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Magazine

French Scooter Holiday



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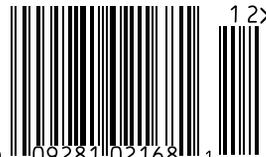
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Parlez-Vous Le Scoot?

By April Whitney with Jon Elliman; Photos by April Whitney except where noted

A French Scootering Vacation

Have you ever dreamt of combining a vacation abroad with your passion for scooting? Touring by scooter enables you to immerse yourself in your surroundings much more than traveling by bus, train or car. Yet, the idea of planning a riding trip in an unfamiliar country with different language, currency and transportation systems, may be daunting for many of us. Wouldn't it be easier if someone arranged the bike rentals and accommodations, planned the rides and provided a knowledgeable, multi-lingual rider who would guide you along the way? Scoot! recently took such a trip to the Côte d'Azur (also known as the French Riviera) and enjoyed a carefree, exciting scootering vacation, free of logistical headaches. Arranged by Edelweiss Bike Travel, the scootering vacation is a new endeavor for the company, which has organized motorcycle travel for over three decades.



Since this was the inaugural trip the tour group was small, just three couples and a guide, which allowed flexibility in the itinerary. Edelweiss calls this a “scouting” trip because the experiences on this first trip will inform and shape future iterations. Our trip had one base hotel from which we embarked on day trips around the region and returned to each night. Over the week, which had five days of riding, we clocked 650 kilometers (about 400 miles).

The Côte d’Azur is located at the southeast of France along its border with Italy, in what is historically called the region of Provence. The area is known for its coast, which is a haven for vacationers on the world-famous beaches of Cannes, St-Tropez, Nice and the principality of Monaco. It is also known for its agricultural areas that provide flowers for perfumery and food such as olives, lemons and wine grapes. Our tour was based in the city of Grasse, known as the Perfume Capital of the World. If you have read the Patrick Süskind book, *Perfume* (or seen the film) you may recall that sections of the book took place in that city.

Since we were concerned about jet lag, we arrived a day early and stayed in a hotel close to the Nice airport. The next morning we walked to a nearby bus stop and took the #500 bus that goes from Nice to Grasse several times a day. The 90-minute bus ride meandered through the French countryside along winding roads and through small towns. When we arrived in Grasse, it was a short walk up a hill to our hotel. When we arrived, the desk clerk said he would call our guide who was staying at another hotel and would come collect us. It turned out that the hotel where we were supposed to stay was not up to Edelweiss standards and the guide, Jens (pronounced Yens), had us switched to a nicer hotel. He shuttled our luggage and us on a Vespa S 125, which was okay with us, since we’re used to loading up our scoots. I was impressed that he could get my massive suitcase on the scoot. Hooray for flat floorboards!

Our new hotel had a gorgeous view of the city below and all the way out to the coast. We checked into our simple, yet comfortable room and then gathered with Jens and the other riders for our first orientation. We met our group and Jens went over the general rules, itinerary and paperwork to get us ready. Edelweiss requires that each rider be legal to ride the bikes in his/her own country. Since all of the attendees were Americans, Jens simply checked our driver’s licenses, and took down our credit card numbers in case we caused any damage to the scooters. We went out to the parking lot and inspected our respective bikes for damage and then took possession of the keys and paperwork. Then it was time to walk down the hill to the town for dinner!

Since the region borders Italy, Italian-influenced food is plentiful. Our first restaurant was called, Bella Napoli and my first meal was a “Miami” pizza. Jon ordered a savory ham crepe. Since I took French in high school (a long time ago!) I attempted to use it whenever possible. My misreading of the ingredients of the pizza proved comic when it arrived and looked more like a cheeseburger pizza, complete with an order of french fries on top! This would not be the last pizza encountered on the trip as pizza was served in almost every restaurant and pizzerias were liberally sprinkled throughout the towns. As in most restaurants we visited the wait staff spoke an adequate amount of English, so there was hardly a problem communicating. Satisfied, we walked back up the hill to our hotel where we enjoyed some drinks on the patio before retiring to get an early start on our first day of riding.



