



Gardens of the Riviera

In and around Menton and Nice

5–11 April 2024 (MK 225)

7 days • £2,620

Lecturer: Steven Desmond

Inspiring historic gardens in spectacular settings, with exceptional growing conditions.

Includes visits to some gardens not normally open to the public.

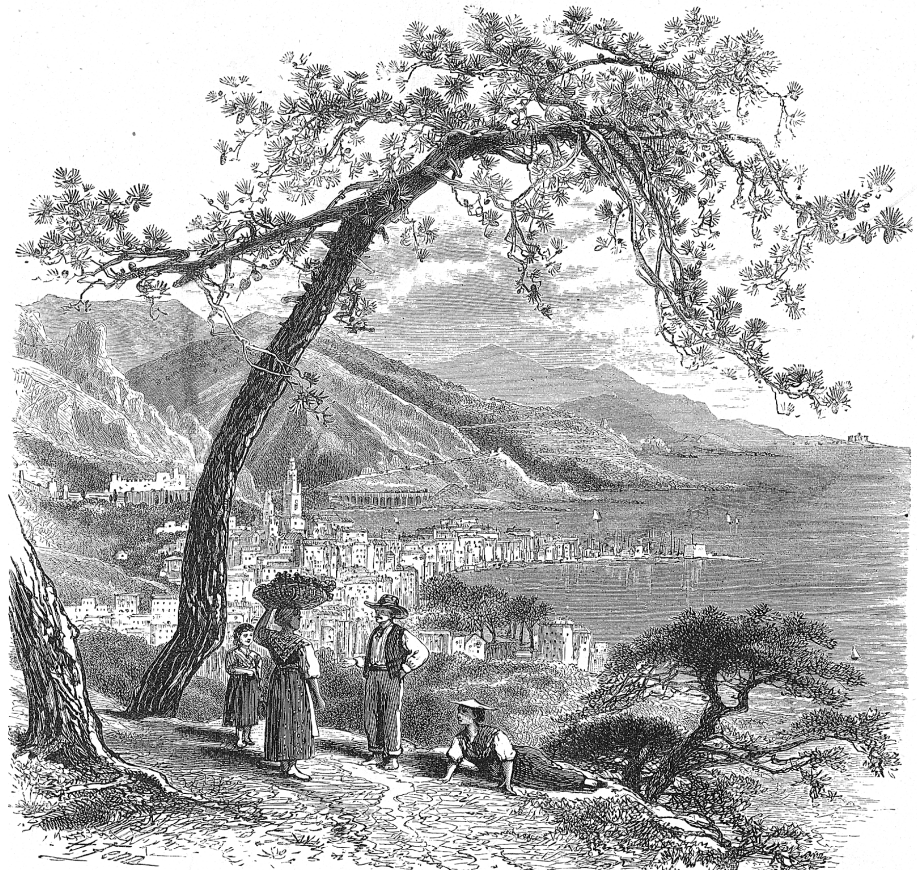
Based in Menton throughout.

When Tobias Smollett arrived on the Riviera in 1763, he found himself ‘enchanted’ by a landscape ‘all cultivated like a garden’. A century later Dr Bennett’s discovery of the miraculous winter climate at Menton established the town as a haven for prosperous foreigners in need of climatic therapy. By 1900 this narrow strip of land between the Maritime Alps and the Mediterranean had been transformed into a paradise of villas, palatial hotels, seafront promenades and exotic vegetation.

The migratory nature of the moneyed population meant that the region developed a character quite separate from local cultural traditions. In a landscape of olive and lemon groves, the villa gardens seem an eclectic collection, disconcerting for those who look for patterns of continuity, but best viewed as separate incidents taking advantage of the exceptional growing conditions.

The Hanbury family famously made the steep Italian cliffs of La Mortola a garden of beauty and experiment. Lawrence Johnston, the maker of Hidcote, established himself in the hills above Menton where his romantically sited garden at La Serre de la Madone provided a home for his huge collection of exotics. The gardens of the villas in Garavan continue to evince the private pleasures of past and present owners of many nationalities and design persuasions.

The French have added their own distinctive contribution to this artificial enclave. Renoir found new inspiration, as well as some relief from pain, in his garden at Cagnes-sur-Mer. Marguerite and Aimé Maeght established a magnificent modern art collection in a garden setting at St-Paul-de-Vence. Art of a different character adorns the rooms of the Villa Ephrussi Rothschild at St Jean-Cap-Ferrat where the gardens take advantage of an incomparable setting, viewing the Mediterranean through a filter of pines, palms and cypresses.



