

Jews. At sunset, gates would seal the street at either end, locking people in until daylight. To identify Jews as non-Christians, the men were forced to wear yellow stars and the women wore yellow scarves. The white columns across from #19 mark what was the synagogue until 1848, when revolution ended the notion of ghettos in France.

• *Around the corner and downhill on Rue Benoît Bunico find...*

### Place Rossetti

The most Italian of Nice's piazzas, Place Rossetti comes alive after dark—in part because of the **Fenocchio gelato shop**, popular for its many innovative flavors.

Check out the **Cathedral of St. Réparate**—an unassuming building for a big city cathedral. It was relocated here in the 1500s, when Castle Hill was temporarily converted to military use only. The name comes from Nice's patron saint, a teenage virgin named Réparate, whose martyred body floated to Nice in the fourth century accompanied by angels (remember the Bay of Angels?). The interior of the cathedral gushes Baroque, a response to the challenge of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. With the Catholic Church's Counter-Reformation, the theatrical energy of churches was cranked up with re-energized, high-powered saints and eye-popping decor.

• *This is the end of our walk. From here you can hike up **Castle Hill** (from Place Rossetti, take Rue Rossetti uphill; see Castle Hill listing on page 304). Or you can have an ice cream and browse the colorful lanes of Old Nice. Or you can grab Apollo and hit the beach.*

## OLD NICE WALK



This self-guided walk through Nice's old town, from Place Masséna to Place Rossetti, gives you a helpful introduction to the city's bicultural heritage and its most interesting neighborhoods. Allow about an hour at a leisurely pace for this level walk. It's best done in the morning (while the outdoor market thrives), and preferably not on a Sunday, when things are quiet. This ramble is also a joy at night, when fountains glow and pedestrians control the streets.

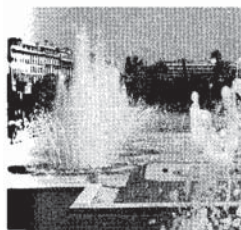
### The Walk Begins

• *Start where Avenue Jean Médecin hits the people-friendly Place Masséna—the successful result of a long, expensive city upgrade and the new center of Nice.*

#### Place Masséna

The grand Place Masséna is Nice's drawing room, where old meets new, and where the tramway bends between Vieux (Old) Nice and the train station. The square's black-and-white pavement feels like an elegant outdoor ballroom, with the sleek tram waltzing across its dance floor. While once congested with cars, the square today is frequented only by these trams, which swoosh silently by every couple of minutes. The men on pedestals sitting high above are modern-art additions that arrived with the tram. For a mood-altering experience, return after dark and watch the illuminated figures float yoga-like above. Place Masséna is at its sophisticated best after the sun goes down.

This vast square dates from 1848 and pays tribute to Jean-



André Masséna, a French military leader during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. Not just another pretty face in a long lineup of French military heroes, he's considered among the greatest commanders in history—anywhere, anytime. Napoleon called him “the greatest name of my military Empire.” No wonder this city is proud of him.

Under the pavement, Nice's historic river, the Paillon, is flowing to the sea. For centuries this river was Nice's natural defense to the north and west (the sea protected the south, and Castle Hill defended the east). A fortified wall once ran along the river's length to the sea. It's been covered since the late 1800s.

Standing in the center of the square, face the sea and start a clockwise spin tour: The towering **modern swoosh sculpture** in the park is meant to represent the “curve of the French Riviera”—the arc of the bay. To the right stretches modern Nice, born with the arrival of tourism in the 1800s. **Avenue Jean Médecin**, Nice's main street, cuts from here through the new town to the train station. In the distance you can see the tracks, the freeway, and the Alps beyond that. Once crammed with cars, buses, and delivery vehicles tangling with pedestrians, Avenue Jean Médecin was turned into a walking and cycling nirvana in 2007. I used to avoid this street. Now I can't get enough of it. Businesses along it flourish in the welcoming environment of generous sidewalks and no traffic.