Above: Ready to roll after a coffee stop (Maria Calabrese)
Inset: The fog begins to lift in Castellane at the foot of The Rock (Jens Ruprecht)
Top: Plotting our course at the morning rider meeting (Sue Younger)

Parlez-Vous Le Scoot?

A French Scootering Vacation

DAY 1: Getting to Know You

The first day out is typically a relaxed country ride so that everyone can get accustomed to the bikes. I had a Vespa GTV 300, while Jon had a Derbi Rambla 300. Frank and Maria from Boston were on a Piaggio Beverly 500. Mark and Sue from Santa Clarita, CA, were on a Piaggio Beverly 300 and a Vespa S 125, respectively. Our guide Jens rode a Vespa LXV 125. A spare LX125 was in the garage, just in case. All of the bikes were new and were transported by Jens from Austria.

After breakfast in the hotel (the best chocolate croissants ever!) the group met for the daily rider meeting where we reviewed the route and marked our individual maps (provided by Edelweiss). Then it was off to gas-up and hit the hills.

The route took us up hills on curvy roads, through small villages with quaint churches and town fountains. It was a cool overcast day at the beginning, so I opened the vents on my riding jacket a bit. In the town of Gourdon we stopped at a restaurant for lunch. Sitting by a fireplace we decided to split a meal of pesto soup and beef bourguignon (how French!) when it began to rain, and then pour outside. Most of us were experienced riders who could ride in the rain, but this was vacation so we decided to wait it out and see if the weather broke. So we had dessert. Then some coffee. Finally it let up just a bit and we made a dash out to the bikes.

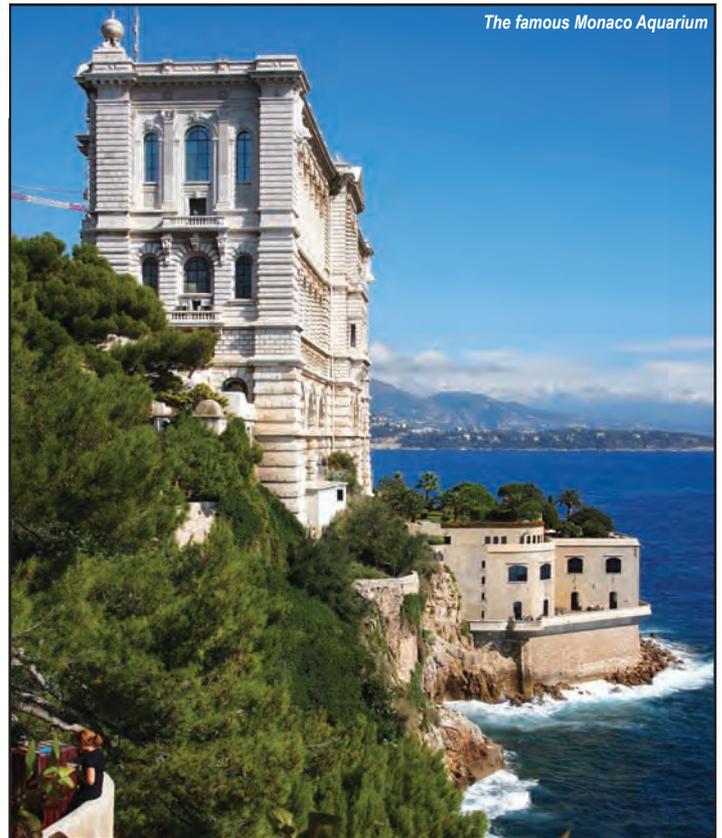
Once we took off and headed out of the town and onto the roads it began to pour again and we slowly rode in the middle of a foggy cloud all the way back to our hotel. We arrived drenched but safe and I found out that it had been Sue's first real solo ride on a scooter. Talk about trial by fire, er...rain!



