

Sea, sun, and city: a warm mix in Marseille

By Jan Brogan
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MARSEILLE — Within minutes of arriving for a study abroad program at Aix-en-Provence years ago, the school administrators warned us: Never go to Marseille.

The city next door was useful only for its airport and train station. Even then, we should watch our bags.

It was 1978. “The French Connection,” an Oscar-winning film about New York’s heroine pipeline, was still in our minds. Marseille was viewed as a dark underworld, home to international drug kingpins. I would steer clear of the city in two subsequent trips to Provence.

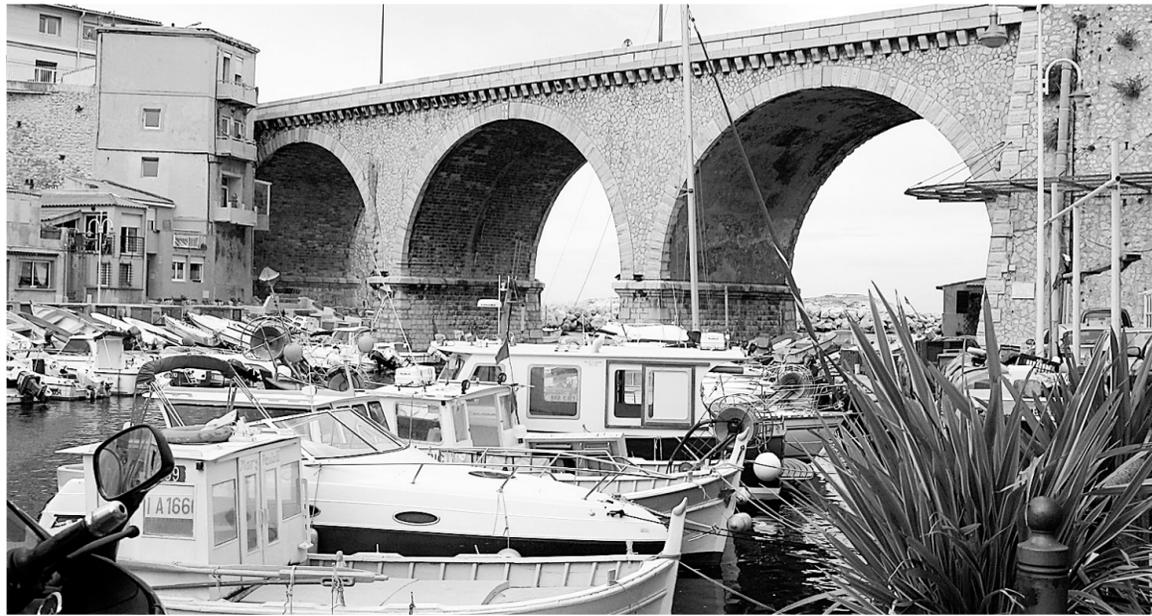
But Marseille has come up in the world. This diverse, cosmopolitan city of 850,000 on the Mediterranean is not without problems, including high unemployment and a continued reputation for mob-related crime. But its safety and image have vastly improved. Residents tout it as “the new Barcelona,” and it has been designated a European capital of culture for 2013, a distinction that typically boosts tourism.

Last summer when I had spent a month in Provence, I finally gave Marseille a try and found myself returning again and again.

Marseille has 35 miles of coastline and is still one of the leading commercial ports on the Mediterranean, though shipping has been rerouted north. Vieux Port, or Old Port, the heart of the city, today is a terminal for boat tours and an enormous pleasure craft marina.

On my second trip, my daughter and I were treated to a tour by a friend, Anny Moussu, who has lived here for 20 years. She took us to the famed 19th-century basilica, Notre-Dame de la Garde, which is perched on a bluff, the highest point of Marseille.

The view alone makes this trip worth the climb (or bus ride). From 532 feet above sea



ANNY MOUSSU FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Vallon des Auffes, a fishing port on Marseille's coast road, is a cove named for auffiers, craftsmen who made ropes and rigging.

level, the wraparound terrace looks down on the bay and the Frioul Islands, four islands that include Château d'If, the prison that was the setting for Alexandre Dumas's “The Count of Monte Cristo.”

