

COTE D'AZUR

Riviera revival

The Eastern Mediterranean has been investing heavily in infrastructure to attract superyachts, but now the Cote d'Azur is fighting hard to win back straying owners

BY TRISTAN RUTHERFORD



The town of Nice is so keen to make visiting easy for superyacht owners that its airport now has VIP jetways and bespoke security

DESPITE SOME INTENSE

competition from new marinas in the Adriatic and Eastern Mediterranean, the 29 ports of the French Riviera are already practically booked out for 2016. New infrastructure investment along the Cote d'Azur and the threat of increasing political instability to the east have combined to encourage superyacht owners back to their original playground.

Yacht centres on the 150km stretch of coast from Cannes on the Cote d'Azur to Loano on the Italian Riviera have begun to fight back to increase their business from superyacht visits.

"Media portrayals of Turkey and the nearby Greek Islands have certainly pushed clients back to more traditional destinations," says Sacha



Sacha Williams

Williams, director of charter marketing at Camper & Nicholsons, who is based in Port Vauban. "The French and Italian Rivas are the obvious beneficiary. But, the destination mix is markedly different from 2015. For example, our bookings in Croatia and Montenegro have rocketed."

It's a trend easily explained by bold initiatives in both Croatia and Montenegro to attract superyacht visits by investing in new infrastructure, such as D-Marin's Mandalina Marina near Split and Luštica Bay marina near Tivat.

"However, try as they might, these destinations still can't compete with the Cote d'Azur for ease of provisioning or client appeal," says Williams. "Some locations are so famed they don't even need services to back them up. Just look at Portofino. There's no marina but our guests adore the town."

Meanwhile, Nice Cote d'Azur Airport – France's busiest airport after Paris – is a shining example of how the South of France is determined to remain the epicentre of the world's €24bn superyacht industry.

The luxury yacht market has demanded the inclusion of helicopter access, VIP jetways and bespoke security check-ins – none of which will ever be available on tiny Greek islands such as Tilos or Kalamos. For helicopter transfers at Nice airport, there's no need to visit the terminal building – just hop from Gulfstream to chopper to your yacht's helipad following a few steps on the tarmac.

In 2016, Monacair added a fleet of helicopters to cater both for this market and for their seven-minute scheduled shuttle service to Monaco.

"Regional berth bookings are booming, but it's no surprise," observes Alexandre Fortabat

of Fortabat Yacht Design, who has styled or refitted 25 superyachts.

"Superyachts between 80m to 120m can travel the Mediterranean with ease, but their owners are quite cautious people. Why would one of these owners risk sailing his brand-new €300m superyacht out there when Cap Ferrat is so appealing?"

Fortabat doubts that the Eastern Med will ever become as popular as the Riviera.

"As a naval designer I know that 90 per cent of yachts under 60m don't have the fuel tanks or accommodation to make a guest-friendly voyage to Turkey, let alone the Caribbean," he claims. "They're built for cruising in style from St Tropez to Portofino. That, by far, 



Alexandre Fortabat

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Cannes Marina has eased its security and registration terms

is our industry’s largest market.”

Refit is another, much less obvious, reason for the Riviera’s current boom, according to Fortabat. “Refits aren’t glamorous, but they indicate the Cote d’Azur’s biggest change,” he says. “Our largest yachts used to winter for repairs in Malta, Palma or Turkey. Now, thanks to upgraded yards in La Ciotat, Marseille and La Seyne near Toulon, many more superyachts have decided to stay here over the last two or three years.

“Last month I was working on a major refit in La Ciotat, and I saw around 25 60m-plus yachts lined up on the drydock. These boats will therefore benefit from being readily available for



Franck Dosne

the Cote d’Azur charter season.”

In the town of Villefranche-sur-mer, Franck Dosne, director of Riviera Ports, the authority

that manages the marina in Villefranche, along with the ports at Cannes, Nice and Golfe-Juan, is particularly optimistic about current business prospects on the Cote d’Azur.

“I’m pleased to say that last year was extraordinarily good for us,” he says. “Some 70 per cent of the world’s superyachts visit the Cote d’Azur every year so you can’t ignore this market.”

But he insists that marina companies like his can never rest on their laurels.

“We have decided to ease our security and registration terms. And in regards to innovation, for the last three years Cannes Marina has operated a concierge that calls each visiting superyacht to assess its particular needs – be that for WiFi, limo parking or specialist repairs.”

In Monaco, the principality’s turnover in the superyacht sector reportedly tops €456m. This means they can pay the likes of Lord Norman Foster to

design their new Yacht Club de Monaco. Some 4,000 VIP guests squeezed inside to celebrate its opening in 2014. It poses an interesting question: can high-end investments like this hook the globe’s largest boats?

“I have only one piece of advice to anyone planning a new marina,” says Captain Ivo Mise of the 50m superyacht, *Casino Royale*. “If you have the money, just copy everything from Porto Montenegro. Its state-of-the-art and environmentally friendly.”



Ivo Mise

Those who have visited the fabled ‘Monaco of the Adriatic’ will know that investments on this scale will bring Cote d’Azur levels of allure – plus the ensuing custom.

“I admit, for the young and restless, classic marina boarding might seem too boring. They want to be picked up with a tender directly from the airport at Venice, Tivat or from an island. But older people prefer a slower pace and well-sourced marinas.”

Mise also points to the burgeoning trend of tender access. The ability to pilot a custom limo tender into Nice or Cannes, then escort guests to a chef’s table at a Michelin-starred restaurant, is becoming as important as mooring stern-to. Again, the French and Italian

Rivieras are au fait with such fashions. More importantly, at a destination like Monaco, guests can simply step off their tender then eat their way through nine Michelin stars, or visit art galleries and world-class shops. Little wonder then that yachts are flooding into recently upgraded ports like Italy’s nearby Marina di Loano.

In 2014, Loano opened a brand-new superyacht zone dedicated to superyachts from 55m-77m. The Italian government has also enticed visitors by slashing VAT on overnight berths from 22 per cent to 10 per cent.

One novel idea that may help to maintain the Riviera as the world’s leading superyacht destination can be found at Cannes-Mandelieu Airport, where the Dassault Falcons and Cessna Citations of the superyacht elite touchdown throughout the summer.

“We are very keen to work with HNW clients,” explains Thierry Pollet, the airport’s director. “Our conglomeration of Nice, Cannes-Mandelieu and St Tropez airports makes up the second-busiest business aviation hub in the whole of Europe. Only London receives more private jets.”

Pollet’s latest business innovation is to offer bespoke tender access at the world’s most exclusive airport.

“If you look at a Google Earth image of Cannes Airport you will see that we own a small strip of the shoreline. Here we are opening a small harbour that will allow guests to sail directly from the airstrip to Cannes Yacht Show in autumn 2017.”

A permanent private airport harbour is also on the cards along the coast at Nice.

“In fact, Nice Airport used to allow boats to sail right up to the runway until the 1970s,” remembers Pollet.

So, if any one destination in the entire world has the will to render itself the ideal superyacht-friendly base, it’s surely the Cote d’Azur. **SB**



A number of superyachts have returned to the Cote d’Azur to make it their summer or winter base