

The Chateau d'If is the locale for a good part of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. (So the author gathers from having read the comic-book adaptation.)

By MANNY GONZALEZ
Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

WHEN I MENTIONED TO A EUROPEAN FRIEND that I was going to Marseille, he rolled his eyes expressively. "Why?"

This is about the reaction you can expect from a lot of people, but if everything you know about Marseille is what you learned from *The French Connection* (in which it was depicted as a crime-infested Drug Dealers' Central), have I got news for you.

Thinking I was just going to rest a couple of days between a trip to Spain and a jaunt around Provence, I had booked my hotel blind, and was pleasantly surprised to find out that it was right on the edge of Marseille's Vieux Port (vyeh-pohrrr). This turned out to be the largest sailboat marina I had ever seen, the equivalent of maybe 10 soccer fields, a veritable forest of masts surrounded by a U-shaped boulevard that took almost an hour to walk around.

Within the Vieux Port, it is easy to forget that you are in France's second largest city, and easy to imagine that you are in a quaint seaside village which just happens to have about 2000 boats in its harbor (see picture).

On my first day, it was sunny but cold, so I just walked around the marina, enjoying the spectacle of sailboats gliding by with women on them who probably would have looked great topless, but regrettably were wrapped up in thick coats. The U-shaped boulevard, which annoyingly keeps changing name (Quai de this, Quai de that), was lined with bars, cafés, and hotels. It soon became clear that absolutely the thing to do in Marseille on a chilly spring day is to sit at a sidewalk café, order a beer (a coffee would ice up in minutes), and face the sun with as much of your body as possible.

So I did.

For people with more sophisticated literary leanings than *The French Connection*, Marseilles is also associated with Alexander Dumas's novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the story of a man who is unjustly imprisoned, escapes, recovers the fortune a fellow-prisoner had told him about, and slowly gets even with everyone who was mean to him. (At least, this is what I gath-

ered from the Classics Illustrated comic book; the actual novel comprises two thick volumes, and I had better things to do in my adolescent years. Most French people claim that they read it. You may wish to take such claims with a grain of salt.)

Anyway, in the book the protagonist was supposedly imprisoned in the Chateau d'If, which despite being called a chateau is actually Marseille's answer to Alcatraz — a prison on a small island several miles from shore. Provence, of which Marseille is a part, used to be an independent kingdom but then got bullied into joining France, so the people of Provence always had an uneasy relationship with the central government. Hence, the Chateau d'If and several other fortifications in the area were built by French kings not to defend Marseille, but to control it. This policy ended when Louis XVI got guillotined.

The Chateau d'If is accessed by ferry, and it is totally worth the journey. The island is surrounded by the clearest water you ever saw, and the prison itself, though there is not much to it, is full of helpful signs — "the cell where General Kleber's body was kept for two years, slowly decomposing" and has TVs scattered around, apparently playing every single movie version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* ever made, including one (I think) in Bulgarian. The only trouble with d'If is that it is not dank and depressing enough, this being the South of France after all.

Another cruise you can take from the Vieux Port is the Calanques (kuh-LANK) tour. Being both enterprising and gullible, I took it.

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give you the impression that a calanque is just like a Norwegian fjord, except for being in France. (A fjord is a deep and long inlet that was carved by glaciers, and most fjords are pretty substantial geographical features — just look at a map of Norway.) Well, I can now tell you that if a calanque



Marseille's waterfront is colorful and always bustling with activity. This shot does not begin to convey how cold it actually was.

tour takes you all through Marseille's harbor, which has forts, an old palace, and heaps of interesting sights, and then takes you to rugged coastlines that sort of look like the Isle of Capri, at a much cheaper price. Therefore, I also recommend this boat ride — just don't expect fjords.

Instead of jostling for seats in the front, as I foolishly did, find a nice quiet seat in the back. Not only will you be able to move around without climbing over fat ladies sitting on the deck, you will also be closer to the toilets. Bring a sandwich and a Coke, as the cruise takes three hours and they don't serve anything on board. Guidebooks should tell you useful stuff like this; you're welcome.

