

Travel

Shortcuts

Paris The Hôtel de Crillon, the grand Parisian hotel that opened in 1909 and occupies a palace commissioned by Louis XV in 1758, is to close at the end of the month for a two-year refurbishment. As a result, some 3,500 lots of furniture, memorabilia and fine wines are to be sold at auction. Items being offered include art deco bar stools (guide price €200-€300), the mahogany and silver dessert trolley (€3,000-€4,000), as well as numerous items of Louis XV-style furniture, wines from the remarkable cellar that supplied its Michelin-starred restaurant, porcelain, silverware, light fittings and tapestries. The sale, being handled by auctioneers Artcurial, will be held at the hotel over five days from April 18 to 22 (viewing from April 12 to 16). www.artcurial.com

Kashmir At the start of the 20th century, the houseboats on Srinagar's Dal Lake offered the height of luxury to visitors seeking an escape from the plains' summer heat. But the region's political struggles led to dwindling tourist numbers, and an air of faded grandeur settled over many of the boats. Now though, with visitor numbers rising once more, a luxurious new houseboat is to open. Mary-Ann Denison-Pender, of the independent Indian hotel directory Mahout, says it "promises to raise the level of comfort and design on the lakes to an all-new high". Sukoon, due to open on March 20, is a traditional vessel built in the 1970s but entirely refurbished, with five spacious cabins, each with bathroom, wifi and purified water on tap. Dinner is included (the cooks are Kashmiri and Keralan), as is use of a solar-powered motorboat to get to and from shore. From Rs7,500 (£95). www.sukoorkashmir.com www.mahoutuk.com

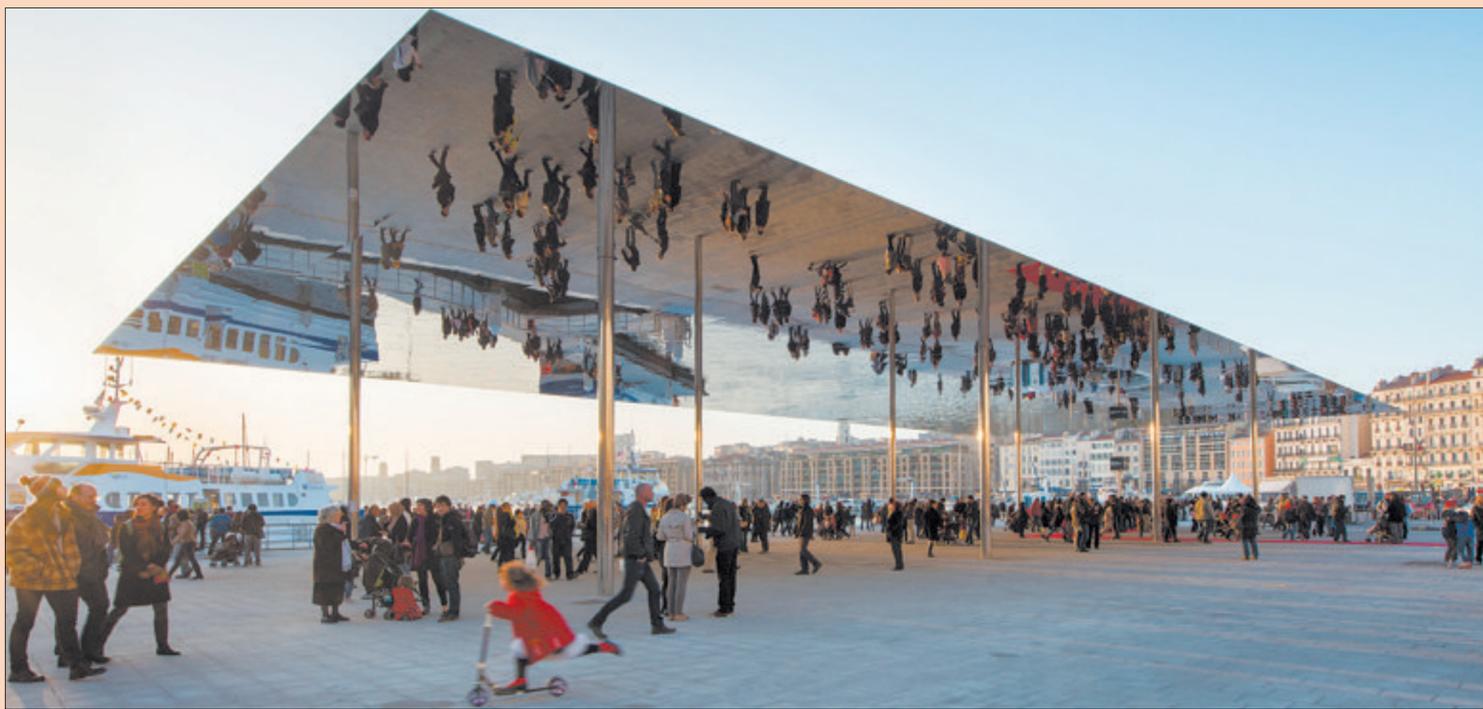
California Orient-Express continues its expansion into the Americas with its reinvention of El Encanto in Santa Barbara, which opens on March 18. Established in 1913, the 92-room hotel has played host to Hollywood legends such as Clark Gable, Carole Lombard, Barbra Streisand and Sharon Stone. President Franklin D Roosevelt was such a regular it became known, during his time in office, as the White House of the West. From \$525 plus taxes. www.orient-express.com

