the water, looking for the front door.

Unlike chilly Paris, winter weather in the Riviera is more like Tel Aviv minus a few degrees. Between the off-season prices and fewer crowds, it's not a half bad time to visit. The Cote d'Azur (the blue coast) refers to the Mediterranean coastlines of southeast France and tiny neighboring Monaco. The Cote is world-famous for sophisticated seashore cities like Cannes, St. Tropez and Monte Carlo, but it's also home to the Alps-Maritime, jagged mountains rising from the forested hinterland, and the first thing on The





Plan for tomorrow.

Complimentary breakfast at La Perouse was a generous spread of cheeses, fruit, baked goods and a few unidentifiable items. After downing a few chocolate croissants, we set off to see some “perched villages” -- gravity-defying medieval towns clinging precariously to rock outcrops on the highest cliffs and mountain peaks. Today, their crooked, cobblestone streets are also known for artists and artisans, galleries and boutiques wedged into them. A word to the wise: Other than a few restaurants, pretty much everything in the villages is closed on Sundays and Mondays.

Just a few kilometers out of Nice, we turned off the highway onto a winding road lined with vineyards and orchards. The village of Eze was just a few minutes up the road but offered our first jaw-dropping view over valleys and out over the Mediterranean. We stocked up on juicy clementines in a tiny grocery and got back on the road, passing the spot where

Princess Grace drove off the road and plunged to her death in 1982.

We veered west past orchards and olive groves towards St. Paul de Vence and Tourrettes-sur-Loup, our two perched villages of the day. “Is that Bluetooth?” my husband suddenly asked, surprised to hear Shlomo Artzi in the car with us.

Equally surprised, I said, “No, I was fiddling with the radio.” I wiggled the tuner back and forth. Shlomo disappeared and came back, then was replaced by a Hebrew-speaking broadcaster giving French traffic and weather reports. A quick iPhone search produced the station’s name: FM 89.3 Radio Chalom (pronounced Shalom). Radio Chalom kept us company in the car the rest of the trip. The two villages were impossibly built on rocky peaks overlooking the Mediterranean 3,000 meters below, separated from each other by a deep valley. It took almost an hour to drive the 12 km. up the winding road to St. Paul de Vence,

but the stunning view of Italy, Monte Carlo, France and the Mediterranean, along with the medieval towns, narrow alleyways, charming shops and cafes, more than made up for it.

We decided to visit more perched villages the next day and agreed that our choice to spend all four nights in Nice – rather than spend a night or two in the mountains – was one of our more brilliant ones, although one little glitch did arise. It’s not the terrorists or the anti-Semites, it’s the narrow hairpin turns with a sheer drop off a cliff.

By 4 p.m. the next day, we had explored four out of the five perched villages just east of Nice: La Turbie, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin (not to be confused with Cap-Martin), Gorbio and St. Agnes, each as majestic and spectacular as the one before. The shadows were getting longer by the time we carefully climbed down the castle ruins atop St. Agnes, but we decided to check out one last village. Who knew when we’d be in the Alps again? So we climbed into the car, popped on Radio Chalom and continued up the winding road to the perched village of Peille.

It’s amazing how fast the sun goes down when you’re on a steep, narrow road, navigating an endless series of hairpin turns just inches from a sheer drop to certain death. Very quickly we realized our mistake, but a U-turn was out of the question, and we were still 12 long kilometers from Peille, barely driving 25 kph, now in total darkness, and with the whole way back down ahead of us.

Soon we were in total darkness, except for the occasional car coming down, which required one car to virtually scrape the mountain so the other could teeter by. We continued inching our way up, eventually reaching Peille, which in itself seemed perilously balanced on a cliff. We started our journey back down, my husband clenching the wheel, me peering out the window and saying, “Slow down. Slow down please. Can you slow down?”

Next morning, I swore to never go near another mountain again, so we adjusted The Plan and spent a very pleasant day at sea level in Monaco. Still shaken by nighttime, I refused to even get on a train that went through mountains, so we scrapped our train tickets and took a flight back to Paris, then home. Maybe a few kilos heavier but a little wiser, too.