The hotel had a drying room where we placed all of our wet gear. We got cleaned up and then hiked downhill to get dinner. Let me just say that on this trip there was no opportunity to go hungry. Three meals a day of exceptional food, and plenty of coffee stops! The Provence region is known for wine, but Edelweiss only permits drinking in the evening after the scooters are parked. No stops for beer or wine on the rides (of course). After dinner we hiked back up the hill (an invigorating walk to combat my daily chocolate croissants) for some relaxation and a drink on the patio and then off to bed to rest up for a full day of riding.

DAY 2: The Road to Monte Carlo

Our second day started much like the others with a tasty continental breakfast at the hotel, a rider meeting and gas stop. But this time we headed for the coast and



the principality of Monaco where Grace Kelly became a princess. We headed down the mountain from Grasse. Even though we passed through several towns, the roads stayed curvy throughout. We made good time, as the French prefer roundabouts to stop signs and traffic lights. They are more efficient and more fun!

When we arrived in the town of Nice we headed south along the coast. The water was a gorgeous blue. Côte d'Azur means blue coast and it was apparent why. The air was clean and fresh and felt great as it rushed into my helmet. It was the off-season, so we avoided the crowds of beach goers and vacationers. Riding along on the scooters, we were able to steal glances of the fancy architecture from other eras, the yachts bobbing in the harbor and the people enjoying the day out. We stopped for some photos and then headed to Monaco.

We had just missed the changing of the guards at the palace, so instead walked around the grounds, gardens, church and shops that surround it. Throughout the streets photos are posted of Princess Grace from her time in Monaco. After grabbing some lunch, we headed out and attempted to take a photo of us on our scooters in front of the famous Monte Carlo casino, but were chased away by a security guard. Undeterred, we pressed on and headed to the well-preserved "perched village" of Eza, which rises 1,400 ft. above the sea. It surrounds 14th century castle ruins and looks straight out of a film with its well-preserved narrow passageways and stone architecture. It was amazing to walk where dozens of generations of people have walked before. It is a must-stop on a tour of the area.

As we retraced our steps and scooted homeward we encountered the after work traffic of Nice. If that was off-season, I'd hate to see peak season. The roads were clogged with cars and scooters. Luckily, the weather was nice and temperate. Most French scooter riders split lanes, and Nice rush hour was no exception. It took a bit longer for our crew of five bikes to advance as we squeezed past the cars.

Once out of Nice, we joined onto the curvy mountain road that delivered us to our hotel on the hill, and on to another tasty dinner.

DAY 3: Into the Country

Our day's route took us into the backcountry, riding through farms, wide lush valleys and into quaint towns. The roads were pleasantly curvy (without being too challenging) and in good condition, which made it fun to glide through the hills. I generally ride at the back and this was no exception since I wanted to take my time to soak it all in. My typical speed was about 40-45 mph on the two-lane roads. If an eager Frenchman wanted to get by, I moved to the side to let him pass. This was my vacation and no one was going to make me miss any of the gorgeous scenery. Our first stop was the adorable town of Saint-Cézaire which had everything you might imagine in a small French village: a town square with an elegant but simple water fountain, peach stuccoed buildings with pastel shutters and tiled roofs; outdoor cafes with old men drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes; wrought iron balconies with potted geraniums. It felt like we stumbled upon a movie set for sure. We indulged in a drink and watched the town leisurely go about its business. A fishmonger pulled up in his van and people came up to buy fish off his iced displays. I couldn't help but think, "Wow, people actually live like this!" So different than the hustle and bustle of suburban USA.

