How to holiday like the Crawleys in the south of France

Our writer follows in the Downton tribe's well-heeled footsteps to live the high life in the Riviera

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It took us some time to get into the grounds of the Villa Rocabella on the French Riviera. Less villa, more mansion, Rocabella is one of the most sumptuous residences in a region of

opulence – but first, you must find it.

The place is hidden on a narrow, winding lane amid trees and high walls that tell you there is a lot of discreet money on the other side. Concealed from quotidian concerns, such grand properties perch haughtily on rocks above the Med. Then you must hang about outside in the lane, pressing the bell. These kinds of places don't cede easily, even if you have an appointment. In our case, it took 25 minutes.

The palatial Villa Rocabella in the south of France, the setting for Downton Abbey II

Then someone pushed a button and the vast metal gates swung open. A governess appeared on the drive up to the house. She was lovely, though more Beyoncé than Mrs Hughes. She agreed to show us round, maybe because the place was empty, so there was no one in residence who might be offended by the presence of the lower orders.

Peeking into Rocabella, the set of the new Downton Abbey film

The white neoclassical pile was a stunner. All columns, marble, stucco, light and space, it spoke of a time when the well-born and well-heeled British considered the Côte d'Azur their elegant repair. People like the Crawleys of TV's Downton Abbey. Exactly like them, in fact.

The Downton tribe were all here at Rocabella last year to film the second Downton movie, Downton Abbey: A New Era, which opened in UK cinemas yesterday. The film decamps the series' aristos and staff to the Riviera of 1929 – right here outside the town of Le Pradet on the rocking, rolling coast that leads to Toulon. Talk about excitement.

The Dowager Countess (right), played by Maggie Smith, whispering with Isobel Crawley, played by Penelope Wilton; a scene from the latest film | CREDIT: Ben Blackall/FOCUS FEATURES LLC

There wasn't that much excitement, actually: people round here aren't impressionable. This is the Mediterranean coast and they've seen movie stars before. Rocabella, once a 19th-century ironmaster's pleasure palace, has featured in several films. So no, folk weren't noticeably enraptured by their proximity to a great movie event. But I was – as are the Downton characters when, in the film, the Dowager Countess announces that she has inherited a Mediterranean villa courtesy of a fellow from her "mysterious past". That's the film's kicker.

Long story very short: the bulk of the Crawley family and staff head south to discover the villa, and unravel the mystery. What they find is a stunner. A vestibule the size of Berkshire, successive reception rooms, a winter garden and monumental stairs leading to bedrooms with space enough for servants to attend to one's hair-combing needs: the whole requires

aristocrats sweeping through to do it justice. Normal people tend to skulk about, talking in whispers, cowed by the magnificence. The seven-acre grounds, running steeply down to a private creek, likewise need silk frocks, parasols and fellows in flannels.

Presently Rocabella, bought in 2020 by a French hi-tech tycoon for a reported £12 million, hosts top-end seminars, incentive and wellness breaks, chambres-d'hôtes for those who can afford the thick end of £500 a summer night for the cheapest room (£1,080 for the most expensive) and, yes, film shooting. This is all good but, as I'm sure Downton II will show, real aristos fit in better, and, traditionally, real British ones best of all.

A stunning bedroom at Villa Rocabella where rooms can start from £1,000 a night

What it maybe won't show is that the 1929 episode was, unbeknown to most, the final flickering of noble British pre-eminence on the Riviera. We'd invented the Med stretch as a visitor destination, first for the good of our health – the region was essentially a sunny winter sanatorium – and then for fun. "I go to the Riviera as I go to the club," said the Prince of Wales.

The history of the Brits and the Riviera

Our dominance of Côte d'Azur winters (summers were considered way too hot and, anyway, there was Henley) ran apace through the 19th century. From 1834, ex-Lord Chancellor Lord Brougham led such a horde of high-rankers into Cannes that French writer Prosper Mérimée cried: "The English have established themselves here as if in a conquered country."

These grandees came not for the sea – it was winter, and the sea was associated with fishermen and other labourers – but for the relative warmth, the exotic horticulture and the company of like-minded people with whom to take tea and wear bonnets and boaters, to gambol, gamble and to share evenings more or less debauched.

