

SPECIAL SECTION
Romantic Sailing Charters
THE RIVIERA



To Catch a Dream



Exploring the lesser known Côte d'Azur

A 55ft yacht on the French Riviera enables guests to experience a first-class charter at an affordable rate.

Close your eyes and dream about this for a moment or two: you are considering chartering a luxury yacht, your chosen location is the Côte d'Azur and the millionaires' playground of Saint-Tropez, your uniformed crew are there to attend to your every need, sensational food is served at every meal, and your cabin has a king-size bed covered in designer linens topped with a fluffy toweling robe. You can feel the heat of the sun, smell the freshly baked croissants, sense the atmosphere of the South of France, and can almost feel the azure blue waters that lap at the side of your white hulled yacht. Your mind is made up; you reach for your checkbook, and that's when the dream begins to fade because not all of us can afford to string that many zeros on a sheet without reaching for the defibrillator.

Dreams are, however, made for catching. American Indians have long believed in this and frequently create intricate designs of complex leather circles and feathers to hang over their sleeping cots for this very purpose. So go on – close your eyes for a moment and rethink the image just a little. Instead of the yacht being 155ft with a crew of 20, look again and see your yacht, *DreamCatcher of London*. There she is docked in the canals of the picturesque Port Grimaud; 55ft with a crew of two. See what happens when you hang on to that dream and lose a few zeros?

DreamCatcher is a newly built luxury yacht with three double staterooms, each with en-suite facilities and separate crew accommodation. Sleek and elegant, she is equipped with everything you would expect aboard larger more expensive vessels: double beds, Ralph Lauren linens, Egyptian cotton towels and bathrobes, air conditioning, and all the electronic entertainment facilities you can imagine, including telephone and e-mail communications. She comes with a crew whose happy smiling demeanor is worth a million dollars as they step forward to meet you, as they did us, when we drew up at the foot of the

gangway. They quickly welcomed us aboard with well-chilled champagne in Thomas Webb crystal glasses. While one showed us around, the other dealt with the luggage. Both above and below decks, the yacht is perfectly designed for charter boat cruising with a spacious cockpit, generous cushions for sunbathing, and easy access to the bathing platform for over-the-side swimming sessions.

Port Grimaud, our port of embarkation, is the picturesque Venice-like creation dreamed up by the French architect François Spoerry. His vision of turning 220 acres of marshy river delta into a township of 2,500 canal-side houses with moorings has been a runaway success. The port is traffic-free and the million or so visitors it attracts each year are transported around this Venice of France in water taxis and aqua buses. Our captain, Alan Oliver, escorted us around the port and its pretty square, the place d'Eglise, with the church of St. François d'Assise and famous Victor Vasarely stained glass windows.

Alan and his wife Michelle have made France their home and the yacht their business. They are just one of a new breed of forty-something high-flying professional couples who tired of the rat race and set out for their next adventure in life. They became owner-operators of their yacht after Alan saw an advertisement in a yachting magazine. After several boat shows and much research, they became the boat's proud owners and sailed her to the Mediterranean.

It was not their first trip, for this couple has been sailing together for over 20 years and Alan has even been part of the Global Challenge crew sailing from Sydney to Cape Town aboard the yacht *Motorola*, gaining salty experience helming the 67-footer in mountainous seas with 70-knot winds and southern ocean swells. He spent his early childhood in Greece and cannot remember a time when he was not messing about with boats. Michelle tells of charter



WRITTEN BY
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Bormes les Mimosas ▲
Village is perched high in the hills, close to the entrance of the Forest of Dom.

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Baie de Bon Porte ▲

Enterprising boat boys sell ice cream and chilled bottled water to smaller day craft without their own refrigerators

guests who love to sail the boat and become involved while others prefer to just sit back and let the South of France drift by. She explains that both types of guest are equally welcome and always feel relaxed.

The South of France is synonymous with yachts, glamour, and luxury. As a cruising ground for chartering, the Côte d'Azur offers more contrasts than probably any other in the world; unspoiled islands, rugged, rocky inlets, and fine beaches sit shoulder to shoulder with cosmopolitan resorts. We sampled them all aboard *DreamCatcher*. First amongst our ports of call was Saint-Tropez with its famous wrought iron bell tower, picturesque cobbled streets, and selection of designer boutiques to rival Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. Here the ladies can and do get golden sand between their toes whilst wearing their stilettos.

