

# SAINT-JEAN-CAP- FERRAT

*History of the "Peninsula of Billionaires"*

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## INTRODUCTION

“Penelope would have ended her days alone if Ulysses had come by.”

The management of the “Brise Marine” hotel welcomes visitors with this nod to the ancient origins of southeastern France and the unique charm of the Mediterranean peninsula.

This small paradise – a small strip of land connected to the French mainland by an isthmus only 350 meters wide – boasts captivating natural beauty.

For centuries, it was enclosed by rocks and sea, isolated from the world – then suddenly, everything changed. The age of progress arrived. Roads, railways, and an influx of work and money led to the development of this once almost deserted peninsula, while preserving its natural appeal.

The name Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat refers to Saint John the Evangelist, patron of the commune, and the Latin “férus”, meaning “wild” or “uncultivated.”

The area of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat extends over approximately 250 hectares, with 764 inhabitants per square kilometre. More than 500 of the most luxurious villas are nestled discretely between its greenery today, allowing their occupants full relaxation without disturbance by the media.

The peninsula represents one of the most eclectic locations on the Côte d’Azur. For many, it is a much-needed break from the concrete of urban hotspots, and that’s why a diverse range of personalities past and present have made this region their home away from home, or even their permanent residence: it offers a feeling of peace and harmony.

But how did this small piece of wild, remote land become one of the wealthiest towns in France today?

### I- The Great History of Saint-Jean

Formerly known as Anao, the site of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat was initially occupied by the Ligurians, later conquered by the Romans and integrated into the Roman province Narbonese Gaul in 121 BC.

In the early Middle Ages, the reclusive Saint-Hospice (died in 581) occupied a tower on the eastern part of the peninsula. Around the same time, the Lombards ravaged the region.

Saracen pirates occupied the territory in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, until they were defeated and expelled by Count William I of Provence in 973.

In 1388, during the surrender of the County of Nice, the hamlet of Saint-Jean, part of the commune of Villefranche, returned to the Duchy of Savoy. The site was fortified under Savoyard protectorate; in 1561, under the reign of Duke Emmanuel-Philibert of Savoy, Fort Saint-Hospice was built. It was destroyed in 1706 during the capture of Nice by France.

Saint-Jean came under French occupation several times between 1720 and 1820, until it was definitively

ruled part of France in 1860, along with the entire County of Nice.

In 1904, the hamlet of Saint-Jean separated from Villefranche-sur-Mer and became a separate commune. Initially named Saint-Jean-sur-Mer, the commune was renamed Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat in 1907.

Having long been characterised by dry, rocky terrain, a water supply was introduced to Cap-Ferrat in 1876, allowing dense vegetation to gradually grow. At the same time, a port was built in the then-modest fishing village of Saint-Jean. Around the peninsula's circular boulevard, mapped out in 1900, splendid properties were erected to house important figures.

Today, Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat is one of the main residential sites on the Côte d'Azur, boasting numerous luxurious properties.

## II- The Development of Tourism

From the early 1900s, winter tourism began to develop on the Côte d'Azur. Thanks to its very mild climate, it attracted wealthy families from abroad, particularly the English and Russians, turning it into a renowned destination.

The peninsula of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat earned its own reputation as a popular vacation spot in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, it had only a few small houses for fishermen and farmers, grouped around the church and the port in the hamlet of Saint-Jean, part of the commune of Villefranche-sur-Mer.

Around this time, the *Compagnie Générale des Eaux* created an artificial lake of 20,000m<sup>3</sup> in the middle of a wooded park, fed by the river Vésubie, complete with an islet and waterfall. Thanks to this water source, denser and more diverse vegetation could grow on the peninsular.

The development of infrastructure – particularly the Nice and Littoral Tramway, also known as “T.N.L.” – also made it easier to reach Saint-Jean. The tram stopped directly in front of the villas La Désirade and Les Cèdres, and cost 0.50 francs for first class and 0.40 francs for second class.

Welcomed enthusiastically by the population, the arrival of the tramway increased the number of visitors to the peninsula and, consequently, significantly raised the price of building land. Things then evolved quickly, and with the rise of private cars, the more cumbersome and less comfortable tramway disappeared from the commune in 1931, replaced by a faster and more profitable bus service.

From then on, Cap-Ferrat became a favourite excursion spot for Nice families, who flocked over in horse-drawn carriage to picnic under the pines and olive trees or dine in the new restaurants popping up near the port.