The Great War stilled the aristocratic surge south. By 1929, when the Downton crew showed up, the Riviera was on the cusp, the winter season giving way to summer frivolity pioneered, not least, by the lost generation of literary US hedonists. Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and the Fitzgeralds clustered round Antibes to swan about, drink, listen to jazz and drink some more. Bathing and beaches were now in vogue. The economic crash finally put the tin hat on aristocratic ascendancy. Things changed but – and here's the rub – not completely, and not for ever. Rocabella's stretch of the Riviera remains beguiling. Modern demands have brought more urban sprawl, flip-flops and burgers to Le Pradet than the Crawleys would have favoured, but elegance persists, not least in the likes of Rocabella.

Rocabella's coming film fame, while it may not ease access to the mansion (that's pretty price selective), does allow us to focus on this lesser-known bit of the Riviera, on the Var coast, far west of Nice and Cannes. The beauty of the forested, crinkle-cut coast survives, enhanced here and there by creeks hosting sweet beaches and pint-sized ports. Up above, on Cap Garonne, an unexpected copper mine went bust long ago – not least because of the cost of shipping ore to Swansea for treatment – but has re-emerged as a cracking mine museum and world-class trove of micro-minerals (£5.75, mine-capgaronne.fr). Further out, Hyères remains suitable for cultivated travellers. So do Bormes-les-Mimosas and Le Lavandou. The Îles d'Hyères present the Riviera as it was before it became The Riviera – and the Var hinterland grows as wild as you like.

A trip to scrubbed up Toulon

But the true surprise is right next door: Toulon. You really need to see this city. It's cleaned up its act more thoroughly than nearby Marseille. As you'll know, the place had long been a city of two tales. In the big story, Toulon starred (and stars) as France's main naval base, historic home to Jacques Tar's thrust to rule the waves. The setting underpinned the

aspiration. A vast harbour and bay – spangled acreage of Mediterranean out front, mountains directly behind – flattered the fleet. Within the big story was the second, a saltier tale of sailors, guns and girls in garters, of darkened bars and dirty money swilling between mobsters and politicians.

Last time I made a proper visit, maybe 15 years ago, there remained vestiges of the basket-case times, when the port-side district was known as Little Chicago. The tight maze of pedestrian streets was still sombre. The Rue Micholet, epicentre of roguishness, still had more seedy bars than I generally expect. There are none left now. The street has swapped notoriety for, among other things, the entirely groovy L'Eautel, as welcoming a new-wave hotel as I've stayed in recently. Bourgeoisification beckons. Behind, the Place de l'Equerre – once a neglected space of plastic chairs and old blokes with few teeth – is now jolly with bars of a contemporary cocktail character.

A family enjoying the delights of Toulon with its contemporary bars and cool restaurants

Brightness radiates along pedestrian streets formerly as seedy as hell. Here are posh frock shops and galleries, coffee roasters and, on the tiny Rue Chevalier Paul, the O'Boulodrome wine and beer bar complete with indoor boules pitches. This is such an outstanding idea, I

can't believe I didn't think of it myself (call 00 334 2804 0933 to book – Olivier Fouiccat will answer in English).

The main Place Puget, where the tout Toulon gathers, no longer looks as though it should be paying protection money. Nearby, the cracking Biltoki food court has just taken over the old art-deco indoor market. Across town, the Toulon Art Museum re-opened last year after a refurb, transforming it into a place you might like rather than endure. No space here to do it justice, but please go (toulon.fr). Not everything has changed. Toulon remains a big port city; there's an edge, as there should be. It is never going to be Monaco or the Vatican. It needs to simmer or lose its flavour.

It simmers pretty well at the city centre Stade Mayol – named after 20th-century music hall artist Félix Mayol, who was born in the city – where Jonny Wilkinson, Bryan Habana and the Armitage brothers, among others, fuelled Toulon Rugby Club to Euro dominance. Best bet is to attend a match there (rctoulon.com). Second best is a guided visit (toulontourisme.com).

Other constants include the monumental National Navy Museum (musee-marine.fr) and, 2,000ft up, the Provence Landing Memorial, located on top of Mont Faron, directly behind the town. There's a cable car to the top, and great views – if you're OK with going into outer space in what resembles a hot-dog van.

