



## TIDES THAT BIND

THE GLOW OF SUMMER BEACH TRADITIONS SHINES LONG AFTER TANS FADE.

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**W**HEN YOU'RE A NATIVE CALIFORNIAN WHO MOVES to Belgium via a pit stop in Florida, you think about beaches and sunshine. A lot. Endless days of colorless, leaky skies will single-track your mind like that, which is how my husband, daughter, and I ended up beelining it to the South of France.

The three of us first set eyes on Sainte-Maxime in 2004. I'll never forget the date or time – May 14, 8 AM – because the sound of cannon fire rang out over the port, nearly slipping me from my untanned skin. The day, it turned out, was the first of an annual two-day festival honoring the village's namesake and military past, which kicks off with cavity-loosening blasts. Little did I know then that this loud but sun-kissed beach town tucked between Cannes and Saint-Tropez in Provence's Var department would become our family's most permanent address.

My daughter, Chloe, was just 6 years old when we moved to Brussels, and it was already her third house. We began swapping our winter blues for the blue-shuttered French village almost immediately,

and within the turn of four seasons we'd found our summer pied-à-terre. Less pretentious than its brand-named neighbor Saint-Tropez, yet just a ten-minute scenic ferry ride across the water, low-key Sainte-Maxime is full of the convivial diversions that characterize a beach town. Pastel houses with terra-cotta-tiled roofs and flowerbox-framed windows shelter ice cream shops, open-air restaurants, and all-day cafés. Boutiques selling bikinis and sun hats spill into the narrow lanes. Across the street from the village, the sandy beach fills with candy-colored umbrellas and elbow-to-elbow bronzers of all ages, while people bob in the calm water on giant inflatable pineapples or unicorns. It's heaven for a young beach-loving family.

While other parents might record their children's growth with pencil tick marks on the kitchen wall each year, Chloe's was marked by how far we let her wander. Her first dose of independence came when she was 9 and suggested she go, on her own, to an ice cream stand we can see from our balcony. We handed her a euro and she returned with a smile as wide as the horizon and lips stained a color of blue

not found in nature. As a way to foster her independence, we eventually asked Chloe to mosey to the *marché couvert* (covered market) for morning croissants and her favorite *chouquettes*, pillowy puffs of golden pastry crusted in pearl sugar. She did this for years before prioritizing sleep over catering to her lazy parents. By the time she was 15, Chloe knew Sainte-Maxime by memories. Ask her today where something is and, while she can't recite the exact name of a restaurant or street, she'll say, "The ice cream place that packs a scoop in the shape of a rose" or "It's next to the spot where my tooth fell out that one summer."

Chloe nudged her way into the famed Côte d'Azur nightlife, often by taking visiting school friends, or newly acquired beach friends, to a café to watch soccer and sip soda (probably beer). Save for Bastille Day or the years when France plays in the World Cup, Sainte-Maxime's streets and bars are quiet by 11 PM – the hour that, these days, our 22-year-old grabs her house key and hops the ferry to Saint-Tropez for clubbing until sunrise. Though she has spent many

summers trying to abscond from us, as young adults often do, our family knot tightened due to our summers in Sainte-Maxime.

With no TV in our house and no smartphones in the good old days, we spent evenings playing cards on our marble bistro table, doors wide open to the balcony – a habit that carries into our current overly plugged-in lives. When Chloe learned to play guitar, she'd practice songs while we lounged on the sofa. To this day, the pluck of "Blackbird" sends me to my seaside living room. We no longer venture to the beach in the center of town, opting for quieter coves or a rollicking beach club with comfy lounge chairs and a rosé-all-day vibe. Wherever we land, we fall into the same groove: I huddle under an umbrella with a book and a bottle of SPF 40, while Chloe tries to convince John to play Frisbee with her or toss her into the water – I'm not sure she'll ever grow out of that.

Over the years, I've often been asked, "Don't you want to visit someplace new?" The answer to that question was, and still is, "Of course"; local travel is an integral part of our well-suntan-oiled summer routine. We've

crisscrossed the continent many times – Spain and Italy, Switzerland and Croatia. We've seen Lenny Kravitz play under the stars in Monte-Carlo, visited museums in Aix-en-Provence and Antibes, crafted custom perfume in Grasse, and kayaked through France's deepest gorge. But what draws us back to Sainte-Maxime year after year is the same tug that pulls other families toward Martha's Vineyard, Florida's Amelia Island, or any other perennial family stomping ground: familiarity. As the world at times spins seemingly out of control, and time pulls daughters farther from our hearths, the predictable sameness of having your summer beach is reassuring.

Just as we long to be

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reacquainted with and hug friends we haven't seen in months, especially these days, I feel the same anticipation for the embrace of my village. I look forward to seeing the familiar faces who will raise their eyebrows in recognition and shake our hands when we sit down in their restaurants. I can't wait to sip rosé by the shaded *pétanque* courts each afternoon. I long to hear the symphony of cicadas and the hourly bells that sing from the church tower, the soundtrack of our family album.

As a child, I loved reading *The Travels of Babar*, which aided and abetted my wanderlust. In it, the intrepid elephant Babar takes off in a hot-air balloon with his wife, Celeste. Author-illustrator Jean de Brunhoff, it turns out, spent time in Sainte-Maxime and is said to have been inspired by the scenery in this corner of the French Riviera. A local beach, Elephant Beach, was named for his playful pachyderm. But it was only recently that I looked at the book anew and realized that the aerial views of de Brunhoff's fictitious village and beaches on pages four and five are Sainte-Maxime. As I write in wintry San Francisco and Chloe studies under London's gray skies, I can see it now as clear as a summer day: the parasol pines and the red roofs, the sailboats and the deep blue Mediterranean Sea. The pages of my childhood book are now part of Chloe's story. Though we may be far from each other now, the salve for my longing is knowing that our memories are safely embedded in the cobblestones and sand of a blue-shuttered village in the South of France – just as others' are fixed in the ice cream stands, café terraces, and shoreline strolls of their chosen spots around the world – waiting for us, right where we left them. VI