Back on the bikes we headed up into the hills towards terraced olive groves and curvier roads. I had been trying to point out any gravel or rocks in the road when I came around the corner to discover a large red dog laying in the center of the road. No need to point him out as everyone saw him. He lifted his head to watch us as we rode past. We continued through the verdant mountains, past stone houses sparsely peppered on the hills until we came to the small village of Mons, which traces its history back to 49 BC (yes, BC!) when the Romans used

it as a source for an aqueduct that is still in use today. Mons is probably no bigger than a large school campus, and is perched over a valley lush with trees. It was a charming town with narrow corridors, a simple church and small shops tucked into ancient buildings. We stopped for a delicious lunch and walked around the town snapping photos and following the twists and turns. After which, we jumped on our scooters to finish the loop which would lead us back to Grasse.

Since it was an early day, Jens set us up with a local tour guide who gave us a walking tour of Grasse. He showed us historical areas such as the old town square where guillotined justice was metered out after the French revolution, the old church, and other areas of interest that pertained to the city's tannery and perfume industries. We ended up at the Fragonard perfume factory and museum. And then, of course, off to dinner!



An afternoon deserted street and scooter in Mons

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DAY 4: Le Canyon du Verdun

Because this would be our longest and most challenging ride, we headed out at 8am, instead of our regular 9am departure time. Le Canyon du Verdun (aka Verdun Gorge) is a river canyon that is often compared to our Grand Canyon. Unlike the Grand Canyon, it is green with lots of vegetation and limestone cliffs, yet it is deep (Over 2,000 feet deep in some areas) and quite impressive. But first, we had to wind our way up to the canyon entrance and that took about an hour of riding in the cold morning fog. I had to stop to batten down the vents in my jacket and cinch my gloves tighter as I was going numb. As we descended down a steep, dewy hill I looked over the cliff and saw a thick blanket of fog obscuring the valley below. Yet, in the middle of the fog, a small church poked up above it, like a castle floating in a cloud. I was stupefied, as it seemed like a painting out of a fantasy novel. At the bottom of the hill, the fog began to break-up as we rolled into the town of Castellane, which is considered to be "the doorway" to the Canyon. It is situated beneath The Rock, a tall stone mountain that juts up 600 feet from the valley floor and is a pedestal for the church that I saw floating in the fog. Amazing! To warm up we stopped for a coffee.



After a rest, we started our ascent up the mountains heading toward the canyon. For a while, the road runs along the river that cut the gorge, but then it begins an earnest climb. The ride was challenging with lots of switchbacks rising continuously. I was a bit wary of the road since it was so curvy and there were no guardrails, just some stones along the road. Reminded myself to keep my eyes on the road and not the beautiful scenery. When we got to the top of the canyon, all of our hard work was rewarded with incredible views of the gorge. The river looked so small as we peered over from our photo spot. We watched large birds glide on the gusts of wind that played in the canyon. We continued on with several photo opportunities, and on our descent, we passed some lazy mountain goats, sunning themselves along side the road. At the bottom of the road, we stopped at a village for a simple lunch, before heading back home. In all we rode about 125 miles that day.

DAY 5: Back to the Beach

Our last day was set aside for a leisurely ride along the coast. We were eager for more of the famous French Riviera, so Jens planned for us to see the towns of Frejus, Saint Raphael, Cannes, and Antibes. Even as we got close to the beach towns, the roads remained curvy, with not a lot of traffic. Once in the towns, the laid-back beach vibe was there and we enjoyed coasting through, soaking in the scenery. We stopped at a beachside restaurant row and sipped coffee while overlooking the sea. We continued on down the coast where the curving roads created a back-and-forth rhythm that, combined with the warm sun and gentle breeze, was intoxicating. Shortly before Cannes, we stopped at a harbor restaurant for some lunch, and ate on the sunny patio overlooking the yachts.

While Cannes is famous for its film festival, we decided to ride through it and stop, instead, in the older more historic Antibes. Along the way, I was surprised by the red rocks along the coast, which were quite similar to the Southwest U.S. When we arrived, we rode through the winding alleys and along the ramparts of the medieval fortress and ended at a small town square where there was an art fair and shopping area. We wandered the streets and alleyways looking for souvenirs. I snapped up a Vespa iPhone case and Jon got a French pocketknife.

