

Travel

The Ultimate Tour de France

The Côte d'Azur is the stuff of dreams, its near-mythical allure and glamour inspiring countless Hollywood movies. Gourmets are drawn here by some of the best restaurants in Southern France, and the promise of riches—or at least excitement—lures thousands to the casinos of Monte Carlo. In a Porsche Travel Club tour, lucky participants experience the thrill of driving some of the world's most beautiful roads and get to know Southern France at its best.

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The silver taxi is already waiting, hovering a few inches above the ground, its rotors sending gusts of air eddying up all around. A yellow cross marks the “parking place” on which it always manages to land dead center. For many of us, the word “taxi” probably conjures up images of the Big Apple’s yellow cabs, but here in Nice, the cabs are silver, and rather than taking the nearest avenue, they take flight. Operated by Heli Air Monaco, our “cab” rises into the sky and reveals a stunning view of the glittering blue Mediterranean below—a truly heavenly beginning to a Porsche Travel Club trip that will take us to some of the most famous jet-set destinations on the French Riviera. On this voyage of discovery, we’ll set out in a fleet of 911s, following in the tire tracks of Rallye Monte Carlo racing legends. We’ll drive down roads with some of the most breathtaking curves in the world, eat with the most famous chefs in the south of France, and experience the picturesque charms of sleepy Provençal villages—the trip of a lifetime.

The chopper tilts sideways, flying in a gently sweeping curve from Nice to Monaco, always hugging the coastline. Over the next seven days, we’ll be discovering the countryside and its roads along with two dozen other Porsche fans, but right now it is spread out beneath us in a stunning panorama. We spot lighthouses, gigantic yachts, and impressive mansions. Surfers far below trace white lines in water the color of which gave this stretch of the French coast its name. The Côte d’Azur is much more than St. Tropez, the Cannes film festival, and glamorous shopping boulevards studded with expensive boutiques and starlets. It is a myth, a living legend—and thus the perfect setting for Porsche.

After fifteen minutes, our taxi arrives in Monaco, the tiny principality nestled between France and Italy that boasts one of the highest densities of millionaires in the world. The Porsche Travel Club has arranged an exclusive champagne reception for us at the Hôtel de Paris. The best hotel in town, it’s just a stone’s throw from the ritzy casino, where someone hits the jackpot every seven minutes—or so the ads promise. Its facade bears stone effigies of the goddesses of luck, who seem to watch over the fortunes of all who enter, and the sidewalk outside doubles as Monaco’s biggest unofficial catwalk. The fancy evening dresses you see here disappearing into the casino’s mirrored interior—*mon Dieu!*—in broad daylight. Monaco is the ultimate playground for grownups, open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There are few places in the world where you’re likely to spot more celebrities. This is one society hotspot that never goes out of style, a small pond with hardly any small fry and plenty of big fish—and more than a few sharks, too.

The next morning, new stars make their grand entrance: a fleet of new 911s emerges from the underground parking garage of the Hôtel de Paris and lines up outside the casino. At the sight of so many curvaceous beauties, an elderly Monegasque, who had been dozing on a bench in the shade, sits up straight, adjusts his beret, and utters an admiring “Oh, là, là!” Monaco knows a thing or two about glamour and style, but even the Place du Casino doesn’t see a gathering of this many attractive curves every day. Our Porsche Travel Club road trip of the Côte d’Azur and Provence is about to begin. We have two tour guides, each of whom will head a group of six 911s. Our group is headed by 57-year-old Harald Becker. Over the course of 25 years, he has come to know and love this stretch of coastline better than any other place in the world, and he has picked out the plums for Porsche. ▶



Up, up, and away: The 911 Carrera 4S makes driving in the rugged hinterland of the Côte d’Azur a dream



I'm amazed at how fast the countryside here changes. The last villa disappeared in my rearview mirror just ten minutes ago, and now it's like we're on another planet, a world of sleepy villages and narrow country roads. Diffuse light filters down through the leaves of the plane trees so characteristic of this landscape, lined up by the roadside like so many Roman soldiers. The lighthearted playfulness of the coast has given way to the more austere beauty of rocky cliffs with sparse vegetation. Our fleet of Porsches traverses tunnels blasted into the rock and winds its way up the switchback curves to a place where racing history was made: the Col de Turini. Situated at an elevation of 1,607 meters (over 5,200 feet), the mountain pass often proved to be the turning point in the Rallye Monte Carlo. Porsche managed to pull off a one-two victory at this legendary race three times between 1968 and 1970—a feat that until then many had believed impossible to achieve.

Where daredevil race drivers once took their vehicles to the very limit, high-tech and the sheer pleasure of driving now rule as I conquer the historic stretch of road along with my two dozen fellow participants in this Porsche Travel Club tour. Anyone

Excursions into another world: Stops in Vence and Grasse (right), the perfume capital of the world

Savoir-vivre The Porsche Tour Provence/Côte d'Azur

Day 1: Arrival in Nice; transfer to Monte Carlo by helicopter; overnight stay at the Hôtel de Paris.

Day 2: Drive from Monte Carlo via the Col de Turini to Vence; overnight stay at the Hotel Le Château du Domaine St. Martin.

Day 3: Drive from Vence via the Col de Vence to Grasse; dinner at "truffle czar" Bruno Clément's restaurant Chez Bruno in Lorgues.

Day 4: Drive from Lorgues via Artuby to the Grand Canyon du Verdon; lunch in the restaurant of star chef Alain Ducasse; overnight stay at the Château de Berne in Lorgues.

