

PORT OF THE MONTH

# Marseille



France's second city booming as a  
Mediterranean cruise destination

Spread photo: Fort St-Jean stands at the entrance to Marseille's Vieux Port (Old Port).



The small harbor of Vallon des Auffes is a popular spot for an aperitif or a meal.



The rocky coastline along Corniche President John F. Kennedy attracts local swimmers.



## By Katherine Rodeghier

**S**prawling between white limestone hills laced with greenery and the blue hues of the Mediterranean, Marseille shares in the natural beauty that makes the French coastline so appealing. But unlike so many destinations along this stretch of the Med, Marseille isn't primarily a tourist town, but a working city of more than 850,000, the second largest in France. It's also its oldest, dating back 2,600 years to the Greek port of Massalia.

Not all 26 centuries have been kind. Blighted neighborhoods, crime and a gritty, industrial look kept Marseille from reaching its potential as a destination for visitors, especially cruise passengers.

But the biggest regeneration project in Southern Europe has transformed France's largest cruise port—and a rapidly growing one. Last year more than 1.6 million passengers alighted from cruise ships here, compared to 1.3 million in 2014. Even in tough economic times for tourism, the cruise sector has continued to grow and shows no sign of stopping. Estimates put the number of cruise passengers at 2 million in 2020.

The turnaround began in 1995 with the launch of Euromediterranee, a massive urban renewal project funded by the European Union, France and local governmental bodies. Then Marseille was named a European Capital of Culture of 2013 and more money flowed in.

Passengers on small to mid-size cruise ships lucky enough to dock at J4, one of two cruise ports in Marseille, will see the change right away. The other, larger cruise port six miles north sits in an industrial area, not so pretty to the eye, though the new Marseille Provence Cruise Terminal has brought welcome amenities.

But J4 takes pride of place in the revitalized Joliette neighborhood, walking distance to the heart of the city and next door to one of its newest and most exciting public spaces.

MuCEM, the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations, and C-shaped Villa Mediterranee, with cantilevered exhibition floor and underwater conference center, both opened in 2013. They sit next to one another on a broad public plaza connected by elevated walkway to the 17th-century Fort St-Jean.

MuCEM immediately catches the eye. A black concrete lattice drapes the building's cube shape like a mantilla. The work of architect Rudy Ricciotti in association with Roland Carta, it houses two exhibit halls, one displaying temporary exhibits, the other a permanent collection of artifacts from Mediterranean civilizations. It's the first French national museum to be located outside Paris.

But the building offers so much more than a look at the past. A gathering spot and a lookout point, it can be accessed without

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Narrow passageways and inviting terraces charm visitors to Le Panier, Marseille's Old Town.

## KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

**Cruise Lines That Call:** Costa and MSC regularly call at Marseille. Other lines include Carnival, Croisieres de France, Royal Caribbean, Holland America, Seabourn, Celebrity, Oceania, Silversea, Regent, Azamara, Sea Cloud, Ponant, Princess and Celestyal.

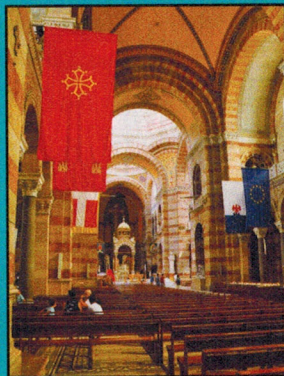
**Weather:** More than 300 days of sunshine a year make Marseille an appealing destination any time of the year, though peak season is summer with highs in the mid-80s in July and August and little rain. Most rain falls in late spring and autumn when high temperatures reach the upper 60s and low 70s.