### III- Prominent Figures who have lived in Saint-Jean

As of the late 1930s, summer visits became increasingly popular with tourists, and by the 1950s, Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat was becoming a very fashionable seaside resort that welcomed celebrities from around the world. Notable figures included musicians, singers, actors, and filmmakers such as Edith Piaf, Charlie Chaplin, Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Roger Moore, Tony Curtis, David Niven, and Romy Schneider, who got married there in 1966.

**Henri Matisse**, the well-known artist, was frequently received at **Villa Natacha**, owned by art publisher **Alec Tériade**. Matisse created a stained-glass window and a ceramic wall in the villa's dining room. Tériade hosted numerous artists he worked with, including **Chagall** and **Picasso**, as well as his compatriot **Odysseas Elytis**, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1979.

**Charlotte Salomon**, a Jewish artist of German origin, stayed for two years at the **Hôtel Belle Aurore** (now Hôtel & Spa La Villa Cap Ferrat), where she painted her life's work "Leben? oder Theater?"

She settled on the Côte d'Azur in 1939, but four years later, the German army occupied the region, leading to the deportation of Jews under the Nazi regime, including Salomon and her husband. She died in Auschwitz on October 10, 1943.

The artist who left the most significant mark on Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat remains **Jean Cocteau**. A regular guest at **Villa Santo Sospir**, where he decorated the walls with splendid frescoes, he also created the fresco that adorns the wedding hall in the town hall.

The first large estates were built by notable figures from the early 20th century. Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat became highly sought after from the turn of the 19th century, following the arrival of **King Leopold II** and the Belgian aristocracy.

It was around 1895 that Leopold II, King of the Belgians, made his first real estate acquisitions on the Côte d'Azur. He initially bought several plots of land at Col de Caire in Villefranche, then built Villa "Léopolda" in this commune, though he reportedly seldom stayed there.

From then on, the king's enthusiasm for the region and Cap-Ferrat grew rapidly, seeing him acquire almost the entire western slope of the Cap, from Passable to the lighthouse. It's thought that ultimately the King owned around ten properties at Cap-Ferrat.

As a joke, a journalist from "l'Eclaireur de Nice" predicted that in the near future, a sign at the entrance of the commune would read: "Belgian colony, no entry."

At a dinner in Nice with President of the Republic Armand Fallières in 1909, Leopold lauded the Côte d'Azur in a speech, calling the Alpes-Maritimes, the Var, and the Principality of Monaco "terrestrial sections of paradise."

Since then, crowned heads, artists, politicians, and wealthy industrialists have continued to be charmed by the unique allure of this place, where the expression "to live happily is to live hidden" takes on its full meaning.

In 1904, the **Panorama Palace Hotel** (now Hôtel Royal Riviera) was constructed at the entrance of the peninsula. Its location placed it at the centre of social life. In 1908, the **Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat** was built to accommodate wealthy cosmopolitan clientele at the tip of Cap-Ferrat. It also hosted politicians such as General de Gaulle, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Raymond Barre, Winston Churchill, George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Boris Yeltsin.

## IV- The Villas

### **Villa Ephrussi Rothschild:**

In 1905, Béatrice de Rothschild, one of the wealthiest people in France at the time, bought a 7-hectare hill overlooking the sea in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, together with her husband, Maurice Ephrussi. Construction was completed in 1912. The villa turned out to be a magnificent palace. Inspired by her honeymoon aboard the luxury liner "Ile de France," Rothschild named her estate after the ship and shaped it like the vessel. The gardeners could even be seen sporting sailor uniforms with the traditional red pompom on top.

In her marvellous palace, she displayed all the decorative objects she had collected on her travels around the world. Sometimes, entire trains of belongings were unloaded at Beaulieu station to allow her to select the best items.

Baroness Béatrice Ephrussi de Rothschild bequeathed her entire property, along with its fabulous collections, to the Institut de France, Académie des Beaux-Arts, in 1934. It was to be made into a museum with one condition: that her donation be used to maintain the villa Ile de France as it was when the work was completed.

### **La Fleur du Cap:**

The first villas appeared along the seafront connecting the peninsula to the neighbouring commune of Beaulieu-sur-Mer (now Promenade Maurice Rouvier). One of the oldest among them is Villa Lo Scoglietto.

