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## THE NICEST HOLIDAY YOU CAN HOPE FOR

by Gitanjali Prasad

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. The Aga Khan. Princess Caroline. The south of France is associated with the international jet set and their glittering exploits. Far, far removed from the even tenor of our ordinary lives. But the best thing about life is its unpredictability.

Suddenly, it was spring time and we were in Nice, holidaying with French friends we hadn't seen in 14 years. Our host, the affable Monsieur Elise, a retired French army officer, who hails from Martinique and his charming wife had everything to do with the happy memories we carry of an unbelievably idyllic day. The French tourism department hand-outs credit F Scott Fitzgerald with popularizing Nice and the Cote d'Azur. Is its fame so recent? I find the information surprising. It was a long train journey from Salamanca, our last stopover to Nice. And overnight from Paris, the train was packed. It was a three day week-end and lots of people wanted a quick getaway to the nearest holiday resort, much as weekend crowds from Bombay descend on Mahabaleshwar or Marve.

As we drove in from the railway station and observed the wide roads with their stream of traffic, the traffic islands lined with palm trees, the curve of the beach and the cluster of multi-storeyed buildings, I thought with a sudden shock of recognition that Nice was a little like Bombay! Take a picture postcard of the famed "Promenade des Anglais" and the striking resemblance to Marine Drive is unmistakable. "Regardez. C'est tres jolie, oui? C'est ravissant, ne c'est pas?" my hostess said every time we caught a glimpse of the rising sun shimmering in the Mediterranean, or a particularly colourful profusion of flowers. And pretty it certainly was. But like so many other pretty avenues in so many towns. With a sinking heart, I wondered whether the impulse to include Nice in our itinerary, had been a mistake after all. For the palm trees, the warm weather which must be an irresistible draw for the Western traveller held no novelty for us. We were full of the "we shall not pass this way again" feeling. We couldn't afford mistakes.

But as we drew into Monsieur Elise's house in the rue de lauriers of the Hammeaux du Soleil, my spirits lifted. In a hilly area lay a village of utmost charm. Cherry trees laden with ripe fruits, the air heavy with the scent of unknown flowers and then our host's house. A rambling five-bedroomed bungalow done up with unsurpassing taste and elegance. The drawing room was unusual. Full of little touches of all the lands they had been to in their army life, one wall was entirely decorated with shells from Djibouti in the horn of Africa. The effect was striking.

We had exactly one day and one night in Nice and we were determined to make the most of it. What did we want to do, Monsieur Elise asked us. And naturally, a swim in the Riviera was first on the list. Monsieur Elise was amused. Apparently in all the holidays they've spent in Nice, they haven't done that even once. "The water is cold," and a Gallic shrug, "probably not too clean," so are we sure we wouldn't prefer to swim in a nice pool. We're sure. Swimming in the French Riviera is a childhood dream. And it's not often that dreams come true.

After a continental breakfast of croissants, lots of lovely jam, and coffee, we set off for our swim. We were about to step into the car when Monsieur Elise unrolled a large map and asked us where we we'd like to go. "Sand, or no sand." We said we'd prefer a sandy beach and were horrified to learn that we had just picked a place, Juan les Pins, that was 75 km away. As we whizzed past, the milestone informed us that we had passed the Antibes. On the other side, lay Monaco. Alighting from the car, I had a strange feeling of stepping into a picture postcard. It was just as I'd imagined it. The cloudless sky, the blue of the sea, the gay beach umbrellas, the multitude of topless and nude bathers— and the indescribable air of a "holiday." Alok and I got into our swimming things and walked into the water. And of course our host was right. It was freezing. We swam vigorously for a while to warm up and then I noticed that pointers marked off part of the water as private, belonging to a hotel. I swam into their "water space" just to see what happened if someone trespassed. The answer was, nothing. A lone swimmer of the hotel idly watched me but made no comment.

Incidentally, I saw no bathing caps at Juan les Pins. Considering the state of undress generally prevalent, I suppose a bathing cap would look much like a top hat with shorts.

On our way back, the pace was more relaxed. We passed narrow cobbled streets, vegetable markets, houses that could have been built in Biblical times. Nice begins to grow on us. It has its tourist spots –but also an irresistible old world charm one responds to.

We lunched at home on an appetizing Chinese meal cooked by our hostess and her housekeeper. Interestingly, the Chinese food here was full of strange aromatic flavours, something that seemed to be seaweed and other unidentifiable delicacies. Quite different from the bland Chinese food we had in New York – and of course our Indian Chinese food is a cuisine apart from both.

After lunch we decided to do something as "untouristy" as have a nap. Our bedroom was a symphony of yellow roses. There were wild yellow roses climbing the balcony and the same blooms on the well-paper. All very nicely set off by a plush yellow bedspread. The bathroom carried the same yellow theme and was almost sinfully luxurious. I must admit I enjoyed my glimpse of how "the other half" lives.

In the evening we set off to Cannes. Cannes is in a magnificent setting overlooking the bay. In the background lie the Esterel mountains. You've seen it all in your mind's eye, the roadside cafes, the ubiquitous beach umbrellas, the holiday crowds thronging the very streets, some with surf boards carried aloft. But there is something more. An infectious air of joie de vivre reflected by the huge smile of a scantily clad Nordic beauty walking arm in arm with an ebony coloured youth with an Afro hair cut. There is the star-dust that clings to places like the Carlton Hotel where the Cannes film festival is held. There is the excitement of being able to walk in and out of shops which bear the names of Pierre Cardin, Rochas, Chanel. Perhaps this is the magic of the French Riviera. It's coming face to face with so many legends.

Twilight was setting in as we drove back to Nice. Our brief stay was almost over. This added a special poignance to our last view of the French Riviera. And then we were at the Hammeaux du Soleil – and home. A small strawberry liqueur, a quiet dinner, some nostalgic conversation, and then a dreamless sleep. Tomorrow we were off, time enough to dream when our "real life" caught up with us.