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# The Legend of the French Riviera

Luminaries in the worlds of fashion, film, music and art have long flocked to the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc as a summer retreat. On the eve of the establishment's 150th year, regulars recount its evolution into the 21st century.

BY JAY CHESHES

**F**ORTY-EIGHT HOURS before the 72nd Festival de Cannes kicks off in mid-May, Arnaud Poëtte, longtime executive chef at the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc in Cap d'Antibes, has been trimming baby artichokes for days. Before the film festival ends, he and his team will have cleaned, cooked and vacuum-sealed more than a thousand miniature tins, in preparation for the yearly amfAR gala that raises millions for AIDS research. For the past 11 years the glittery soirée has been hosted at the hotel toward the end of the festival's two-week run of poolside deal-making and red-carpet premieres.

The hotel is such a center of gravity during the festival fortnight that some have taken to calling it the Festival du Cap. In a couple of days most of the hotel's 118 rooms and suites and its two private villas will be booked by film-world figures taking refuge from the photographers and movie fans along Cannes's Croisette, a 20-minute drive up the coast. Soon the hotel will be locked down like a fortress, its security phalanx keeping paparazzi at bay, but on this Sunday evening a steady calm reigns before the Hollywood onslaught.

Inside the Eden-Roc Restaurant's main dining room, Oscar-winning director Alejandro Iñárritu, this year's Cannes jury president, settles in for a quiet dinner. Nearby, a waiter flambés pounded sirloin in cognac, finishing up an order of steak Diane, a signature dish. A gray-haired Frenchman arrives in a gray hoodie and sneakers. The restaurant, which once barred Jacques Chirac, then French prime minister, from dining until he put on a tie, has relaxed its dress code in recent years.

But change comes slowly to the most venerable hotel on the French Riviera, which is preparing to celebrate its 150th birthday in 2020. Regulars still remember when cellphones were forbidden at the swimming pool, when guest rooms had no televisions or minibars, when bills were settled by a wire transfer or a suitcase of cash. (The hotel only started taking credit cards in 2006.) For the longest time the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc was a place apart from the modern world.

Though complimentary Wi-Fi and other 21st-century amenities are now standard, in many ways the hotel is preserved in amber, from the spare beachfront cabanas where Marc Chagall used to sketch to the sweeping *grande allée* that Coco Chanel used to wander, cutting through lush gardens, heading down to the sea. The original hill-top Napoleon III-style white stone manor house opened as

a winter resort in 1870, as the Grand Hotel du Cap d'Antibes. It's still as richly appointed in crystal and marble as it was in the late 19th century, when Monaco's Prince Albert I and Russia's last czar were both guests.

The hotel will commemorate its milestone birthday this spring with a coffee-table book, *Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc: A Legend on the French Riviera*, to be published by Flammarion in May in the U.S. The book features 300 pages of historical anecdotes and iconic images, from Jacques Henri Lartigue's moody shots at the opening of the Eden-Roc restaurant in 1920 to Slim Aarons's famous pool scenes and portraits of John Lennon and Yoko Ono posing near the rocks in 1970.

The hotel's craggy promontory has been a magnet for Anglo and American expats at least since F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda, entertained friends there in the 1920s, hosting Cole Porter, Pablo Picasso and Ernest Hemingway as it transitioned into a summer retreat. "Americans and English have literally taken possession of Cap d'Antibes," reported the *Chicago Tribune* in 1929. Fitzgerald would later immortalize the hotel in his final novel, *Tender Is the Night*, published in 1934, in a thinly veiled stand-in, the *Hôtel des Étrangers*, a "summer resort of notable and fashionable people."

Wallis Simpson and the Duke of Windsor sought refuge in 1937 among the hotel's tony crowd, post-abdication. Marlene Dietrich and Joe Kennedy, traveling with their families, are said to have started a tryst inside the compound in 1938. John F. Kennedy, 21 at the time, would squire Jackie by the pool years later, turning on the charm to repair their rocky relationship. Rita Hayworth famously stood up the Shah of Iran for lunch at the Eden-Roc restaurant, meeting her future husband, Prince Aly Khan, instead. The hotel's spell over Hollywood predates the film festival's launch in 1946, going back to the silent-film era when Charlie Chaplin and Rudolph Valentino prowled the "bathing rocks" at its Club Nautique, the "newest playground," as it was described in *Vogue* in 1928. Today the hotel is treasured by insiders for its anachronistic mix of old-fashioned opulence and warm hospitality. "The gardens are so exquisite, and the people who work there are like family," says Sharon Stone. In 1992 she escaped the frenzy in Cannes around her breakout role in *Basic Instinct*, barricading herself with friends in a villa there. After photographers who had climbed over the walls were ejected by security, she hosted a big party. "The hotel is just great," she says. "No matter what you need, no matter

**LA DOLCE VITA**  
One of the most iconic images of the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc in Cap d'Antibes, photographed by Slim Aarons, August 1976.





how you need it, they just have it together.”