The Nice olive oil merchant Alfred Bounin bought several plots of land in 1880, which he combined to form a small cape overlooking the sea, on which he built a modest villa named Lo Scoglietto. The owner used his Saint-Jeannoise residence as a secondary home where he could indulge in long horseback rides or swimming.

Bounin had a bathing cabin built on a rocky point emerging from the sea and bordering his land, connected to his villa by a narrow footbridge. After his death, his son Alfred, a theatre actor, raised the building and added a "temple of love" to the park, which served as the setting for the film "L'esclave de Phydias" directed by Léonce Perret in 1914. The house underwent other modifications and was rented to political figures such as French President Vincent Auriol and King Leopold III of Belgium, who occupied it with his son, future King Baudouin I. Later, Charlie Chaplin spent a few months there, before another English actor, David Niven, acquired the villa and kept it until his death in 1983.

### **Iberia:**

King Leopold II of Belgium began buying land on the Cap in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, acquiring over 50 hectares on the western slope of the peninsula within a few years. First, he bought a small villa near the

Passable district, which had a private port, used as the officers' villa. However, the sovereign regularly visited this pleasant cottage for some peace and solitude.

He acquired the villa of Joseph Vieil at Passable, now Villa Iberia, with a convenient small jetty that allowed him to dock by boat when he came to France aboard his yacht.

### **Les Cèdres:**

Leopold III's most beautiful property was arguably Villa Les Cèdres, which he expanded under his ownership. To complete the works, an army of workers of all disciplines worked for nearly a year.

In the 15-hectare park, gardeners cleaned and pruned trees, laid out flower beds, tilled the soil, and planted various plants. Masons consolidated and raised the enclosing wall, while near the main entrance, a vast pond fifty meters long was dug, soon surrounded by multicoloured flowers.

To complete the park, a two-kilometre track was traced around the estate so that the king, a great horse-riding enthusiast, could ride at his leisure. Away from the main building, a model stable thirty metres long included ten boxes, a hay store, fully automated water troughs, and above, two staff apartments for coachmen and grooms. Opposite, a garage intended to house the king's cars was nearing completion.

As for the villa itself, the spectacle was no less impressive. Electricians specially brought in from Paris replaced the old gas lighting with a modern electrical system. Plasterers, carpenters, plumbers, locksmiths, and upholsterers occupied almost all the rooms of the house, giving it all the luxury desired by its royal owner.

Leopold III received distinguished guests such as Grand Duke Peter of Russia, Lord Salisbury, and Prince Charles, heir to the Swedish and Norwegian crowns. On the property, he also built a villa to accommodate his mistress, Baroness Vaughan.

A large artificial lake was also constructed for boating and to attract migratory birds. When it later dried up, the 'lake' was a zoo until September 2009.

Now owned by the Marnier-Lapostolle company, the villa's vast park boasts an immense collection of rare trees, particularly a large number of bamboo varieties unique in Europe. Some plants are used in the production of the famous Marnier liqueur.

The king is also credited with constructing three other villas: Boma, Matadi, and Banana, named after three villages along the Congo River.

### **La Vigie:**

In 1898, Emile Crozet-Fourneyron, a major industrialist in the Lyon steel industry and former deputy and secretary-general of the Loire during the 1870 war, bought a vast plot of several hectares on the site of old grain mills. He built Villa Vigie, designed by himself in collaboration with architect Charles Bermond.

The villa had a unique circular shape, with a roof terrace on which an independent dwelling was built much later. The house, which belonged to the family of the former deputy until recently, is now divided into three apartments.**Maryland:**

Right next to Villa Vigie, Villa Maryland, is equally spectacular with its magnificent, cloistered patio and terrace of red marble columns, built at the request of the British Sir Arthur Wilson in 1904.

Villa Maryland was a true Florentine-style palace with about thirty rooms. Overlooking the mosaiced terrace, a sundial bore the inscription: "Quad pero lumen est" (what I seek is light), amusingly recalling the name of the English architect.

While the name Wilson might not resonate with the people of Saint-Jean, he was well-known throughout the British Empire at the time. He lavishly hosted his longtime friend Edward VII when he was still the Prince of Wales, as well as the entire English colony of the Côte d'Azur.