Notre-Dame de la Garde's interior is decorated with inlaid marble, mosaics, and murals. Model boats hang from the ceiling. On the wall, there are plaques, letters, paintings, War World II medals and flags — all offerings from parishioners. Anny pointed out the shirts given by players and supporters of Olympique de Marseille, the local football (soccer) team. It all has a playful, nautical feel, and a charm that comes from the visible connection to the community.

Anny, who grew up in Strasbourg in the north, says the warm climate and seaside nature of Marseille keep her living here. An avid swimmer, she took us to her favorite local beach, known as “insiders' beach.” Plage des

Abri Côtiers, which means coastal shelter, offered clean water, an intimate sand-and-pebble shore, and a backdrop of tall buildings that blocked the wind.

After a stop at Anny's favorite patisserie, Allegrini, on 57 Avenue Montredon, where we loaded up on pain chocolat and croissants for breakfast the next morning, we ended the day in Le Panier, the oldest district in the city, on the hill just north of Vieux Port.

There we climbed a winding road full of shops and galleries to sample what Anny considered the best chocolate in all of Provence. Tiny La Chocolatière du Panier offers 138 varieties, including unusual combinations with lavender, basil, even onion. We stuck to the more conventional varieties, and I tried a sheaf of dark chocolate filled with caramel. My daughter chose chocolate and dried cherries.

After stopping at a small shop to buy gifts and savon d'huile, the region's luxurious olive oil

soap, we ended the day at Place de Lenche, the old Greek market, now an open square full of restaurants and cafes. We sipped the favorite summer wine, a crisp, not-too-sweet Provencal rose. Between buildings we could see the sun beginning its descent over the harbor.

Upscale shopping and hotels are found on the main thoroughfare, La Canebière. For funkier shops and a more bohemian feel, the Cours Julien district offers colorful graffiti and a multitude of ethnic restaurants that reflect the city's diverse population and North African influences.

On my next trip to Marseille, Anny drove me and my husband along the coast, on la Corniche Kennedy. This cliff road, rebuilt in the 1960s and named for President Kennedy, starts in the city center and heads south, along the water to exclusive beaches and quaint fishing villages.

As the road escapes the city proper, and we passed dive shops, windsurfing rentals, and a

carnival ride park, the terrain begins to look more like Greece.

When the coast road came to a dead end, we parked and climbed a small hill to look down on the Baie des Singes (Bay of Monkees). Here, at what seems like the end of the world, a beautiful azure cove is nestled between sun-bleached bluffs in a stark, almost lunar landscape.

An exclusive restaurant on the cove with spectacular views and good reviews was tempting, but it was too early for lunch so we headed to another inlet in Goudes, where we strolled between shops and dockside cafes.

On the way back, we stopped at le Tiboulen de Maire for lunch. The restaurant has a warm, family atmosphere with great views of the Bay of Marseille. It serves only fish — fresh and expensive — which waiters file at the table.

Many US tourists sidestep the beaches of Marseille to head to the affluent and picturesque town of Cassis to the southeast, the sun-

If you go . . .

Where to stay

Grand Hotel Beauvau Marseille
Vieux Port, 4 rue Beauvau
011-04-91-54-91-00
www.mercure.com
The city's oldest hotel and close to the center of everything near the Old Port. Doubles from \$179.

New Hotel Vieux Port
3bis rue Reine-Elisabeth
newhotelvieuxport.com
Newly renovated and offering its best rooms at \$141 per night until Dec. 31, standard rooms at \$116.

Where to eat

Chez Fon Fon
140 rue Du Vallon des Auffes
011-04-91-52-14-28
www.chez-fonfon.com
Fancy fish restaurant known for its bouillabaisse and with a terrific water view. Main courses \$20-\$60, fixed price menu \$52-\$72. Reservations required.

Chez Etienne
43 rue de Lorette
(Panier district near Vieux Port)
011-04-91-54-76-33
Authentic, local hang out. Provençal and Italian cooking, excellent pizza; \$18-\$38.

bleached limestone cliffs that create the Mediterranean fiords. Anny, who hikes in the mountain range between the two places, says there are more calanques and pretty inlets in Marseille.

That is an understatement. According to Marion Fabre at the Marseille tourism office, there is only one calanque in Cassis, and 15 in Marseille.