To the seaside

Toulon's greatest constant, though, is the seaside. In the Mourillon district, the city puts on its leisure wear and comes over all Côte d'Azur. The beaches are long, sandy and superior to those of St Tropez. Sand-side brasseries do the seafood thing at prices most can afford. Further along, the coast gets craggier, developing creeks where locals' weekend shacks stack up the rockface. In the Anse Méjean, the ramshackle L'Escale restaurant – bought in 2019 by ex-rugby international Pierre Mignoni – has its feet in the water, its mind on fish. The French never told you that Toulon could be like this because, outside of Toulon, none of them knows.

The beaches in Toulon are long, sandy and superior to those of St Tropez | CREDIT: Christian Raolison/Â© Var Tourisme

A little further along and you're back to Le Pradet. On the winding way up the Colle Noire headland, the Navicelle wine domaine has cracking Provençal reds and rosés – if someone offers you a bottle of the Zéphir rosé, grab it and run – and unexpected owners in the family of Ingvar Kamprad, founder of Ikea (domainedelanavicelle.com).

So back to Rocabella just down the road. Or, rather not. Having got in once, I'm not pushing my luck. Sad, of course, that the noble British veneer has long dissipated. I date the turning point to the mid-1920s, when Zelda Fitzgerald would go bathing in her knickers. I doubt the Dowager Countess of Grantham considered that a promising omen. That said, Downton passes, but the Riviera remains unbeatable.

How to do it

Toulon needed a swell and funky four-star urban hotel, and L'Eautel is it. Excellent value for money, and first-rate restaurant, too (leautel-toulon.com; doubles from £67). If money is no object, head to Villa Rocabella itself (rocabella.fr)

Fly to Toulon-Hyères from Gatwick (easyjet.com). Alternatively, take the train from London St Pancras to Toulon, via Paris, in around eight hours (thetrainline.com)

The Riviera, then and now

A complete guide

Bathing

British nobles didn't swim in the sea any more than they wrestled in mud. The season was winter, the water cold and the sea, anyway, for proletarian pursuits. British society had brought with it to southern France tennis, golf and horse racing. That was sport enough.

Locals

They were considered less as equals, more as domestic staff. Some locals, at least, were gratified: it was a good break for unmarried mothers from the Provençal hinterland. Plus they could earn more than farm or forest labourers. That said, treating every French person as a potential servant these days doesn't invariably end well.

Transport

Nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet worried that the "extreme rapidity" of the 20-hour train journey from Paris to the Med would be "anti-medical … for nervous and anxious person(s)". Twenty-first-century nervous and anxious persons may have quite different but equally piquant concerns related to budget air travel.

Royalty

They flooded the Riviera for the winter months, from Victoria and her offspring through to the Romanovs. As Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII was considered the "king of the Côte d'Azur. No fête or party was organised without his say-so." These days, royals are scarcer on the Riviera. I haven't heard of any since Harry and Meghan flew to Nice on Sir Elton's jet.

1924: The 2nd Duke of Westminster, Hugh Richard Arthur Grosvenor (1879-1953) with a female friend at the Carlton Club in Cannes | CREDIT: Getty

Russians

The Romanovs led Russian nobles into the Riviera in numbers second only to the British. They put up the grandiose Russian cathedral in Nice just in time for a deluge of post-revolution White Russians. Much later, after the fall of communism, the Riviera saw a fresh influx of well-moneyed, ill-mannered Russians. The manager of a Côte d'Azur luxury hotel would, he said, take particularly loud Russians to one side to give them the elements of etiquette. It didn't always work, though he'll doubtless be having less trouble on that score from now on.

Worship

Anglican churches sprang up along the Riviera as our Victorian nobles needed to pray. Now, in Nice, Cannes and Monaco, the need is satisfied by Chanel, Dior and Balenciaga.

Food

Should the idea ever have occurred to them, the Crawleys would have had to wait for a very long time for a pizza, a burger or a crèpe. Now, one hardly has to wait at all.

Clothes

Ladies wore lots up until the 1920s; there's a lot less now. Flip-flops and monokinis, too, would not have been countenanced by a real countess.

Gambling

Vital then as now for the entertainment of high rollers. Lower rollers get in these days for the fruit machines.

Glamour

Ever-present though, back then, it didn't have to hide. Queen Victoria rode around the Alpes Maritime in a donkey cart in view of all (and giving alms to many). She didn't have to face paps, camera phones or much in the way of democracy. Also the good old days were a bit more damned deferential.