London James Jayasundera, founder of Ampersand Travel, which specialises in bespoke trips to India and south Asia, is diversifying into UK tourism. Targeted at the affluent end of the Indian and South American markets, its suggested itineraries focus on British art, architecture, fashion, literature (taking in London, Oxford, Cambridge, Bath and Stratford) and sport (Wimbledon, Ascot). There's also a six-day course (from £1,868pp) entitled "Learn to be an English Gentleman or Lady", the necessary attributes for which turn out to be an ability to ride, to shoot clay pigeons, to play tennis, croquet and polo, and to develop a taste for afternoon tea at Claridge's. www.ampersandtravel.com

Claire Wrathall



The Hôtel de Crillon in Paris



Marseille's year in the sun

Can 'capital of culture' status and a €7bn regeneration project transform the city's earthy image? By Andrew Eames

Down on the quayside of Marseille's Vieux-Port, workmen are putting the finishing touches to Norman Foster's Ombrière. A sunshade for the scorching summer and a refuge from rain for winter, it looks a bit like a slender-legged bus shelter marooned in a pedestrian zone. It is only when you draw closer that you begin to appreciate that it has an extra dimension: its high ceiling of polished steel reflects a backdrop of upside-down ferries and inverted fishing boats, in front of which a line of wrong-way-up fisherman sell their catch direct from trestle tables. The Ombrière is a shelter-providing kaleidoscope of port life.

Up close (and the right way up), the fishermen are a craggy-looking lot and, from what I can gather by eavesdropping, there's an earthy argot going on. Their catch is craggy-looking too – rockfish, monkfish and conger – but it's certainly tasty. Which is why chef Christian Buffa is weaving his way through, haggling and wise-cracking with the fishermen's wives. Marseille-born and bred, Buffa is a streetwise kid turned restaurateur, and his restaurant Miramar, a short scot along the quay, is the velvet-upholstered flag-carrier for *bouillabaisse*, the lip-smacking fish stew that was invented in these parts. It is priced on his menu at a whopping €118 for two, and he scoffs when I mention that I've seen it advertised at €20 a head elsewhere. "That is not a real *bouillabaisse*. A real *bouillabaisse* uses at least four kinds of fish, and we use six – and that means three kilos of the likes of rockfish, monkfish, John Dory, red mullet. See the price? €30 a kilo." It is not hard to do the maths. So what are they putting in the cheapies? He shrugs – sea-horse meat, perhaps?

Like many a port, France's second-largest city (a title disputed by Lyon) has struggled with its image. And it's more than just adulterated *bouillabaisse*: the city of the decline and fall of French colonial power has been well known for drugs and drug-related violence. While Nice and Cannes, further along the coast, were built with leisure and elegance in mind, Marseille is like a version of Paris, with



From top: the Norman Foster-designed events pavilion, known as the Ombrière, which was inaugurated by the Mayor of Marseille last weekend; the new Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (Mucem), with the city's 19th-century cathedral in the background

Paul Ladouce; Nigel Young

all its big-city grit, that has been dragged to the water's edge, where its population has been mixed with immigration transfusions from French-speaking north Africa.

As a tourist destination, it has been an acquired taste. But the city fathers are hoping to change all that, now that Marseille is one of the two European Capital of Culture for 2013 (the other is Kosice, Slovakia). And why not? This is, after all, the city whose light inspired impressionists such as Paul Cézanne, and whose offshore island prison (Château d'If) provided the impetus for Alexandre Dumas to write *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Lord Foster's Ombrière is but a small part of a far bigger picture – Euromediterranée, the biggest urban renewal project in southern Europe, with a budget of €7bn. The lion's share of that money is being spent along the shoreline, in arts centres, apartment blocks, offices and shopping centres – some of which have barely been started, let alone finished. But the focus of this year of culture is the Vieux-Port, which is where Marseille was first founded in 600BC, and which has been reborn as the city's front room.