One thing that everyone around the world associates with Marseille is bouillabaisse. Mention to friends that you are going to Marseille, and those who don't roll their eyes will say "Oh, you must have the bouillabaisse," in the same tone they would reserve for telling you that when you go to Hershey, Pennsylvania, you should have some chocolate.

Almost every single restaurant in Marseille serves bouillabaisse. (Even the Indian ones, though I am not so sure about MacDonald's.) As you walk around the little streets running behind the main boulevard, you hear the restaurant touts all shouting "Bouillabaisse! Get your fresh, hot bouillabaisse!"

So I did. But there is a fly in this ointment, and it will come to mind if you think about it hard enough. Bouillabaisse is fish stew. Thus, it is made with fish. Lots of fish. Concentrated essence of fish. Not del-

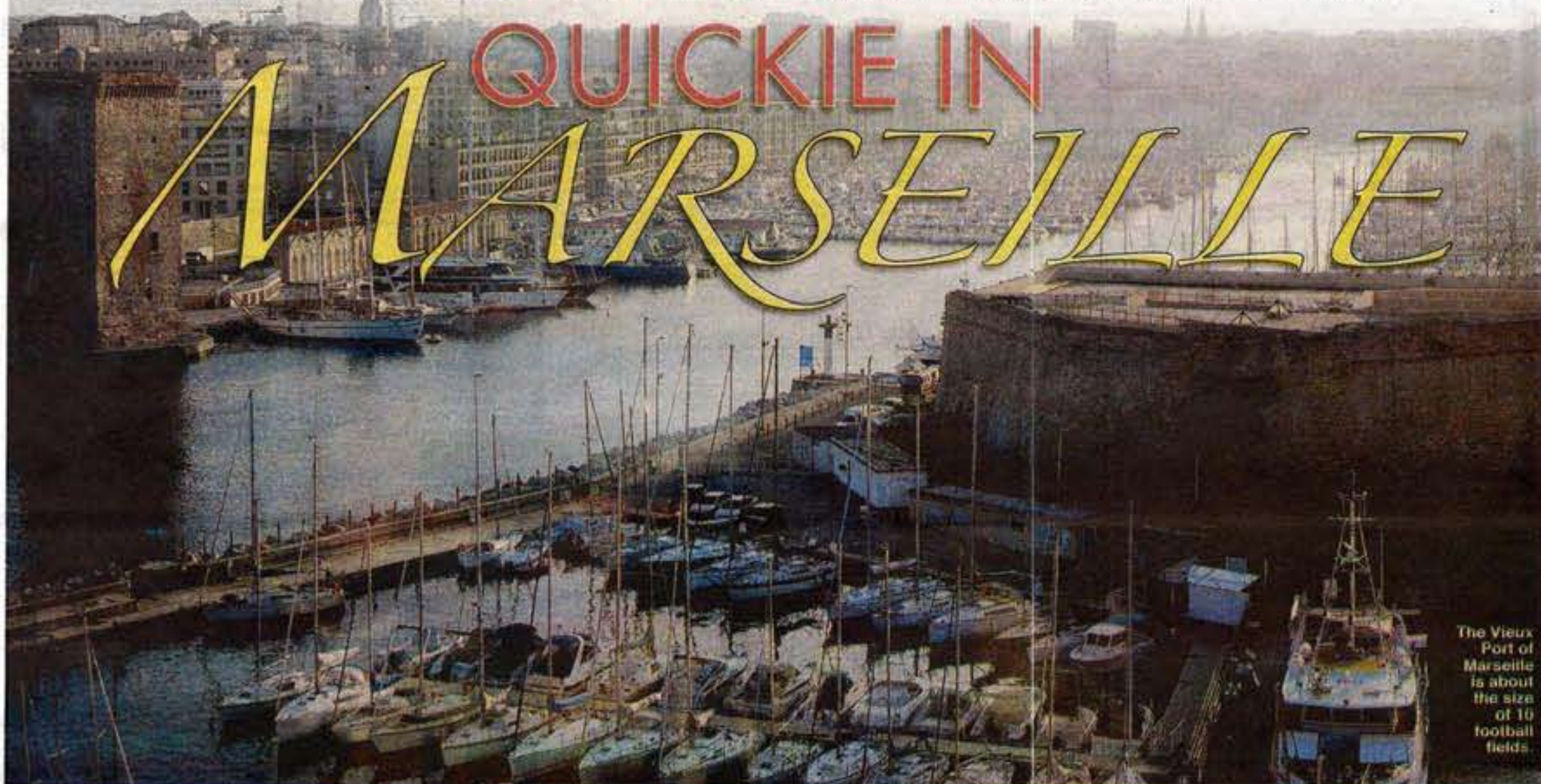
icate-tasting fish like garoupa, but strong, manly-tasting fish. Fish with lots of bones and thick, rubbery skin.