Appreciate the city's Italian heritage—it feels as much like Venice as Paris. The portico flanking Avenue Jean Médecin is Italian, not French. The rich colors of the buildings reflect the taste of previous Italian rulers.

Turn to your right and look east to see Nice's ongoing effort to “put the human element into the heart of the town.” The unsightly bus station and parking structures were demolished and the green parkway—**La Coulée Verte**—now stretches from the sea to Place Masséna and on to the Museum of Modern Art. Forming a key spine for biking and walking, this ambitious 30-acre project is another example of Nice's determination to make its urban center more livable. Notice the fountain—its surprise geysers delight children by day and its fine lighting enhances romance at night. Beyond the fountain stands a bronze statue of the square's namesake, Masséna. And the hills beyond that separate Nice from Villefranche-sur-Mer.

Turn further to the right to see the old town, with its jumbled and characteristic facades below Castle Hill. The **statue of Apollo** holds a beach towel as if to say, “It's beer o'clock, let's go.”

• Walk past Apollo with the beach towel into the old town. After a block down Rue de l'Opéra, turn left onto Rue St. François de Paule (or you can detour right one block to the **Molinard** perfume shop at #20, which

As you continue down the street, look above the doors. The iron grills (like the one above #6) allow air to enter the buildings but keep out uninvited guests. You'll see lots of these open grills in Vieux Nice. They were part of a clever system that sucked in cool air from the sea, circulating it through homes and blowing it out through vents in the roof.

A few steps ahead, check out the small **Baroque church** (Notre-Dame de l'Annonciation) dedicated to Ste. Rita, the patron saint of desperate causes and desperate people. She holds a special place in locals' hearts, making this the most popular church in Nice. Drop in for a peek at the dazzling Baroque. Inside, the first chapel on the right is dedicated to St. Erasmus, protector of mariners.

• Turn right on the next street, where you'll pass Vieux Nice's most happening bar (**Distilleries Ideales**), with a Pirates of the Caribbean-style interior. Pause at the next corner and simply study the classic Old Nice scene. Now turn left on Rue Droite and enter an area that feels like Little Naples.

### Rue Droite

In the Middle Ages, this straight, skinny street provided the most direct route from river to sea within the old walled town. Pass the recommended restaurant L'Acchiardo. Notice stepped lanes leading uphill to the castle. Stop at **Espuno bakery** (at Place du Jésus) and say “*Bonjour*, what's cooking?” to Natalie from England and her husband Fabrice, who's from here. Notice the firewood stacked behind the oven. Try the house specialty, *tourte aux blettes*—a tart stuffed with Swiss chard, apples, pine nuts, and raisins.

Pop into the Jesuit **Eglise St-Jacques** (also called Eglise du Gesù) for an explosion of Baroque exuberance hidden behind that plain facade. At the wooden pulpit, notice the crucifix held by a sculpted arm. This clever support allowed the priest to focus on his sermon while reminding the congregation that Christ died for their sins.

The balconies of the large mansion on the left mark the **Palais Lascaris** (c. 1647), home of one of Nice's most prestigious families. Today it is a museum with an impressive collection of antique musical instruments—harps, guitars, violins, and violas (good English explanations)—along with elaborate tapestries and a few well-furnished rooms. The palace has four levels: The ground floor was used for storage, the first floor was devoted to reception rooms (and musical events), the owners lived a floor above that, and the servants lived at the top. Look up and make faces back at the guys under the balconies.

• Turn left on the Rue de la Loge, then left again on Rue Benoit Bunico.

In the 18th century, Rue Benoit served as a **ghetto** for Nice's

including the local favorites: carnations, roses, and jasmine. Locals know the season by what's on sale (mimosas in February, violets in March, and so on). Until the recent rise in imported flowers, this region supplied all of France with flowers. Still, fresh flowers are cheap here, the best value in this notoriously expensive city. The Riviera's three big industries are tourism, flowers, and perfume (made from these flowers...take a whiff).

The boisterous produce section trumpets the season with mushrooms, strawberries, white asparagus, zucchini flowers, and more—whatever's fresh gets top billing. What's in season today?

