

Marseilles: Adventurers Guide

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Marseilles is a city that's in the midst of a huge change. That's practically the first thing we learned on the tour we took during our day in the city's port.

It's certainly not a place that boasts many, if indeed any, guidebooks to its name and as a result, out of all our ports of call on the Disney Magic's tour of the Mediterranean, Marseilles was probably the one I knew the least about beforehand. Therefore, if I'm honest, I really wasn't expecting that much from the place. I mean, after all, if no one can be bothered to write an entire book about the place, there can't be that much to it, surely? How wrong you can be.

Our half-day tour of Marseilles quickly took us through the history of the city, as we drove towards it. The first thing we learned was that it's the oldest city in France, dating back to the sixth century BC and much of its trade over the years has come through its impressive port. As we made our way from that port, we were also told about the Marseilles of more recent times. Only a decade ago, it was known as a major stop in the illegal drug trade and the city was falling into disrepair. A lot of money from the European Union, and a fast train service linking Marseilles with much of the rest of France (and even London through the Eurostar train through the Channel Tunnel) has helped to change all that.

Today it's a thriving place, with much of city life centered around the beautiful Vieux Port (Old Port). As well as being a picture postcard, with hundreds of yachts docked here, it's also home to a daily fish market, with a series of restaurants and shops lining the harbor. City Hall is also here, dating from the 17th century, complete with a bust of King Louis XIV, best known for his extravagant palace Versailles, near Paris.

Vieux Port is a pleasant walk and allows you to mingle with local residents, but it's important to keep your wits about you, as there are unfortunately pickpockets at work, as there are in many parts of Europe. On our tour, one woman told us she had only put her camera down for a second, but that's all it took for it to disappear.

Despite the beauty of the Vieux Port area, you have to do some work to get the best views of Marseilles. If you look upwards from the harbor, you'll see a church, complete with a huge golden statue of the Virgin Mary, dominating the landscape. Set on top of a hill at the highest point of Marseilles, the Notre Dame de la Garde Basilica replaced a fort,

which had previously been on this spot, with a chapel. Consecrated in 1864, it was another sixty seven years before the statue was added on to the church, in front of crowds estimated at 300,000 people. The statistics are truly staggering - at nearly 30 feet tall, a total of nearly 30,000 sheets of gold leaf were required to gild the statue.

This is another example of how the city is changing. We were told that a major restoration project on the church had only been completed a matter of weeks beforehand and the interior is certainly stunning, following all that repair work over the last couple of years. But perhaps the most stunning aspect to this church is actually what's outside it. As you'd expect from its position overlooking Marseilles, it offers spectacular views down to the city sprawling beneath you. Although it took quite a lot of energy to walk the 180 steps to reach the church, the view was well worth the exertion!

Having got your exercise for the day, a great way to unwind is by sampling some of the superb offerings at one of the local patisseries. Of course, France is famous for its cakes and desserts - and for good reason! There's certainly nothing more French than picking out some wickedly good treats in a cake shop and then enjoying them, sitting by one of the main city streets while watching the world go by.

Something else Marseilles is famed for is its soap. It may seem like an ordinary everyday product, but what they produce here is very different from what you usually find on the supermarket shelves, much bigger and more scented and makes for a good souvenir.

Although Marseilles is far from being a city that's familiar to most visitors to France, there's no doubt that's set to change over the next few years, as more and more people discover this beautiful port on the south coast of France. Despite any reservations I had beforehand, Disney definitely made a good choice when they decided to put into port here on their Mediterranean cruise.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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