Day 5: Drive from Lorgues via Montmeyan, Tavernes, and Brignoles to the Mediterranean; overnight stay at the Villa Belrose in Gassin/St. Tropez.

Day 6: St. Tropez, Cannes, Antibes, Nice, Monte Carlo; overnight stay at the Hôtel de Paris.

Day 7: Transfer from Nice to Monte Carlo by helicopter.



watching us drive past would have no trouble recognizing us, even if our cars were somehow blocked from sight. How, you ask? Easy: by our goofy grins. We just can't help it. Some of us manage to maintain a dignified expression longer than others, but there comes a moment when even the holdouts among us can no longer contain themselves: as we step on the gas pedal after hitting one of the sharp bends leading up to the pass, the grin appears automatically. The car accelerates with a deep roar, the olive trees whip by left and right—pure bliss. Till the next bend, when the game starts all over again. A short tap on the brakes, and the first car pulls around the curve as if guided by invisible rails. Big, goofy grin—next, please!

When driving is this exhilarating, we might well overlook the quieter attractions by the roadside. But this trip is for all the senses, and it's Becker's job to make sure we don't miss out on the charms of the little towns, with their narrow, winding streets, stern-looking churches, and patisseries with mountains of mouth-watering confectionary creations. He has a gem in store for us in Fayence, in the backcountry behind Cannes, and so we all follow his lead and turn into an inconspicuous country road. After passing several vineyards, we reach Le Castellaras restaurant. Our faces light up—all that driving has made us hungry.

Star chef Alain Carro is waiting for us in the rose garden. At the sight of our posse of Porsches, 55-year-old Carro clicks his tongue appreciatively and says, "Pleasure comes in many varieties." A word from the wise—for as we will soon find out, there is at least one variety of pleasure in which Carro is a true master. In his contemporary take on classic French cuisine, he applies an approach he calls *nouveaux mariages*, using the finest ingredients the region has to offer and combining them in unusual ways to produce fresh, new taste sensations. And Carro treats our taste buds to some sensational fare, indeed.

We will have other opportunities to indulge our sense of taste on this trip, but the Côte d'Azur and Provence have plenty to offer the other senses, as well. The unique light and ever-changing moods of the countryside have inspired countless artists; it is no coincidence that painters such as Matisse, Cézanne, and Renoir created some of their finest work here. Next to the church in the little town of Vence, we encounter their modern-day counterpart, Véronique Porter, at her easel, and watch in fascination as she deftly mixes pigments and applies daubs of dark blue paint to a half-finished canvas. "What artists prize about this area is the uniquely clear quality of the light," says the 44-year-old artist. Porter moved to Provence after living in the United States for ▶

Taking a breather: The hotel Le Château du Domaine St. Martin near Vence invites visitors to linger a while



many years “because there’s something magical about it to me, and it’s still authentic.” Indeed, in some ways we seem to be in another age, far from the hectic 21st century. Here people still feed their caffeine habit with a leisurely *café au lait* in Henry’s Café, rather than grab a coffee to go from Starbucks.

Thanks to Becker’s expert guidance, we have plenty of opportunity to savor these tranquil moments. But while we enjoy it, most of us are really here for something else altogether—to escape from our everyday responsibilities and experience the rush of driving a powerful car on remote roads unclogged by traffic. However, as exhilarating as the sense of freedom and the adrenaline rush are, it’s good to know that we can rely on our guide in his accompanying Cayenne to help if we should need him.

Another highlight of the tour awaits us on the third evening: we have dinner at the restaurant of “truffle czar” Bruno Clément, who goes from table to table to inquire personally if we enjoyed our dinner. What a question! I head to bed fairly early, though, because I know another full day of driving and taking in the sights, smells, and sounds is in store for me tomorrow. That night, we check in at a charming country inn nestled among vineyards. We’re only halfway through the tour, but I already know one thing for sure—we really hit the jackpot with this one! ◀



Porsche Travel Club Program for 2009

Porsche Travel Club’s extensive program for 2009 includes numerous Adventure Tours—trips of several days through stunning landscapes to unusual destinations.

Tours and Dates:

Tour Rügen (Germany):

May 15–17; May 22–24

Tour Saxony/Baltic Sea/Berlin (Germany):

June 8–14; August 31–September 6

Tour Eifel/Rhineland (Germany):

May 15–17; June 19–21; August 7–9

Tour Alsace/Vosges (France):

May 1–3; July 24–26; September 4–6

Tour Bavaria/Black Forest/Heidelberg (Germany):

June 26–July 2; September 11–17

Tour Burgundy (France):

May 21–24; July 2–5; August 20–23; October 1–4

Tour Alpine Passes Central Switzerland:

June 26–28; August 21–23; September 11–13

Alpine Tour St. Moritz/Bavaria (Switzerland/Germany):

June 12–14; August 14–16; September 18–20

Tour Alpine Passes South Tirol (Italy):

July 16–19; August 27–30; September 24–27

Tour Portofino (Italy):

October 15–19

Tour Provence/Côte d’Azur (France):

September 16–22; September 23–29;

September 30–October 6

Tour Barcelona/Pyrenees (Spain):

September 2–6; September 6–10

Tour New Zealand:

February 13–20 (North Island); Feb. 21–28 (South Island);

March 1–8 (South Island); March 9–16 (North Island)

For more information on Porsche Travel Club tours, see our website www.porsche.co.uk/travelclub or www.porsche.com or call +49-711-911-78155

Point of departure and destination: Our tour begins and ends in style—at the glamorous Hôtel de Paris in Monte Carlo