**Language:** French, though English is widely spoken, especially in tourist areas.

**Money Matters:** Currency is the euro, credit cards are readily accepted and ATMs are easy to find. A Marseille City Pass can be purchased online through the Tourism Office of Marseille for admission to museums, tours, boat to Chateaux d'If, tourist train, public transport and MuCEM. A 24-hour pass costs 26 euros, 48-hour pass 33 euros. (<http://resa.marseille-tourisme.com/en/to-do/a628602/city-pass/showdetails>)

**Getting Around:** Marseille has two cruise ports. The J4 dock, walking distance to the heart of the city, can accommodate vessels up to 656 feet long. The larger Mole Leon Gourret is six miles north of the city center and has benefited from recent development, notably the franchising of the Marseille Provence Cruise Terminal, MPCT, to Costa and MSC. Shuttles and taxis at Mole Leon Gourret provide transport to the city center. Public transportation in Marseille includes a network of buses, two metro and two tram lines. Tickets can be bought on buses and from machines at tram and metro stations. Trains to Aix-en-Provence depart from the Saint Charles train station. The Petit Train, a toy-like tourist trolley, departs from Vieux Port for Notre Dame de la Garde and Le Panier. A hop-on hop-off tourist bus has English commentary via earphone. Two minibus tour itineraries with audio guides in English are offered exclusively through the Tourism Office of Marseille.

**For More Information:** Tourism Office of Marseille, [marseille-tourisme.com](http://marseille-tourisme.com).



Cathedral de la Major

Small and mid-size ships like the *Azamara Journey* can dock at the J4 terminal next to MuCEM.



paying admission to the exhibits. Ramps lead up from ground level with views, framed by the lattice, of ramparts and turrets of the old fort, cruise ships docked at J4 and the striped Byzantine exterior of the massive Cathedral de la Major at the entrance to the plaza. A rooftop terrace offers more vantage points and access to Le Mole Passadat restaurant overseen by Michelin three-star chef Gerald Passadat. Cruise passengers wishing to taste his cuisine should make reservations well in advance.

From the terrace, a walkway suspended more than 92 feet above a water inlet leads to Fort St-Jean. Built by Louis XIV at the entrance to the city's old port, it incorporates the 12th-century hospice operated by the Knights Hospitaller of St. John of Jerusalem during the Crusades. Its warren of arcades, terraces and turrets opened to the public for the first time in 2013. Visitors get lost in a maze of sepia stone, stopping to drink in views. A walkway leads to the oldest part of the city and Vieux Port.

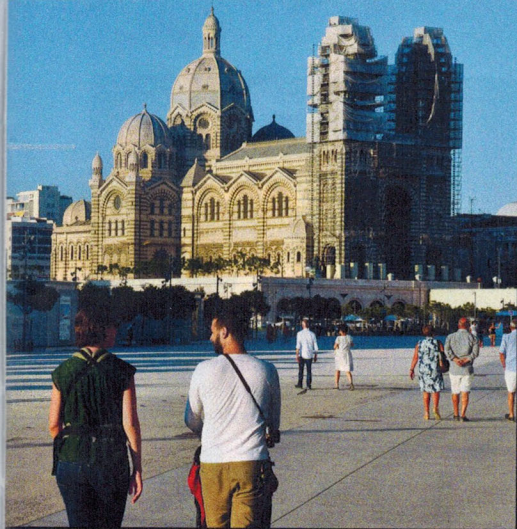
The heart of Marseille, Vieux Port, or Old Port, served as a trading post in the sixth century. Today fishing boats share space with pleasure craft and excursion boats to Chateau d'If, France's Alcatraz. The fortress on a rocky island just offshore dates from 1529 and became a state prison, one made famous as the setting for *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas.

At Vieux Port cruise passengers who arrive early enough will see its fish market in full swing. Swarthy fishermen dump their wriggling catch of the day on long tables along the quay while locals gather around bargaining, questioning, buying. Next to the market riders queue up at a busy bus terminal, one of the city's main transfer points. Farther back from the waterfront a ring of bars and restaurants caters to working fishermen and the fashionable crowd.