#### **Sylvia:**

In 1902, the American Ralph Curtiss built a large Florentine-style villa overlooking Grasseuil beach, which he named after his wife, Sylvia. Each winter, Ralph Curtiss divided his time between Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat and Venice, where he owned an exquisite Venetian palace on the Grand Canal. In the 1950s, the villa was acquired by an Egyptian, Pasha Ilhamy Hussein, who renamed it Baia Dei Fiori. He kept it for nearly forty years.

#### **Château Saint-Jean:**

In 1899, the German Carlo Wedekind bought several plots of land in Saint-Hospice, totalling 14,000 square metres, to house another remarkable building: Villa Wedekind. In Venetian Gothic style, the residence, surrounded by high walls topped with crenelations, opened onto a vast hall of two hundred square metres. In 1909, the residence was sold to the Hungarian Countess Vilma Lwoff de Parlaghy, who renamed the estate Château Saint-Jean, the name it still bears today.

#### **La Fiorentina:**

A little further on, on the Pointe Saint-Hospice, the Countess of Beauchamp built a vast residence in the heart of a 22-hectare park, which she named La Fiorentina. She sold the property to Sir Edmund Davis, a diamond mining magnate in South Africa, to whom we owe much of the tourist path that borders the small peninsula. Successive owners modified the villa's appearance, and even though its park is now reduced to three hectares, it remains one of the most beautiful properties on the Côte d'Azur.

#### **Les Bruyères:**

In 1905, Georges Falicon built a square villa near the manoeuvring area, which he named Marolaine. In around 1910, the residence passed into the hands of the Englishman Torley, who renamed it Les Bruyères and later bequeathed it to his daughter. However, she did not get to enjoy the building for long; due to her marriage to a German citizen, it was placed under sequestration and sold at auction after the armistice. It was then acquired by Duke Arthur of Connaught. A frequent visitor to the Riviera, which he had toured many times with his mother, Queen Victoria, the Duke decided to make it his main residence. Present every winter on the Riviera, the Duke often mingled at various social events and participated in several inaugurations and events, notably in Nice. He kept Les Bruyères until his death in 1942.

#### **La Mauresque:**

The British writer Somerset Maugham acquired Villa La Mauresque between the two World Wars, where he lived for many years before his death in 1965. In the four-hectare park, he planted many species of fruit trees, including the first avocado trees in Europe. At the height of his fame, he hosted

many prestigious guests, such as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Winston Churchill, Harpo Marx, Lord Beaverbrook, and the Aga Khan.

**Villa Vial:**

One of the most beautiful residences in the region remains Villa Vial. Built in 1875 by the Nice shipowner Edouard Vial, commissioner on the Board of Directors of the “Société d’Éclairage et de Chauffage par le Gaz” and the “Société Immobilière et de Construction de Nice,” the villa has a neoclassical-style, with its pilasters, caryatids, and pediments topped with vases, and large side terraces supported by marble columns. Often rented to passing personalities, the building has housed the American billionaire Vanderbilt, among others.

**Villa Sicard:**

Closer to the village of Saint-Jean, Villa Sicard, built around 1885 by the director of the Caisse de Crédit Mutuel de Nice, once welcomed the Duke of Russia, Maharaja Duleep-Singh, and his large entourage. During the First World War, it became a reception centre for war orphans. On August 2, 1914, the day after the declaration of hostilities, Emile Vitta created an association for war orphans in Etretat to take in and raise children who had been suddenly orphaned.

In March 1915, he set up a permanent office in Nice at 15 Boulevard Victor Hugo and rented the villas Raoul Pugno, Audibert, and Sicard in Cap-Ferrat for a modest sum. Less than a month later, the first train departed from Etretat and brought about forty children from Avignon, Marseille, Toulon and more. The children arrived with their identity papers pinned to their aprons. The youngest wore hastily written signs around their necks that read: “I am going to the war orphans’ colony and am entrusted to the care of travellers.”

**La Villa du Parc - Della Robbia - Trianon - Le Cottage:**

Between 1901 and 1905, several notable personalities built the Villa du Parc and Villa Della Robbia. The first was built for Henri Perretmere, who lived there for several years before selling it to Herman Frasch, nicknamed “the king of sulphur.” After the Second World War, the building was remodelled, divided into apartments, and its two-hectare park split up.

The second villa was built by Adolphe Marie-Lévy, who owned several buildings in Nice. A great art lover, he erected marble statues on the villa’s terraces and set up a gallery of paintings in the living room of his residence. He named the residence Villa Della Robbia in homage to the famous Italian Renaissance sculptor. The building was expanded in the 1920s and later transformed into a hotel-restaurant and then divided into apartments.