This exceptional resort has become a victim of its own charms and frequently gets overcrowded to the point that the only way to arrive is aboard your own luxury yacht. After docking we walked the waterfront, drank coffee in the Café de Paris, and watched local artists displaying their wares on the harbor walls. The pretty pastel houses that line the Quai Jean Jaurès are truly viewed correctly only from the deck of your yacht alongside Môle Jean Reveille. From there it is very clear what it was that inspired Paul Signac to start painting and create the trend that continues to this day. Brigitte Bardot still lives in La Madrauge and it was her film, "God Created Women," shot on location in the town in 1959, that started the celebrity rush that attracts tourists eager to watch the rich and famous at play.

Behind the town, Anse les Canebieres is a large bay in the shadow of the fortress that dominates Saint-Tropez. It was here that we spent a peaceful night at anchor. Our crew had brought the yacht around from the port close under the walls of the town, and during the passage had pointed out homes belonging to the rich and famous including Mohamed Fayad, where Princess Diana spent the last days of her life with Dodi immediately prior to her fateful trip to Paris. Near neighbors include Joan Collins who has a home in Grimaud and Johnny Depp whose abode is in the hills overlooking the Golfe in which we sailed.

We awoke to freshly baked croissants and French sticks of bread delivered still warm from the oven by an enterprising patisserie using a small boat. The sails were hoisted, the anchor weighed, and our craft sailed across the smooth blue waters, heading for one of the most famous beaches in the whole of the Mediterranean. Pampelonne Bay is a three-mile long, wide expanse of sun-kissed golden sand, more famous for the restaurants that cling to its crescent shape than anything else. Those who frequent these fashionable eateries fringing the private beaches are more than used to seeing their name on film credits; they visit here

“unspoiled islands, rugged, rocky inlets, and fine beaches sit shoulder to shoulder with cosmopolitan resorts”

more to be seen, than to eat the food. Film stars and those aspiring to become so, are regulars. Amongst the famous we spotted at Club 55, in the center of Pampelonne Beach, was Eddie Jordan the Formula One racing car team principal whose own boat, *Snapper*, lay at anchor off the beach. Mingled in with them, are a never-ending stream of rich old uncles who appear to have insatiable supplies of young and very pretty nieces.

We anchored off the beach in crystal clear water and Alan suggested we have a dip in the sea before lunch. Equipped with masks, snorkels, and fins, we swam around the boat and spotted the tiny fish that inhabit the patches of coral and rocks. During the afternoon we sailed around the imposing Cap Camarat under the watchful gaze of the lighthouse toward Cap Taillat, a finger peninsula that juts out to create the picture-perfect anchorages of La Briande and Baie de Bon Porte either side of it. The area is locally known as Bastide Blanche because of the beautiful white chateau that overlooks it from its perch high up on the cliffs that dominate the bay. Here, again, enterprising boat boys sell their wares to smaller day craft without their own refrigerators; this time it was ice cream and chilled bottled water.

The next day we sailed to the first of the Iles d'Hyères a group of four islands, a handful of miles off the mainland. Their history has been checked because of their important strategic position, and they have been occupied by invading Greeks,



Romans, and Saracens as well as hordes of ruthless pirates. Today the French navy uses large chunks of Le Levant Island and what they do not occupy is a village called Héliopolis inhabited by groups of dedicated followers of Doctor Durville who in 1932 founded a nudist colony there.

The island of Port Cros is infinitely more welcoming and appealing and occupies the center position within the group. Its wooded slopes of holm oak, myrtle, and strawberry trees shelve down into an unpolluted sea that is rich in marine life and declared a national sea park by France in 1963. We sailed past Fort du Moulin, the oldest fort on the island, with Fort de l'Estissac above and into the anchorage. The island, just two and a half miles long, is hillier and more rugged than its neighbors and its Garden of Eden greenery is a wonderful backdrop to the myriad of walks that can be enjoyed. A must is the trek from the tiny port of Port Cros with its fishermen's houses and harborside restaurants to Fort de l'Estissac, an ideal vantage point from which to view the

island. The 15-minute climb along the track is well rewarded by the views of the yachts as they lay peacefully at anchor below. Once the summit is reached the fort reveals itself to be a well-presented museum of natural history that fully explains the national park status and the benefits that such status has conferred on the island. Another anchorage in the pretty bay of Port Man provided a peaceful spot to spend a day of swimming and enjoying the sunshine. It proved to be the perfect antidote to the strenuous day of activity that had preceded it.