Anny adds that Marseille has the advantage of being a little less touristy, and a lot more real.

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Vitality, variety of Delhi's streets sampled in its food stalls

► STREET FOOD

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juice stands and kebab kiosks to full-out kitchens of men working like blazes to produce specialty items. For some of India's best food, do a bit of research and make a list of places to try, haggle with a cycle rickshaw driver, and then plunge into the bazaar.

Old Delhi is a mishmash of stunning balconies, colossal mosques and temples, and atrocious modern architecture that begins crumbling as soon as the cement sets. Masses of wires dangle from buildings and telephone poles giving it a post-apocalyptic feel. There are hordes of people, wholesale vendors of every kind, entire streets and micro-neighborhoods devoted to metalworks, electronics, wedding supplies, spices, silk, and jewelry. Rickshaw wallahs cart scores of uniformed schoolchildren on their three-wheeled cycles, porters haul plastic, cooking oil, rebar, or great slabs of paper on their heads, backs, and carts. It's a crush of hungry humanity and everyone needs a place to eat.

It's also such a maze that finding the food stalls (finding any place, for that matter) can be half the challenge. Directions in local newspaper articles routinely suggest heading down a better-known street to a well-known landmark before doubling back 100 feet to make a turn you would otherwise miss. Even Google Maps gives up the ghost when you try to zoom in.

One of those first places I try, the Ashok & Ashok Meat Dhaba, makes the effort worth it. A tipster has sent me here to try mutton korma, a house specialty available only two days a week, where the spice-laden meat is seared, then slow-cooked over low heat.

“We're out of mutton,” says the fellow taking orders in the sidewalk's fray. “Have the chicken.” The stand has been open half an hour and the signature dish is sold out.

The chicken korma arrives on a metal plate, a vessel for a host of spices and the clarified butter known as ghee. The chicken has a flavor so incredibly deep and earthy, it tastes as if its claws are still on the ground. It's served with a dish of biryani rice,



JOE RAY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Lamb waits on spits to be minced and served with spices at Al Bake, an indoor-outdoor place.

flecked yellow-orange with saffron, and a continuous supply of whole-grain chapati, or flatbread; either is a perfect means for getting more of the curry into your mouth.

If you need a breakthrough moment for Indian street food, this would be it.

Accommodations are spartan. Wooden utility tables take up most of the sidewalk in front and there's an awning-tarp combination protecting some diners from the sun. You eat on your feet, licking your fingers and thanking the heavens.

“I can have a lot of Byzantine notions, but five-star hotel food isn't very good,” says Rahul Verma, my Ashok & Ashok tipster, who has been singing the glories of Delhi's street food for 20 years for The Hindu newspaper.

“I love it. I get energized,” he says. “If you look at street food, you get the whole city.”

With a Rolodex of the best places to eat in the warren of Old Delhi, Verma seems custom-made for his job. He's the kind of guy who holds court at the Press Club of India, continually dispersing spot-on information on the best places to eat and topping off your beer whenever you're not looking.

“Street food is the closest link to culture and society and it's evolved over the centuries,” he says, “and it's cheap.”

A perversely proud two-time survivor of jaundice, Verma has a strict set of ground rules to minimize the chances of catching traveler's illnesses affectionately known as Delhi Belly.

1. “Go someplace busy” — the faster the turnover, the fresher the food.

2. “Eat food that is cooked in front of you” — to minimize the risk from food-borne bacteria.

3. “Always carry bottled water.”

4. “Don't touch the sliced onions.” They may have been staying fresh in a bowl of water.

With that and a handshake, he sets me loose on the city with a list of his favorites. I enlist Scottish-born journalist Pamela Timms whose Eat and Dust street food blog was recently voted one of India's top five food sites.

We take a cycle rickshaw to Chawri Baza, one of Old Delhi's main drags (picture a chaotic “Indiana Jones”-esque street scene, double the number of people, make sure they're all sweating profusely, and you get the idea), and we head to Jain Coffee House, one of Timms's new favorites.

We walk through an alley I wouldn't want to head down alone at night and come out in an aqua-hued courtyard full of wholesalers. It's a calm world, separate from the bazaar half a

block away.

