

Villefranche-sur-Mer Town Walk

ARRIVAL IN VILLEFRANCHE-SUR-MER

By Train: Not all trains stop in Villefranche-sur-Mer (you may need to transfer to a local train in Nice or Monaco). Villefranche-sur-Mer's train station is just above the beach, a short stroll from the old town and most of my recommended hotels. Taxis from the station to my recommended hotels cost about €10.

For tourists, Villefranche is a tiny, easy-to-cover town that snuggles around its harbor under its citadel. This quick self-guided walk laces together everything of importance, starting at the waterfront near where cruise-ship tenders land and finishing at the citadel.

• If arriving by bus or train, you'll walk five minutes to the starting point. Go to the end of the little pier directly in front of Hôtel Welcome, where we'll start with a spin tour (spin to the right) to get oriented.

The Harbor: Look out to sea. Cap Ferrat, across the bay, is a landscaped paradise where the 1 percent of the 1 percent compete for the best view. The Rothschild's pink mansion, Villa Ephrussi (slightly left of center, hugging the top) is the most worthwhile sight to visit in the area. To its right, in the saddle of the hill, the next home, with the big red-tiled roof, belongs to Paul Allen. Geologically, Cap Ferrat is the southern tip of the Alps. The



range emerges from the sea here and arcs all across Europe, over 700 miles, to Vienna.

Today, ships bring not pirates but tourists. The bay here is generally filled with beautiful yachts. (In the evenings, you might see well-coiffed captains being ferried in by dutiful mates to pick up statuesque call girls.) Local guides keep a list of the world's 100 biggest yachts and talk about some of them as if they're part of the neighborhood.

At 2,000 feet, this is the deepest natural harbor on the Riviera and was the region's most important port until Nice built its own in the 18th century. Greek, Roman, and American ships appreciated the setting, as do cruise ships today. The biggest cruise ships drop their hooks here rather than in Nice or Monaco. The tiny jetty is the landing point for the cruise-ship tenders that come ashore each morning in season.

Up on the hill, the 16th-century citadel (where this walk ends) is marked by flags. The yellow fisherman's chapel (with the little-toe bell tower) has an interior painted by Jean Cocteau. Hôtel Welcome offers the balconies of dreams. Up the lane is the baroque facade of St. Michael's Church. The promenade, lined by fancy fish restaurants, leads to the town beach. Fifty yards above the beach stands the train station and above that, supported by arches, is the Low Corniche road, which leads to Monaco. Until that road was built in the 1860s, those hills were free of any development all the way to Monaco. The big yellow building beyond is rentable for €300,000 a month (as Madonna did for a recent birthday).

• *Walk left 30 yards past the last couple of fishing boats surviving from the town's once important fishing community to a small bronze bust of Jean Cocteau, the artist who said, "When I look at Villefranche, I see my youth." Step up to the little chapel he painted.*

Chapel of St. Pierre (Chapelle Cocteau): This chapel is the town's cultural highlight. Cocteau, who decorated the place, was a Parisian transplant who adored little Villefranche-sur-Mer and whose career was distinguished by his work as an artist, poet, novelist, playwright, and filmmaker. Influenced by his pals Marcel Proust, André Gide, Edith Piaf, and Pablo Picasso, Cocteau was a leader among 20th-century avant-garde intellectuals. At the door, Marie-France—who is passionate about Cocteau's art—collects a €3 donation for a fishermen's charity. She then sets you free to enjoy the chapel's small but intriguing interior. She's happy to give explanations if you ask (open Wed-Mon 10:00-12:00 & 15:00-19:00, usually closed Tue, hours vary with cruise-ship traffic and season).

In 1955 Cocteau tattooed the barrel-vaulted chapel with heavy black lines and pastels. Each of Cocteau's Surrealist works—the Roma (Gypsies) of Stes-Maries-de-la-Mer who dance and sing to honor the Virgin, girls wearing traditional outfits, and three scenes

from the life of St. Peter—is explained in English. Is that Villefranche-sur-Mer’s citadel in the scene above the altar?