Walking along steep mountains is enough to give anyone an appetite and while we were burning off calories, Michelle our chef was creating more in her galley. Lunches aboard were simple local dishes that took full advantage of fresh produce from Provence. Sardines grilled with lemon, fresh jumbo shrimp, garlic pâtés, local cheeses, and charcuteries were just some of the delicacies that graced our table. How Michelle managed to create a tarte of red onions, goat cheese, and zuc-



Fort de l'Estissac ▲

An ideal vantage point from which to view the island of Port Cros

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Port Grimaud ▲

The picturesque Venice-like creation dreamed up by the French architect François Spoerry.

Information

DreamCatcher of London charters from \$9,936 per week in the Mediterranean, for up to six people. In the winter, she is available for charter in the BVIs.
 Contact: Dream Sailing, info@dreamsailing.co.uk or www.dreamsailing.co.uk

About the Writers

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Saint-Tropez ▲

This exceptional resort has become a victim of its own charms and frequently gets overcrowded to the point that the only way to arrive is aboard your own luxury yacht.

chini at the same time as handling the sheets and halyards required for sailing, I do not know, but we were very appreciative of the fact that she could and did!

The island of Bagaud was almost as appealing as Le Levant but we skipped by for a different reason. Lying a mile east of Port Cros, this, the smallest island, is uninhabited save for a rumored colony of rats so potent that it was they who wiped out the posse of cats landed by the authorities to decimate the colony. The largest and most westerly of the islands is Porquerolles, two miles wide and twice as long. It has an unusual history in that it was for 60 years the private property of a single family. Before the First World War a Belgian engineer, Joseph Fournier made his fortune in Mexico and decided to give it to his young bride as a wedding gift. He set about cultivating the island and employed an army of gardeners to create a Spanish hacienda style estate introducing exotic fruits such as pineapples and kumquats then almost unknown in France. He laid down vineyards that survive to this day and produce a rosé wine so typical of this area of the coast. The majority of the island has since been acquired by the state and they set up a conservation area to protect the forests that cover the island.

Leaving the islands we headed north to Le Lavendou with its modern well-run marina. This seaside resort is a family magnet and popular with the French from the northern part of the country who enjoy their summers here. Perched high in the hills above is the village of Bormes les Mimosas, close to the entrance of the Forest of Dom. It is an attractive town to visit with its colorful profusion of

mimosa, oleander, chamomile, and eucalyptus. The roads and alleyways cling to the hillside and frequently resemble steep steps rather than narrow streets. The shops are full of interest and this is the village in which to acquire locally created artifacts made from the bark of the cork trees that grow nearby in great profusion.

This region of France is famous for its fabulous selection of local restaurants, and the crew of *DreamCatcher* has quickly realized that guests want to taste locally prepared dishes in these establishments. As a result they serve breakfast and lunch each day and dinner on four days of a week-long charter, giving them ample opportunity to suggest local dinner venues that are not always immediately apparent to the casual visitor. This is another area in which their service as local guides is invaluable. None more so, than on our final day when after a trip eastward from La Lavendou toward Cavalaire sur Mer we berthed alongside a pleasant dock in the center of the port.

That night we visited La Petite Auberge de Barbigoua a tiny restaurant in the private home of Phillipe and Françoise Rougou. Phillipe gave up an outstanding career as a top chef at many of the better Parisian restaurants. The couple now prepare and serve a stunning meal to a lucky handful of diners just three nights a week. The first course, a homemade foie gras de canard came with a glass of the chilled sweet Beaugues de Venise wine, traditional with this starter. We followed that with grilled squid served with a sauce of shallots that were almost dreamlike in their texture, but that was what this trip was all about; we were out to catch a dream. 🍷