The hotel has a well-worn reputation for indulging guests’ whims and even produced *Cuisine and Cravings of the Stars*, a cookbook detailing a few, from Clint Eastwood’s roast beef salad to Eddie Murphy’s turkey burger. “It’s a cuisine of *la dolce vita*,” says French restaurant critic François Simon, who wrote the book.

The staff’s preemptive desire to please means a favorite breakfast might be waiting before an order is placed. “They were always so diligent at the Hotel du Cap,” says Peter Bart, former editor in chief of *Variety*. “If you stayed there and on day one ordered a particular drink they would always, immediately, even before you could sit down, give you the same drink—even though you probably wanted a different one.”

Madonna first holed up there while presenting her *Truth or Dare* documentary at Cannes in 1991. Naomi Campbell held her 40th-birthday bash in 2010. The following year Karl Lagerfeld’s Chanel cruise collection paraded down its grande allée.

“It’s the greatest hotel in the world,” says Hollywood producer Irwin Winkler (*Raging Bull*, *Rocky*, *Goodfellas*, etc.), who visited for the first time in 1970. He’s been bringing his family back on summer vacations ever since. In July and August, the hotel operates essentially as a private club, booked by the same families year after year, from one generation to the next, often occupying the same room, restaurant table and beachfront cabana. “This past summer,” says Winkler, “we were 14—three generations came.”

So many kids have learned to swim in its pool over the years, under the watchful eye of the staff in their white uniforms. “If you behaved badly you got screamed at by the swimming teacher or Mr. Colombo, who used to run the restaurant,” says Charles Finch,

son of actor Peter Finch, who first came to the hotel as a child in the 1970s and has returned as an adult. “I continued to go there when I had money and when I didn’t,” he says. “They would give me a little room with a shower, no bathtub, for the equivalent of \$99 a night.” (Regular rooms, today, start at 650 euros, or about \$720, a night.) Finch, an agent, producer and deal maker, now hosts an annual filmmakers dinner at the Eden-Roc during the festival honoring top auteurs.

Much of the hotel’s core team, as loyal as their guests, have worked there for decades. “When you’ve known guests for years...you’re happy to see them, and they’re happy to see you—it’s a bit of alchemy, magic,” says Pierre Bérillon, manager of the Eden-Roc Grill restaurant, who started at the hotel 37 years ago.

These days, every guest who stays for the minimum requirement of five days or more in the high season in July or August, when reservations online are entirely blacked out (and the minimum room price nearly doubles), receives a letter from management that fall offering a booking for the following summer. “Once they’ve stayed, they are a priority,” says managing director Philippe Perd.

It takes a solid referral or a last-minute cancellation to break into the exclusive summer rotation and a certain decorum to keep your place there. Perd’s predecessor, the inscrutable Jean-Claude Irondelle, who died this past summer, was notorious for showing even A-list guests the door for bad behavior. He banned supermodel Kate Moss from the hotel in the 1990s after she trashed her room with then-boyfriend Johnny Depp. And, according to the hotel’s head concierge, Gilles Bertolino, who started parking cars at the du Cap in 1986, he barred the flight-averse Palme d’Or-winning Danish director Lars von Trier from

parking at the hotel the first time he showed up in a large camping van. (Moss was eventually welcomed back, and von Trier became a hotel regular.) Irondelle, who ruled as an imperious presence for more than 35 years, kept guest dossiers on cards behind the reception desk listing their particular peccadilloes. A red mark meant the guest was no longer welcome. “If someone called, we had to quickly run to get their card to see if Monsieur Irondelle had marked it before taking a reservation,” says Bertolino. “If there was a red mark, the hotel was full, full—always full.”

During the 2004 film festival, Irondelle’s top lieutenant, reservations manager Andrew Quiska, faced off with Brett Ratner. Angling for an upgrade, the director of the action comedy *Rush Hour* franchise had slipped Quiska 500 euros. Instead of a better room, though, Ratner and his then-girlfriend Serena Williams were moved to a room in the hotel’s annex that was “the size of a toaster oven,” as Ratner would later describe it in an article he wrote for *Variety*. A cat-and-mouse game ensued: Ratner moved himself into New Line Cinema founder Bob Shaye’s suite; management banished him from the property with a directive to never come back. “Irondelle and his closed circle, they had fun playing around with guests—putting them in tiny rooms so they would come after imploring, ‘Please, Monsieur Quiska; please, Monsieur Irondelle.’ It was a game for them,” says Bertolino.