• *From the chapel, stroll the harbor promenade 100 yards past romantic harborside tables. Restaurant La Mère Germaine is named for Mother Germaine, who famously took care of US Navy troops in World War II (step inside to see sketches and old photos on the wall). Just past the restaurant, a lane (signed Vieille Ville) leads up into the old town. Walk a few steps until you reach a long tunnel-like street.*

Rue Obscure, the Old Town, and St. Michael’s Church:

Here, under these 13th-century vaults, you’re in another age. Before the long stepped lane (which we’ll climb later), turn right and walk to the end of Rue Obscure (which means “dark street”). At the end, wind up to the sunlight past a tiny fountain at Place du Conseil, and a few steps beyond that to a viewpoint overlooking the beach. Then stroll back past the fountain and gently downhill. At Place des Deux Canons, turn right and climb the stepped lanes, and then take your first left at a restaurant to St. Michael’s Church, facing a delightful square (Place de l’Eglise) with a single magnolia tree. The church features an 18th-century organ, a particularly engaging crucifix at the high altar, and (to the left) a fine statue of a recumbent Christ—carved, they say, from a fig tree by a galley slave in the 1600s.

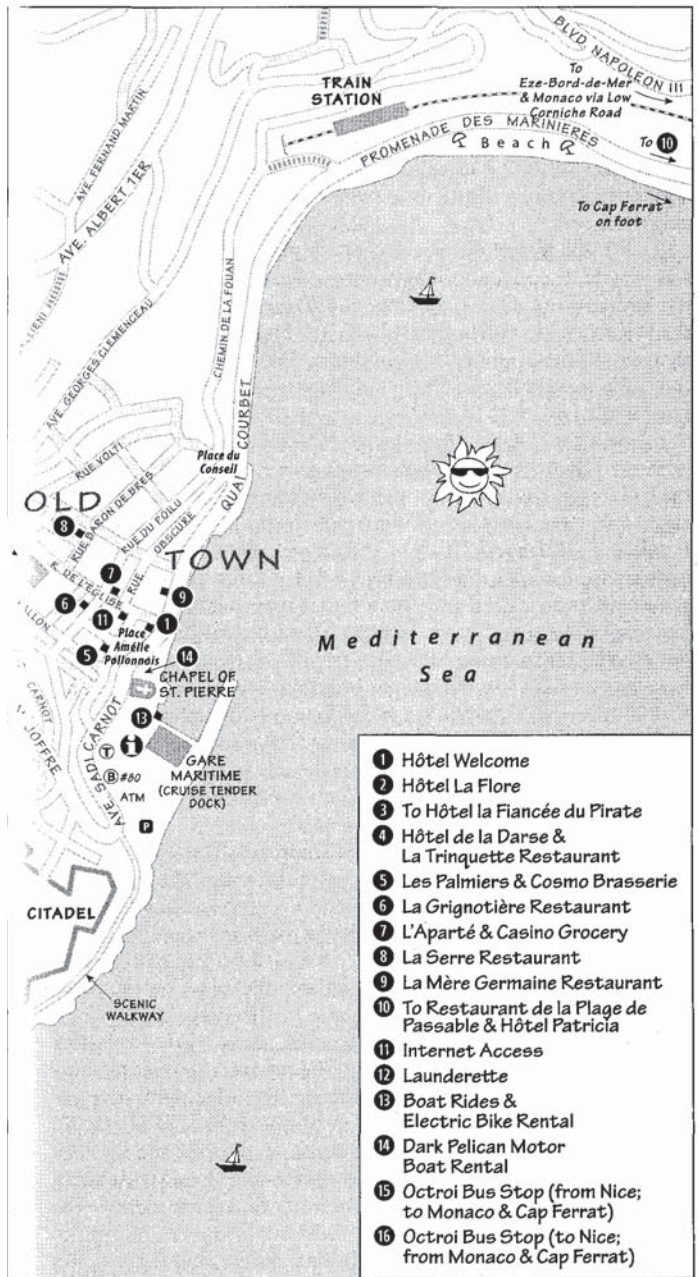
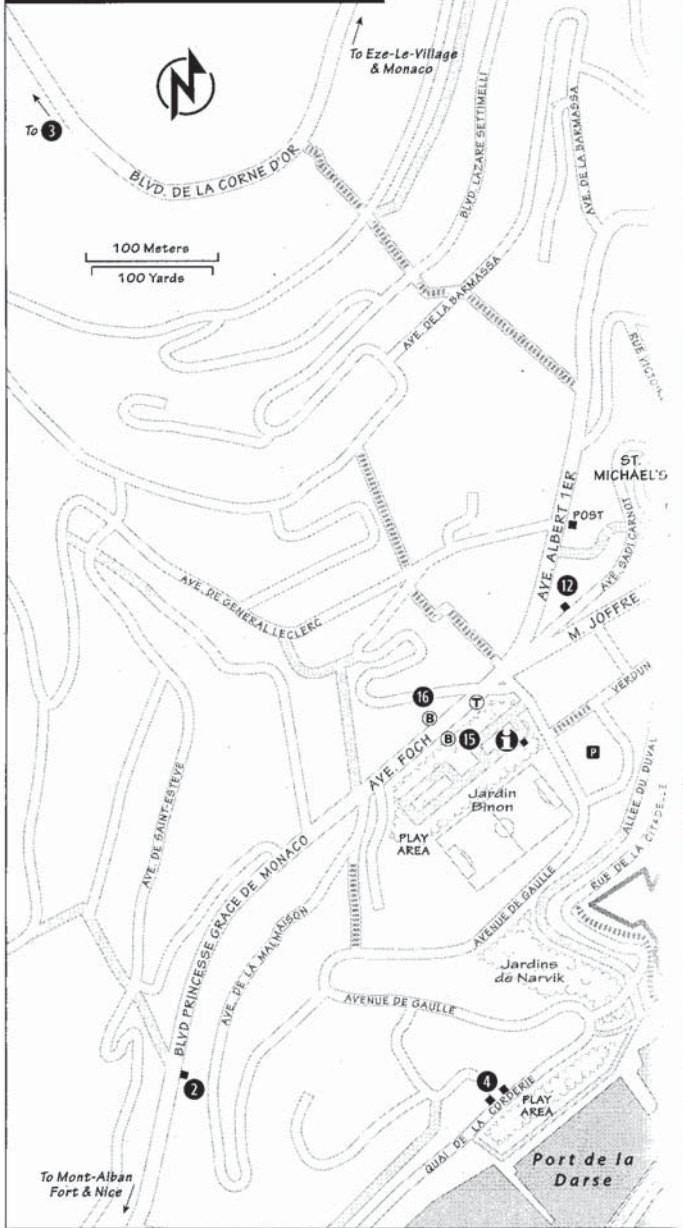
• *Leaving St. Michael’s, go downhill halfway to the water, where you hit the main commercial street. Go right on Rue du Poilu to Place de la République. (Browse real-estate windows if you’d like to move here.) Head through the square and angle left, up the hill to the...*