The market opens up at Place Pierre Gautier. It's also called Plassa dou Gouvernou—you'll see bilingual street signs here that include the old Niçois language, an Italian dialect. This is where farmers set up stalls to sell their produce and herbs directly. For a **rooftop view** over the market, climb the steps by Le Grand Bleu restaurant (you may have to step over the trash sacks, but it's allowed).

Look up to the **hill** that dominates to the east. The city of Nice was first settled up there by Greeks (circa 400 B.C.). In the Middle Ages, a massive castle stood there with soldiers at the ready. Over time, the city grew down to where you are now. With the river guarding one side and the sea the other, this mountain fortress seemed strong—until Louis XIV leveled it in 1706. Nice's medieval seawall ran along the line of two-story buildings where you're standing.

Now, look across Place Pierre Gautier to the large "palace." The **Ducal Palace** was where the kings of Sardinia, the city's Italian rulers until 1860, resided when in Nice. (For centuries, Nice was under the rule of the Italian capital of Torino.) Today, the palace is the local police headquarters. The land upon which the Cours Saleya sits was once the duke's gardens and didn't become a market until Nice's union with France.

• *Continue down Cours Saleya. The fine golden building that seals the end of the square is where Henri Matisse spent 17 years. I imagine he was inspired by his view. The Café les Ponchettes is perfectly positioned for you to enjoy the view too if you want a coffee break. At the café, turn onto...*

### Rue de la Poissonnerie

Look up at the first floor of the first building on your right. **Adam and Eve** are squaring off, each holding a zucchini-like gourd. This scene represents the annual rapprochement in Nice to make up for the sins of a too-much-fun Carnival (Mardi Gras, the pre-Lenten festival). Residents of Nice have partied hard during Carnival for more than 700 years. The **spice shop** below offers a fine selection of regional herbs.

*has a free one-room museum and offers create-your-own-perfume sessions for a price; see [www.molinard.com](http://www.molinard.com)).*

### Rue St. François de Paule

This colorful street leads into the heart of Vieux Nice. On the left is the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall). Peer into the **Alziari olive oil shop** (at #14 on the right). Dating from 1868, the shop produces top-quality stone-ground olive oil. The proud and charming owner, Gilles Piot, claims that stone wheels create less acidity, since metal grinding builds up heat (see photo in back over the door). Locals fill their own containers from the huge vats.

**La Couqueto** (at #8) is a colorful shop filled with Provençal handicrafts, including lovely folk characters (*santons*).

Across the street is Nice's grand **opera house**. Imagine this opulent jewel back in the 19th century, buried deep in the old town of Nice. With all the fancy big-city folks wintering here, this rough-edged town needed some high-class entertainment. And Victorians needed an alternative to those "devilish" gambling houses. (Queen Victoria, so disgusted by casinos, would actually close the drapes on her train window when passing Monte Carlo.) The four statues on top represent theater, dance, music, and party poopers.

On the left (at #7), **Pâtisserie Auer's** grand old storefront would love to tempt you with chocolates and candied fruits. It's changed little over the centuries. The writing on the window says, "Since 1820 from father to son." The gold royal shields on the back wall remind shoppers that Queen Victoria indulged her sweet tooth here.

• *Continue on, sifting your way through a cluttered block of tacky souvenir shops to the big market square.*

### Cours Saleya

Named for its broad exposure to the sun (*soleil*), Cours Saleya (kooor sah-lay-yuh)—a commotion of color, sights, smells, and people—



has been Nice's main market square since the Middle Ages (flower market all day Tue-Sun, produce market Tue-Sun until 13:00, antiques on Mon). While you're greeted by the ugly mouth of an underground parking lot, much of this square itself was a parking lot until 1980, when the mayor of Nice had this solution dug.

The first section is devoted to the Riviera's largest flower market. In operation since the 19th century, this market offers plants and flowers that grow effortlessly and ubiquitously in this climate,

# Old Nice Walk