From Vieux Port, a walk uphill leads to the oldest part of Marseille, Le Panier, the site of the first Greek settlement and an ancient trade center spanning centuries. Once a seedy side of town, where prostitutes and criminals hid in its labyrinth of narrow passages, it also has benefited from urban renewal and emerged as an artsy and trendy neighborhood. Visitors climb staircases and cobblestone streets lined with tall stone buildings, some with laundry dangling on lines, and emerge onto terraces surrounded with boutiques and cafes.

The bell tower of the 11th-century Accoules Church has stood here since the Middle Ages when it sounded alerts for the town. The Marseille History Museum houses 4,000 items, many of them, including the hull of a sixth-century ship, excavated during archeological digs in the area.

While Le Panier and Fort St-Jean flank one



The Cathedral de la Major stands at the entrance to the broad plaza where the Villa Mediterranee exhibition center (right) and MuCEM are located.

side of Vieux Port, Fort St-Nicolas and the Pharo guard the entrance to the harbor on the other, both offering stunning views from rocky promontories. An elegant chateau, the Palais du Pharo, was built by Napoleon III and now serves as a conference center, but it's the gardens that bring most visitors there. In a city lacking green space, the Jardin du Pharo offers broad lawns studded with works of modern sculpture. People picnic, sunbathe, practice yoga and just enjoy the city's average 300 days of sunshine.

While all of these points of interest can be accessed on foot from the J4 terminal, they also can be reached on public transportation and cruise line shore excursions. Other attractions in Marseille and environs will require cruise passengers to use more than their own two feet, again, either public transportation or shore excursion.

Chief among these is Notre Dame de la Garde, an iconic symbol of Marseille. A gilded copper statue of the Virgin Mary stands atop the basilica's 130-foot bell tower looking down on the city from its highest elevation. Guardian of sailors and fishermen, "La Bonne Mere," as the church is known, was consecrated in 1864 to replace an 11th-century church built atop an ancient fort. The 360-

degree views of the city and Mediterranean coast from this perch would be reason enough to trek to the top of the hill, but the building itself also merits a look. Neo-Byzantine in style, its chapel is adorned with marble, mosaics and murals.

South of the city, the Calanques stretch for 12 miles along the coast. One of France's national parks since 2012, the white chalk massif has fjords enfolding turquoise waters and limestone cliffs studded with pines. Visitors come to hike on trails and swim off secluded beaches, some accessible only by boat or kayak.

More accessible beaches can be found off Corniche President John F. Kennedy, a serpentine roadway winding almost three miles along the city's southern shoreline. Luxurious homes of merchants and the bourgeois, some dating from the 19th century, hint at the exclusive status of the neighborhood. Everyone traveling the roadway has views of the craggy coastline and rocky islands just offshore. Stairways lead down to tiny hidden beaches, some just a square of pebbles where locals, young and old in various states of undress, stretch out in the sun.

Visitors tend to seek out the easier-to-find and more well-known beaches. Prado Seaside Park has plenty of open space, a

broad lawn and sandy beaches. Heading north are two smaller beaches, the Prophete and the Catalans, where an international volleyball tournament takes place in the summer. All three can be accessed on the No. 83 bus from Vieux Port.

Many cruise lines offer shore excursions farther into Provence, especially to Aix-en-Provence, about 20 miles north of the city, 50 minutes by motorcoach or train. A university and spa town, it was founded by the Romans and served as the medieval capital of Provence. Artist Paul Cezanne spent much of his life there and "C" emblems in the streets mark a walking route past sites associated with him.

Cruise passengers who visit on major market days—Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday—will find plazas in Aix's Old Town loaded with colorful booths containing flowers, produce, cheese, olives, meats, fish, bread and other baked goods. A stroll around Aix shows off its architecture. The city boasts the third-largest collection of Baroque buildings in France after Paris and Versailles. Don't-miss spots include Place de l'Hotel de Ville with its charming cafes, Saint Sauveur Cathedral with its mix of Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque architecture, and swanky Cours Mirabeau, the Champs Elysses of Provence. **[CT]**

Fishermen bring their catch to the market at Marseille's Vieux Port (Old Port). The Old Town of Aix-en-Provence fills with vendors on market days.