Not far from Villa Della Robbia, Villa Trianon was inhabited by Queen Helena of Serbia and then by the King of Laos. Its architecture was inspired by the Petit Trianon of Versailles.

Finally, right beside it, Villa Le Cottage had exposed beams and sash windows, bringing a distinctly British touch to the neighbourhood.



## V- Historical Heritage

### **The Chapel of Saint-Hospice**

The Chapel of Saint-Hospice was built in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and is listed as a historic monument. It is named after a Benedictine monk, Hospitius, who lived in total destitution in a tower around the year 575.

Legend has it that the monk predicted an invasion by the Lombards, and when they did arrive on the coast, one of them tried to kill him, but his arm was suddenly paralysed. Out of respect for his calmness, the barbarians spared his life. Hospitius is also credited with several miraculous healings.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the chapel was completely restored by Charles Emmanuel II, Duke of Savoy, and in the following century, it was expanded and equipped with an altar. The portico dates from 1826. Inside, you can admire paintings by Louis Marchand des Raux depicting the life and miracles of Saint-Hospice.

The 11-metre-high bronze Virgin beside the chapel was built in 1903 at the request of a wealthy merchant from Nice. It was crafted by the Italian sculptor Tranquillo Galbusieri.

### **The Marine Cemetery and the Belgian Military Cemetery**

Nestled at the top of Pointe Saint-Hospice, the communal cemetery of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat feels like you are standing at the end of the world. It was created in 1905, thanks to the generosity of Auguste Gal, a wealthy merchant from Nice, who donated the land. Located below the Chapel of Saint-Hospice and the bronze Madonna, this marine cemetery has a panoramic view of the Mediterranean Sea, inviting tranquillity and contemplation.

Situated below the chapel, its name honours the Belgian victims of the First World War who died at Villa Les Cèdres. This property of the former King of the Belgians Leopold III had been transformed into a military hospital by his nephew Albert I.

### **The Church of Saint John the Baptist**

The simple but charming Church of Saint John the Baptist dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Two expansions took place during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Significant restoration work, starting in 1992, gradually gave this building the final appearance that can be admired today. Every year, on June 24, the village population celebrates the feast of their patron saint by organising a procession where the statue of Saint John the Baptist is carried to the old port's pier.

### **The COEXIST Fountain**

The COEXIST foundation works to promote exchanges between different religions, as symbolised by its logo: a merging of the Muslim Crescent, the Star of David of the Jews, and the Christian Cross. The two fountains, located respectively at the foot of the lighthouse and at the beginning of the Saint-Hospice promenade, were inaugurated in September 2007 in the presence of the director of the COEXIST Foundation, James Kidner, Cherie Blair, wife of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Bono, singer of the band U2.

## **The Lighthouse**

Listed as a Historic Monument since 2012, and currently closed to the public, the lighthouse was built in 1732. It was built to replace the old fire tower from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Following its destruction in 1944, it was rebuilt after the war. The lighthouse offers a unique panorama that extends from the Estérel to the Italian coast.

## **The Old Port and the Marina**

It is around the port that Saint-Jean was born and developed, with fishing activities being a vital industry for the village. The old port, now Quai Lindbergh, was built by convicts from the Villefranche prison between 1840 and 1876. The port is where both the Charlie Chaplin performance hall and the Shell Museum are located, and it also offers various shops and a restaurant.

In 1972, the new marina was inaugurated. It can now accommodate 560 boats, including 400 in private berths. There are numerous restaurants, shops, and galleries along the quays, as well as the municipal Neptune Hall, where exhibitions, concerts, and other events regularly take place.

## **Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat**

As such a luxurious commune, it would be easy to reduce Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat to the wealth it attracts. However, as we can see, this place is alive with a rich heritage and fascinating stories.

The area is appreciated for its seclusion and discretion, but not at the expense of modern infrastructure and transportation, making it a coveted destination.

A land that has long-since welcomed international elites, kings, artists, and great industrialists who spend fortunes to create their dream homes or enjoy the perfect short stay, the story of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat is also one of many important architects and craftsmen. Its natural setting allows those who want to stay out of sight to do so, while others can let their creative minds wander in this paradise built by man.

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