

Cruising the Riviera... IN A MINI COOPER



by Dirk Dominick

It's mid-September, late Sunday afternoon, and I'm standing on the side of the road in the French village of La Turbie. A light breeze creeps off the Mediterranean, across the red-tiled roofs of Monaco, then moves quickly up a steep, rocky slope before drifting away down the narrow street. In front of me, stretched out like quarter horses at a starting gate, a row of sleek Mini Cooper Cabriolets, tops down and engines idling, sits waiting.

The sun drops behind a nearby cliff as my guests, the self-proclaimed "Miniacs" who signed up months ago for my south of France Mini Cooper Tour, file out of a nearby shop. They smile as they slide eagerly behind the wheels of their shiny convertibles.



It has been a very good day.

This morning, from our home-base in St Paul de Vence, we took the A8 east, crossing into Liguria, Italy at the bustling border town of Ventimiglia, then headed north into the lush Nervia valley. Cruising through Dolceacqua, past the crumbling Doria castle high above the old town, our convoy of Minis elicited more than a few shouts of "Mini! Mini!" from admiring locals. Accelerating past Manet's Ponte Romano we criss-crossed the Nervia river several times as we drove fast through deep, rough-cut hills, arriving just in time for lunch in the ancient hill-town of Buggio.

Buggio is tiny, wonderfully undiscovered, and nestled in a green hollow that is literally at the end of a seldom-traveled road. Our northern Italian feast at a family-owned agriturismo featured a seemingly never-ending procession of home-cooked delights (antipasto, rabbit, wild boar, pasta, fresh bread, and local wines), and to add just the right touch to the rustic setting, the family hound snoozing at our feet.

Apricale and Castel Vittorio, two of the most spectacular villages in the region, provided perfect opportunities for afternoon, post-lunch exploring as we made our way back to the border.

Outside Ventimiglia we hugged the Mediterranean and followed the basse corniche into a slowly setting sun all the way into Monaco, then turned north up to the Grande corniche and the village of La Turbie.

Tonight the group will dine at a Michelin starred restaurant in the village of Tourrettes sur Loup.

Not a bad Sunday if I do say so myself.

The French Riviera, Riviera back country, and Liguria, Italy, are tailor made for driving, but the perfectly twisting roads and breath-taking high altitude switchbacks are only part of the story. The region is so diverse geographically and culturally (and don't forget the exceptional food and wine) that each day of a five night six day driving tour promises a world of new experiences.

Friday's back-country loop included a tour of a tiny candy factory, lunch in cliff-top Gourdon (listed as one of the





enne corniche, cruising above Villefranche sur Mer on our way to what may be the most spectacular view on the entire French Riviera in the village of Eze.

We ended the day in Monaco, looping around the Place du Casino and then tracing part of the route driven by the world's best drivers during the annual Monaco Grand Prix.

Monday will feature an al fresco lunch surrounded by olive trees, a drive along the famous La Croisette

top has been down). With 120hp it's very quick and carves up the tight turns of the back country with ease. It also attracts a lot of attention, especially when a convoy happens to be cruising down the Promenade des Anglais or La Croisette.

I check the rearview mirror as we make our way out of La Turbie. The group is intact, holding together like a well oiled machine. As we pull onto the A8 and accelerate into an endless orange of setting sun I glance, once again, into my rearview mirror, but this time all I can see is my big goofy grin. ■

most beautiful villages in France), a cruise along the spectacular stretch of mountain road featured in the films *Ronin* (starring Robert DeNiro), and *James Bond's GoldenEye*, and a race through the hauntingly beautiful Gorges du Loup.



Saturday was pure French Riviera glitz.

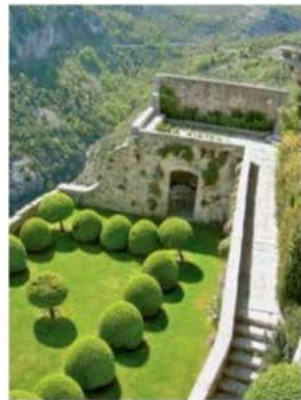
We began with a tour, tasting, and picnic lunch at a family-owned vine-

yard in the smallest AOC region in France, Bellet (located in the hills above Nice). Don't let Bellet's size fool you—the wines produced here are exceptional.

From Bellet we headed south to Nice for a drive down the glamorous Promenade des Anglais and up along the moy-

in Cannes and then a spectacular cruise around "the cap" to Antibes.

Clearly this is ideal driving country and the Mini Cabriolet has all the interior bells and whistles needed for zipping around the magnificent Cote D'Azur (even an "odometer" to let you know how long your



Dirk Dominick is the owner and founder of Mini Cooper Tours.

Le Stuff, his blog about the South of France, has been featured in numerous newspaper and Internet publications and garners readers from around the globe. He is surely the world's only expert on locations used in Alfred Hitchcock's film *To Catch a Thief* starring Cary Grant and Grace Kelly, and he is, in fact, BFF with Brigitte Auber, the French actress who co-starred in the classic film.

In 2010 Dirk consulted (in France) for a German N-TV film crew and in 2011 he was featured in a BBC Radio 4 production titled "The Search For Villa Noé" about the quest to find author David Dodge's villa in Juan Les Pins, France.

For more information on convertible driving tours on the French Riviera go to minicoopertours.com or email dirkdominick@gmail.com.