Previously, the port was a parking lot for yachts, throttled by a multi-lane highway. Under the redevelopment plan, the nerve-shredding traffic was diverted, fences were taken down, pedestrianism was encouraged and old forts were given new leases of life.

One of those forts protects the harbour entrance from the south side,

along with the Pharo, once Napoleon's palatial residence. The latter is now a conference centre, while the ramparts of the upper part of Fort Saint Nicholas, originally built in the 17th century to oppress the unruly townsfolk, is now where courting couples come for summer sunsets.

Wedge between them is the Sofitel Vieux-Port, a five-star hotel that has long presided over the port as Marseille's best address. It is a stylish place with a top-floor restaurant – Les Trois Forts – that feels like the bridge of a ship. But its status is about to be challenged by the opening, next month, of the Intercontinental Hotel Dieu, another five-star venue, but in a far grander and more charismatic historic building on the port's north side, with a spa, fine dining and 194 rooms to fill. A price war between the two could produce some top-end bargains. Cheaper hotels are found at the inland end, which is also the location of the fish market, the Ombrière and the tourist office. This is the starting point for the passenger ferries that go to the islands a 20-minute ride away and to the Calanques, a series of extraordinary limestone inlets.

Cheap *bouillabaisse* is readily available in a dense maze of pedestrian streets off the corner of the port nearest the Ombrière, where tourist menus are as little as €15 for three courses. While, the northern side of the port is lined with more sophisticated restaurants, including Buffa's Miramar, and the bijou Hotel de Ville, with a spanking new Pavillon M next door, the temporary booking office and exhibition centre for this year of culture.

A big chunk of the year's investment is being spent around the third and most impressive of the fortifications, the 17th-century Fort Saint Jean, once a barracks for the Foreign Legion. The fort has been remodelled to link up with two newcomer buildings with ugly acronyms: Mucem (Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée) and Cerem (Centre Régional de la Méditerranée).

Mucem is the big hitter of the two, a moat-surrounded block covered in a concrete lace. Opening in June, it is the city's first designated "national museum". Meanwhile neighbouring

Cerem, bent like a seagull's wing, is going to be hosting Mediterranean-themed conferences and exhibitions, and represents a play for the position of the Med's most important city – the other key contender being Barcelona.

Marseille's oldest quarter, Le Panier, once the biggest red-light district in the Mediterranean, rises up behind the new museums. Rather like Barcelona's Barri Gòtic, Le Panier is a labyrinth of tiny streets, with staircases that top out in a couple of little squares, filled with café tables and chairs.

Here, too, is one of Marseille's most interesting accommodation options, Au Vieux Panier, a B&B-cum-art installation run by the very personable (and half-English) Jessica Venediger. Every year she holds a competition for contemporary artists to give each room a completely new look, with results such as the Panic Room, half-white and half-fluorescent graffiti.

Its roof terrace, with a spectacular view over clay tiles down to the sea, shows why Impressionists such as Cézanne got so excited about Marseille. But the most dramatic overview of everything – sea, sky, city, islands, mountains and new developments – is from Marseille's equivalent of the Sacré Coeur, perched on a hilltop across the other side of the Vieux-Port. This is the basilica of Notre Dame de la Garde, better known as the "la bonne mère", because it is to this church that locals come with all their hopes and fears. Its interior of delicately crafted mosaics is hung with *ex votos*; plaques, paintings and even model boats, in memory of ships lost and lives saved.

If the Ombrière, the year of culture, and the Euromediterranée money manage to redeem Marseille's gritty reputation, it will be here that the people will come to give thanks.

Details

Andrew Eames was a guest of French national tourism agency Atout France and the Marseille tourist board. For information on visiting, see www.rendezvousenfrance.com and www.marseille-tourisme.com

A 500-year-old palace gets a fresh look

Maria Shollenbarger is impressed by the painstaking restoration of one of Venice's landmark hotels, the Gritti Palace

For a few key weeks each year, during the film festival and the alternating biennales of art and architecture, Venice is inundated with the great and the good (as well as the merely deep-pocketed) from the creative industries. This results in a pronounced upmarket shift in its visitors' demographic profile – no small matter in a city that sometimes struggles not to be undone by mass tourism.