“There it is,” she says, pointing toward a white-haired man sifting wheat. Hidden in the corner is the tiniest of kitchens, taking up just enough space to make coffee, chai, and some peculiar specialties.

She orders a pair of mango sandwiches that arrive with the crusts cut off.

“Their sandwiches are usually fruit jelly with thin slices of paneer [a type of fresh cheese] and grape or pomegranate, and slices of mango or apple,” she says. “It depends on what's in season.”

Ours, which we eat while sitting on sacks of grain, are unlike anything I've seen in India — more, say, a fresh and slightly healthier version of the cream cheese and jelly I loved as a kid.

“They're not traditional, but Jain has been around 50 years,” she says, smiling at the contradiction. “It's a pretty unique enterprise.”

We head to check out one of Verma's suggestions, Manohar Dhaba, which is nestled into the electronics bazaar at the end of Chandni Chowk, across from Delhi's historic Red Fort. Here, you eat “japani samosas,” one-of-a-kind stuffed mille-feuille with muddled, and not necessarily Japanese origins.

We take a bite — the flaky, cube-like puff hides an interior stuffed with peas and potatoes —

If you go . . .

How to plan

You need a plan of attack to know where to go on an Old Delhi street food jag. To get started, find a few destinations on the blogs of food writers Pamela Timms (<http://eatanddust.wordpress.com>) and Rahul Verma (<http://delhistreetfood.blogspot.com>).

Even if you know the places you'd like to visit, your best bet is to find a cycle rickshaw driver. You should be able to negotiate a rate of around 200 rupees (about \$4.30) per hour.

Cycle rickshaw driver Rahul Pal (011-91-9871533849) knows many of Timms and Verma's favorite places and can help find others.

Where to eat

Prices vary, but it is hard to spend more than the equivalent of \$5 on a meal at any of the following establishments.

Hotel Adarsh Niwas

483 Haider Kuli Corner
(below Andhra Bank)
Chandni Chowk
011-91-(0)11-2392-9139

Al Bake

22 Community Center
New Friends Colony
011-91-(0)11-3297-2881

Ashok & Ashok Meat Dhaba

42 Subhas Chowk, Basti Harphool Singh, Sadhar Thana Road
011-91-989-1776283

Manohar Dhaba

38/240 Diwan Hall Road, Old Lajpat Rai Market (across from Red Fort Main entrance)
011-91-(0)11-4139-1909

Jain Coffee House

Directions from the Eat and Dust blog: From Chawri Bazar Metro walk along Chawri Bazar until almost at the left turn into Nai Sarak. On your left is a small gully, Raghu Ganj; walk in and turn left, Jain Coffee House is the grain store at the far left.

which make a fantastic, if heavy mouthful.

“This would come in the ‘hangover food’ category,” says Timms, putting a fine point on the inherent greasy goodness.

From here, we cheat a bit and stop at a sit-down restaurant that's on both Timms and Verma's lists: Hotel Adarsh Niwas.

“Hotel” gets a bit of a stretch in Delhi, encompassing accommodation-free eateries. Inside, owner Satnarayan Sharma sits on the edge of a booth seat, his legs folded under him. We buy brass tokens at the register and hand them to the waiter without a word; he returns in a few moments with the restaurant's signature “thali” — a large metal plate covered with smaller metal plates, each with a different dish: dal, curries, and even sweeter options to be eaten alongside the savory. One cup has a thin yogurt with puffed grains — something I'd be tempted to eat for breakfast or as an afternoon snack, yet in the context of the other options, it makes perfect sense. There's also warm “gulab jamun,”

sweet milk solids typically flavored with cardamom or rosewater that remind me of a perfect pancake from my youth.

We're stuffed to the gills but Timms wants to make sure I have what I need.

“Need any other places?” she says.

“Not unless we're within 10 feet of one,” I reply, raising the white flag.

She understands, but she's a good foodie, and I can see the gears turning as we head out the door.

That evening, I take a walk in the Nizamuddin neighborhood where I'm staying. The mercury is still high and a block away from the flat, I hear the tinkling bell of the popsicle cart. All the man sells is three sizes of “kulfi,” a dense ice cream cousin traditionally made by boiling down sweetened milk. This version has traces of cinnamon and cardamom — cool, soothing goodness on a stick.

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