Menton, engraving from *Picturesque Europe*, c. 1880.

Itinerary

Some of these gardens can only be visited by special arrangement and are subject to confirmation.

Day 1: Menton. Fly at c. 11.45am from London Heathrow to Nice (British Airways). Transfer by coach to Menton where all six nights are spent.

Day 2: Menton. Visit a private garden in Menton, not normally open to the public (details will be provided). The garden at Clos du Peyronnet is still owned by an Englishman who continues to develop it, blending plants from around the world in a setting of terraces, pools and pergolas.

Day 3: La Mortola (Italy), Menton. The Hanbury Botanic Gardens at La Mortola have been famous since their establishment in the 19th century. An unparalleled collection of specimens festoon the steep site. Curtains of plumbago and bougainvillea, perfumed

parterres, pergolas, exotic pavilions and citrus orchards adorn this garden paradise on a private headland. Return to Garavan, the hillside quarter of Menton to visit Val Rahmeh, an early 20th-century villa surrounded by gardens of exceptional richness created by Maybud Campbell in the 1950s.

Day 4: Grasse. The Jardin de la Villa Fort France was developed by an English writer, Lady Fortescue, whose husband bought it in the 1930s. Now a source of inspiration to the artist Valerie de Courcel, who owns the garden with her husband. Then the nearby La Mouissonne, a former olive grove, where the terraces are being developed, rooted in the scents of Grasse’s history but planted with contemporary verve.

Day 5: Menton. Morning tour of Fontana Rosa whose tiled benches still evoke the ‘Writers’ Garden’ created in 1921 by Vicente Blasco Ibañez, successful playwright and novelist of *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* fame. Literary threads are drawn in from across the

Gardens of the Riviera
continued

world, the surviving rotunda decorated with 100 tiles illustrating Cervantes's *Don Quixote* encapsulates the mood perfectly. Opportunity for independent time in Menton; a chance to see one of two museums dedicated to Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) or his Salle des Mariages. Lawrence Johnston's great garden La Serre de la Madone was made between the wars, and though much of the detail has gone, a romantic atmosphere still pervades the dramatic layout.

Day 6: St Paul de Vence, Cagnes-sur-Mer. The Fondation Maeght near St-Paul provides a rare opportunity to view modernism in a garden context. Afternoon visit to Les Collettes near Cagnes-sur-Mer, the farmhouse where Renoir spent his last years, painting and sculpting from the olive terraces around the garden.

Day 7: St Jean-Cap-Ferrat. Sited in an exceptional position on Cap Ferrat, the gardens at the Villa Ephrussi Rothschild, established by Beatrice de Rothschild, are rich and varied. Her *Palazzo* contains an eclectic, wealthy art collection. Transfer to Nice airport for the flight to London Heathrow, arriving at c. 5.15pm.

Lecturer

Steven Desmond. Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Horticulture, Fellow of the Linnean Society and a Professional Associate of the Royal Horticultural Society, Steven Desmond specialises in the conservation of historic gardens. He obtained an MA in Conservation from the University of York, and works as a writer and lecturer. As well as contributing to *Country Life* and other journals, he is the author of *Gardens of the Italian Lakes* (2016), led many tours for MRT and is a regular with The Arts Society; he has completed two lecture tours of Australia for ADFAS.

Practicalities

Price – per person. Rear-view room, two sharing: £2,620 or £2,460 without flights.
Single occupancy: £2,940 or £2,780 without flights.

Sea-view room, two sharing: £2,710 or £2,550 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,100 or £2,940 without flights.

Included: air travel (Euro Traveller) on scheduled British Airways flights (aircraft: Airbus A319 & 320); private coach travel; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 1 picnic lunch and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hotel Napoléon, Menton (napoleon-menton.com). A modern, comfortable 4-star hotel located near the border with Italy, looking back on the old town. Sea view rooms have balconies but suffer some noise from the busy coastal road. Rooms at the rear are quieter. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? A lot of walking and standing. Several gardens are on steep sites and paths are often slippery and uneven, without handrails. Sure-footedness is essential. Average distance by coach per day: 42 miles.

Group size: between 10 to 22 participants.