Citadel: The town’s mammoth castle was built in the 1500s by the Duke of Savoy to defend against the French. When the region joined France in 1860, the castle became just a barracks. Since the 20th century, it’s housed the police station, City Hall, a summer outdoor theater, and art galleries. The single fortified entry—originally a drawbridge over a dry moat (a.k.a. kill zone)—still leads into this huge complex.

The exterior walls slope thickly at the base, indicating that they were built in the “Age of Black Powder”—the 16th century—when the advent of gunpowder made thicker, cannonball-deflecting walls a necessity for any effective fortification. The bastions are designed for smarter crossfire during an attack. The inside feels vast and empty. If you wander around, you’ll find a memorial garden for victims of World War II, five free and empty museums and galleries, a garden in the bastion, and the City Hall (which offers a free WC, as all City Halls in France are required to by law).

• *And that concludes our introductory walk.*

Villefranche-sur-Mer



- 1 Hôtel Welcome
- 2 Hôtel La Flore
- 3 To Hôtel la Fiancée du Pirate
- 4 Hôtel de la Darse & La Trinquette Restaurant
- 5 Les Palmiers & Cosmo Brasserie
- 6 La Grignotière Restaurant
- 7 L'Aparté & Casino Grocery
- 8 La Serre Restaurant
- 9 La Mère Germaine Restaurant
- 10 To Restaurant de la Plage de Passable & Hôtel Patricia
- 11 Internet Access
- 12 Launderette
- 13 Boat Rides & Electric Bike Rental
- 14 Dark Pelican Motor Boat Rental
- 15 Octroi Bus Stop (from Nice; to Monaco & Cap Ferrat)
- 16 Octroi Bus Stop (to Nice; from Monaco & Cap Ferrat)