Of course, this was a very limited sample. But after inspecting tables at half a dozen other establishments that night, I slowly came to the conclusion (as women diners saw me eyeing their bowls and quickly moved to secure their handbags and their skirts) that genuine Marseille bouillabaisse is for connoisseurs only, and not for your typical ignorant tourist like me.

Now, if you want what I considered a terrific bouillabaisse, I had one in Nice a couple of weeks later. Stand by for my article on the Cote d'Azur.

My hotel in Marseille was well-located and had bright, friendly staff, many of them fairly pleasing to the eye. (I managed to spend 20 minutes checking in.) Their restaurant overlooked the harbor, which was truly stunning by both day and night, and served a decent breakfast to boot. My room was modern and spacious, and everything worked. There was just one small problem... I will not bore you by explaining the problem, but, trust me, this hotel is unlikely to satisfy the needs of most readers who may happen to pass by Marseille.

But do, indeed, pass by Marseille. The old town is not only picturesque, but also bustling with activity throughout the day. Find your own hotel in the Vieux Port, take the boat tours, and bail on the bouillabaisse, and you will be glad you discovered this under-appreciated Mediterranean gem.



The Vieux Port of Marseille is about the size of 10 football fields.

Quickie in Marseille

By Manny Gonzalez, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

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Beer on the Bay. On my first day, it was sunny but cold, so I just walked around the marina, enjoying the spectacle of sailboats gliding by with women on them who probably would have looked great topless, but regrettably were wrapped up in thick coats. The U-shaped boulevard, which annoyingly keeps changing name (Quai de this, Quai de that), was

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Count of Monte Cristo Island. For people with more sophisticated literary leanings than *The French Connection*, Marseilles is also associated with Alexander Dumas's novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the story of a man who is unjustly imprisoned, escapes, recovers the fortune a fellow-prisoner had told him about, and slowly gets even with everyone who was mean to him. (At least, this is what I gathered from the Classics Illustrated comic book; the actual novel comprises two thick volumes, and I had better things to do in my adolescent years. Most French people claim that they read it. You may wish to take such claims with a grain of salt.)

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French Fjords. Another cruise you can take from the Vieux Port is the Calanques (kuh-LANK) tour. Being both enterprising and gullible, I took it.

The Calanques are coves – indentions in the coastline. Now, guidebooks and cruise advertising posters will try to give you the impression that a calanque is just like a Norwegian fjord, except for being in France. (A fjord is a deep and long inlet that was carved by glaciers, and most fjords are pretty substantial geographical features – just look at a map of Norway.) Well, I can now tell you that if a calanque is a fjord, it is a junior fjord. A very junior fjord. A fjord dropout, if you will. Some of these calanques were barely wide enough to beach a rowboat. A few were a little more extensive, but honestly, several orders of magnitude removed from Norwegian proportions.

However, the Calanques tour takes you all through Marseille’s harbor, which has forts, an old palace, and heaps of interesting sights, and then takes you to rugged coastlines that sort of look like the Isle of Capri, at a much cheaper price. *Therefore*, I also recommend this boat ride – just don’t expect fjords.

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CAPTIONS

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Waterfront Marseille's waterfront is colorful and always bustling with activity. This shot does not begin to convey how cold it actually was.

The Biggest Calanque There are dozens of calanques near Marseille. You may think of them as junior fjords; the cruise operator would certainly like you to.

Looks Greek Much of the area around Marseille has a Greek-isle look to it.