When it came time to return back to Grasse, we were a bit sad, knowing that it was our last time riding our scooters. Luckily, Jens led us on the back roads so that we avoided traffic, but also had more fun riding. We went through small villages, through wooded areas, and through small valleys. As we entered Grasse, we wound up the hill through the old section of the town. It felt as if we were seeing a secret part of France that we would want to remember forever.

As we pulled into our hotel parking, and began to unload our scooters, Jens came around to check our scooters and collect the keys. We had made it, no damage or mishaps, just fun and good times. I was sad to park the scooter for the last time, but upon reflection I was pleased that I felt as if the week hadn't just breezed by, like some vacations can. It seemed as if I had ridden all those miles and seen all those places, and I felt very satisfied.

Once we had time to relax a bit, we headed out for our last group meal. Over wine we toasted to our fabulous, memorable vacation on the French Riviera.





Pricing & Options

Edelweiss will offer two scooter tours in 2011. The dates & prices below were current as of the writing of this article. Check edelweissbike.com for current info.

EDELWEISS 2011 SCOOTER TOURS - Dates and Costs

Côte d'Azur by Scooter June 5-11 & September 4-10
Tuscany by Scooter June 12-18 & September 11-17

Scooter Displacement	125cc	200/250cc	300cc
Duo: sharing scooter & room	\$1,800	\$1,950	\$2,030
Solo: sharing room, riding solo	\$2,090	\$2,230	\$2,380
Single: single room, riding solo	\$2,330	\$2,470	\$2,620

These fees include hotel, breakfast and dinner, as well as comprehensive vehicle insurance with deductible. These fees do not cover airfare, airport transfer, gas for scooter, toll, lunch and beverages.

Travel Tips

We flew in to Nice the night before we were scheduled to arrive in Grasse. To save money, book a hotel that has a shuttle that can pick you up. Taxis charge a 25 Euro flat fee. April used frequent flier miles to book a room at the modern, roomy and comfortable Novotel Nice Aeroport Cap 3000 hotel, which is quite close to the airport and conveniently located next to the Cap 3000 shopping mall. We also stayed there the night before flying back to the US. novotel.com/gb/hotel-0414-novotel-nice-aeroport-cap-3000

The Novotel was a few blocks away from the stop for the #500 bus to Grasse. The 90-minute ride was comfortable, scenic and only cost 1 Euro. The best bargain of the trip! lignedazur.com

Our Grasse base hotel Mandarina was previously a residence for priests. It has a beautiful view, friendly bi-lingual staff and was within walking distance of the main area of town. mandarinahotel.com

The interesting walking tour of Grasse was offered by the Grasse Tourism Office for just 10 Euros. grasse.fr

About Edelweiss

While this may be the inaugural scooter tour trip for Edelweiss, they have been providing motorcycle tours since 1980. The Austrian-based company offers various trips in Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. View their catalog online at edelweissbike.com.



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Clockwise - Starting above:

Into the fog en route to the Canyon du Verdun. (Maria Calabrese)

Sue and Mark at Monte Carlo's Grand Casino before being chased off. (Jens Ruprecht)

A rainy first day of riding: Our clothes were damp, but not our spirits! (Maria Calabrese)

Riding along the river up the canyon. (Maria Calabrese)

While every village has a fountain, we were always impressed by them.



*Clockwise - Starting at left:
The earth near Antibes looked like the U.S. Southwest.
April and Jon after passing the lazy dog in the road. (Jens Ruprecht)
Fine dining in the basement restaurant La Voute in Grasse.
Quaint churches can be found speckled throughout the villages.
Lunch at the harbor overlooking the yachts, near Saint Raphael.*

See more photos from this trip at ScootMagazine.com.



A passageway in the old Antibes shopping area.