The luxury hospitality industry seems suddenly to be responding en masse: local groups, overseas boutique hoteliers and multinationals have all been staking new claims or consolidating established presences. The Danielli, for example, last year undertook an ambitious renovation of its suites (the clear implication being that sig-

nature suites – not middling double rooms – are required for Venice's new seasonal habitués). Under the aegis of Pierre-Yves Rochon, they have been given subtle makeovers, maintaining the feel of private residences (the 100-year-old parquet still squeaks reassuringly) but updated with opulent upholstery.

Across the canal is Villa F, a new addition to the portfolio of Francesca Borlotolotto Possati, owner of the Bauer Hotel. Opened late in 2011, its 11 extremely private apartments are spread across a 16th-century palazzo on the Giudecca, where Possati herself oversaw restoration of the hand-painted ceiling beams, frescoes and terrazzo floors, as well as the three acres of gardens.

This year's big news is the reopening of the Gritti Palace, after a 15-month resto-

vation. It's an undertaking that impresses as much for the sheer breadth of resources enlisted as for the splendid final result. One of the most important heritage palazzi in the city, it was built in 1475 and served as the residence of Andrea Gritti, the Doge of Venice from 1523 to 1538.

The palace has a very high-grade listing from the Soprintendenza ai Beni Architettonici, the Italian authority that oversees architectural heritage, so its renovation was unusually involved. It entailed collaboration between designer Chuck Chewning, creative director of Donghia (a design house that is US-based, but owned by the 160-year-old Venetian textiles company Rubelli), officials from the Soprintendenza, who dispatched teams of endorsed artisans,

restorers and painters, and the Luxury Collection, a sub-brand of Starwood Hotels, whose flag the Gritti flies. The Gritti project, estimated to have cost about €35m, is one of several ambitious renovations across Luxury Collection's portfolio of European heritage properties, which

include Seville's Alfonso XIII, the Prince de Galles in Paris and the Danielli.

Rubelli has played a pivotal role here: its brocades and silks are definitively Venetian, and Chewning spent weeks reviewing its archives, which comprise more than 6,000 textiles, among which he found

designs commissioned for the Gritti itself in the 19th century. Several were creatively reinterpreted (or replicated); in total, more than 200 were used throughout the hotel. The brocade lining the walls of the Club del Doge restaurant, for example, is a reproduction of an 18th-century doge's cape in the Rubelli vaults. Covering the walls of the Explorer's Library, is a brocade interpretation of a design Chewning found drawn on a 17th-century document.

The room also showcases a portrait of Andrea Gritti from the school of Titian – one of dozens of important paintings and more than 280 antiques for which new homes have been found throughout the property.

Here, too, the trend for bigger, grander, rooms prevails. The hotel originally had 91 rooms, but now has

just 82, of which 21 are suites. Several are themed after famous Gritti denizens: the Peggy Guggenheim suite features a library stocked with rare monographs; the Somerset Maugham royal suite has the author's original letters; the Hemingway presidential suite is home to the chair in which he composed sections of *Across the River and Into the Trees*.

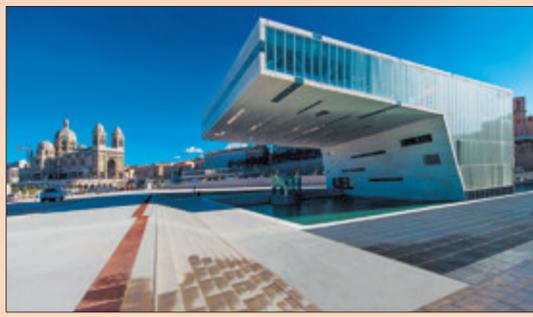
Any hint of gimmickry is superseded by the quality of craftsmanship, from the immaculately-restored rococo ceiling cornices and Murano chandeliers to the fantastically hued and perfectly book-matched marbles – mint-green, taffy-pink, slate-grey – in which all the bathrooms are clad.

For the moment, the Gritti is basking in the Venetian spotlight, but more competition is on the horizon. The renowned hotelier Gordon

Campbell-Gray is rumoured to be investing in a property in the city, and June brings the opening of the Aman Grand Canal at Palazzo Papadopoli.

Restored by local company Dottor, the Palazzo Papadopoli, owned by the counts Arrivabene Valenti Gonzaga – who will retain a residence on its top floor – also boasts its fair share of *stucchi*, terrazzo floors and frescoes by Tiepolo. Its architect (and old Aman hand) Jean-Michel Gathy tends to have a far more austere way with the colour and texture than is the Venetian norm – but opulence, in this city, is hard to resist: the Gritti's version of it might yet make apostates of a few card-carrying Aman junkies.

Double rooms from €485; www.thegrittipalace.com



The Explorer's Library at the restored Gritti Palace



The Explorer's Library at the restored Gritti Palace