

Dispatches from Italy: Ferraris and the South of France

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By John Miller

*"I'm going to drive a ***** Ferrari." – John Miller (as his tour bus pulled into Eze)*

Every summer session, the Lorenzo d' Medici Institute (LdM) hosts field trips on three of the four weekends of the semester. The first field trip for June was to the south of France and Monaco. Recognizing this may be my only chance to get out of Italy, I quickly signed up.

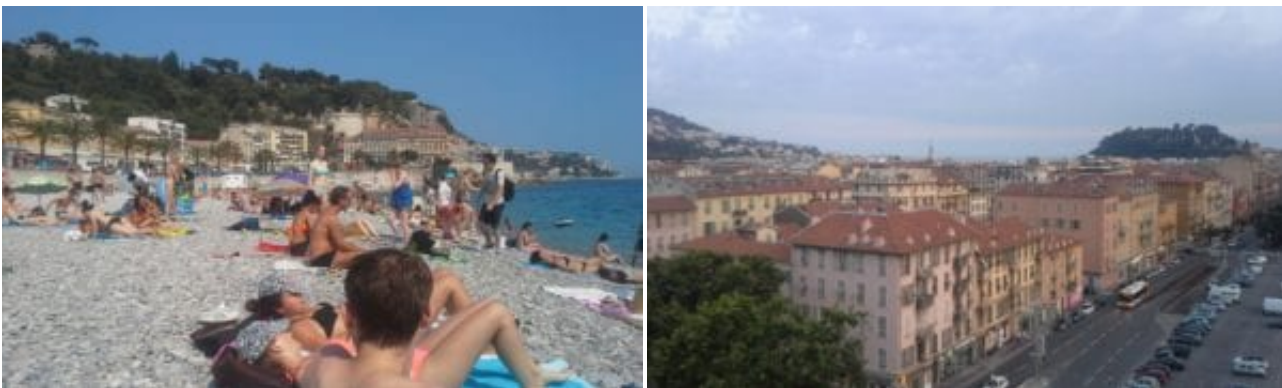
The itinerary was impressive: stop first in St. Paul de Vence, spend the night in Nice, jump to Eze and tour Monte Carlo before driving five hours back to Florence. So, with my roommate, Mark, I left the flat at 5:30 a.m. on Saturday morning.

We arrived in the incredible St. Paul de Vence around noon. St. Paul de Vence is a tiny, medieval walled city that's perched precariously on the top of a hill. You can see it for miles in any direction. Around the turn of the century, contemporary artists started settling there. Over the years it had become a paradise for the modern (and incredibly wealthy) artist. Notable residents included James Baldwin, Yves Montand and Simone Signoret. Over the years, a tradition has started: each artist that calls the town home must donate one of his or her pieces to be put on display for the public. According to the professor in charge of the trip, St. Paul de Vence is the most expensive place to live in southern Europe.



Inside, the town is beautiful; you walk along ancient streets, beneath age-old houses and century's old ramparts. The town is filled with restaurants and art galleries. It's any art lover's idea of paradise. One of the galleries that I stepped into was curated by a Ukrainian woman. She knew enough English and I knew enough French to hold a conversation about one of the artists featured in her gallery. Unfortunately, I can't remember the artist's name, but he was originally from St. Petersburg in Russia and is featured in many galleries in Europe and the U.S. Apparently, he also had the honor of painting Stalin's portrait.

After departing St. Paul, we made the short drive to Nice, where we checked into our hotel. (I'm not complaining, but almost none of the lights worked in our four star room.) Nice is very different from Florence. It lacks the culture and is much larger. However, it's much cleaner and has beaches. Part of the itinerary was a three-hour guided walking tour in the 95 degree heat. Needless to say, most of the group bailed on the tour as soon as we found the Mediterranean.



The water was warm and very salty, much saltier than any other ocean I've tasted. It was also ridiculously clear. I'm guessing I was treading about ten feet of water and I could see the rocky bottom. Speaking of rocks, the steep beach was made of gray, smooth, fist-sized stones that made climbing up to your towel very challenging. After a

while, someone in my group spotted some locals cliff jumping a ways down the beach.

Eager to try something new, I found someone else who would try it and together we made the trek down the rocky beach. Getting to the cliffs was the easy part and the local kids graciously show us where to jump so as not to crush ourselves on the rocks far (but not that far) below. Looking back, I think the only reason they had been so kind was because I had come with a female member of the group and when she climbed down, they all started showing off. Everywhere you looked, there were French adolescents flipping and diving into the crystal clear water below. Jumping off those rocks was a blast! Certainly much more fun than walking around another European city. Getting out of the water and back up to the jump spot was the hardest part. It involved hoisting yourself up slick, razor-sharp rocks, over broken, rusty railings and tiptoeing around broken glass. But it was completely worth it.

I've also never been to a topless beach and, let me tell you, it takes a second to get used to. It's not weird or awkward or anything like that; it's just that you do a double-take every time because it doesn't immediately register in your American brain.

That night we had a lovely three-course meal at the hotel. On Sunday we drove to Eze, a little village on a hill with a perfume factory at the base. I didn't visit either. Instead, I drove a Ferrari F430 convertible through the hills above Monte Carlo.

The test drive was, quite literally, out of a video game— Forza Horizon 2. I paid €120 to whip around the magnificent corners for 15 minutes. The roads were beautiful: a towering mountain to your left and the Mediterranean far below, to your right. The roads were just two lanes and the only thing that kept you from sailing off the road into thin air was a low stone wall. In retrospect, I'm fairly certain it wouldn't have stopped a howling Ferrari.

I wasn't alone in the car; the man in charge of the test drive rode shotgun to navigate and comment on my driving skills. A few minutes into the drive, he asked me if I'd raced before; when I pulled the beautiful car back into its parking space, he told me I was an excellent driver. Apparently, hot laps at Watkins Glen really had some (pseudo) real world use.

The car was remarkably easy to drive. Under 30 miles per hour it was a little jerky and sounded a bit like a diesel, but it felt entirely manageable. Once on the open roads, it came to life. Blasting through hairpin turns at 75 miles an hour with a V8 screaming behind your head really has a way of getting the adrenaline pumping. I didn't even need to brake; in the beginning, I would come off the gas and onto the brakes just before the turn but the navigator instructed me otherwise. The instant your foot leaves the gas pedal, the car starts to slow and the grippy tires completely eliminate the need to tap the heart-stopping brakes.

The engine noise changed as you climbed the RPM gauge. Like I said, at a low RPM it reminded me of a diesel, low and throaty, but as you moved up it quieted right down before shrieking like a banshee.

Unfortunately, I was not allowed to pass slower drivers, which led to me getting passed by two fat people on a moped.

As I pulled around the last corner in the parking lot, I went too fast and — *crunch!* — bottomed out on some sort of drain or grate. To add another layer of difficulty, the navigator had me back the Ferrari into its parking spot, without scraping the thousand-dollar bumper on the stone wall that stood, inconveniently, just behind the roped off parking spot. Was the 15 minute test drive the best part of my two day trip to France? Indubitably.

Later, we bussed to Monaco and toured Monte Carlo. It wasn't too exciting, just a palace that looked like it was made of plaster and some ugly apartment buildings.

Monte Carlo: nice, but no James Bond novel

After Monte Carlo, my group settled back on the bus for a five-hour ride to Florence. I must admit that I enjoyed the bit of France I've seen more than the bit of Italy. Not only can I speak a bit of French, but I also found the cities to be much cleaner (there are no dogs defecating in the streets, no thoughtless graffiti on its walls or papers lying in its gutters) and the people much friendlier.

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