Ratner’s account of the incident appeared that winter, shortly before Irondelle stepped down, at the age of 75. Irondelle took a beating in the French press post-retirement when it was revealed that the hotel owners had brought a complaint against him for theft and embezzlement after an audit uncovered 750,000 euros missing from 2003 to 2005. According to his lawyer Jean-Louis Keita, Irondelle, who had cut himself a hefty severance check, maintained his innocence, but he was indicted in 2011. In the end, no charges stuck.

Though new management lifted the fatwa on Ratner after Irondelle retired and abolished the card system in favor of computerized files, Perd, formerly of the Crillon in Paris, insists that a code of conduct remains. “We are still very careful with who we accept, and if we are unhappy with a guest’s behavior, not only do we tell them, but we don’t take them back,” he says. But the management these days is keen to shake off the establishment’s closed-door reputation. “The Hotel du Cap has always been perceived as an inaccessible place,” says Perd, noting the general impression that someone couldn’t pass through the gates for a drink or a meal without a room reservation. “Outside the Cannes festival period,” he says, “you can enjoy your lunch.”

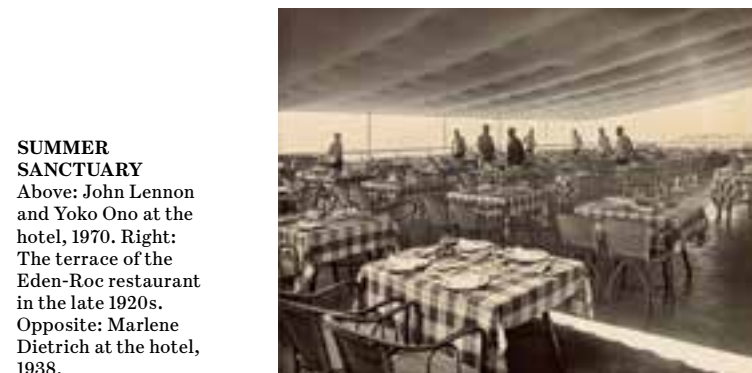
In the spring the hotel will unveil a pair of refurbished restaurants, reoriented to attract more diners from outside the hotel, under a new consulting chef, three-Michelin-starred Eric Frechon of the du Cap’s sister hotel, Le Bristol, in Paris. “My job will be to evolve the restaurants without ruffling the guests too much,” he says. The new menu isn’t finalized, but according to Frechon, the steak Diane will vanish, along with the sushi added to the raw bar a few years back in the Grill. The new selections will skew more local and French. Ordering off-menu, a du Cap mainstay, will be gently discouraged. “We’re going to bring some of the madness in line,” says Frechon, “shake up the restaurants without knocking them down.”



**FRENCH CONNECTION**  
Clockwise from top left: The Duke and Duchess of Windsor arriving at the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc, 1936; Pablo Picasso with Olga Picasso and Sara Murphy, 1923; Eden-Roc pavilion, 1924.



**HOLLYWOOD’S HIDEAWAY**  
Right: Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc pool, 1927. Below (from left): Rita Hayworth and André Sella, former general manager of the Hotel du Cap, welcoming Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud, 1948.



**SUMMER SANCTUARY**  
Above: John Lennon and Yoko Ono at the hotel, 1970. Right: The terrace of the Eden-Roc restaurant in the late 1920s. Opposite: Marlene Dietrich at the hotel, 1938.

COURTESY OF HOTEL DU CAP-EDEN-ROC

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF BIONDO AGENCY; RMN-GRAND PALAIS (PICASSO-PARIS NATIONAL MUSEUM); COURTESY OF HOTEL DU CAP-EDEN-ROC (8); © FARABOLA/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; COURTESY OF HOTEL DU CAP-EDEN-ROC



**FESTIVAL CIRCUIT** Below, from left: Sharon Stone and Marion Cotillard at the amfAR Cannes gala at the Hotel du Cap, 2009; famous faces, including Remo Ruffini, Jessica Chastain and Will Smith, at the amfAR gala after-party, 2017.



**LIFE OF THE PARTY**  
Clockwise from above: Attendees of amfAR's annual Cannes gala, including Francesco Vezzoli, Amanda Harlech, Tom Ford, Carine Roitfeld and Karl Lagerfeld, 2010; Janet Jackson and Donatella Versace at the gala, 2011; Kendall Jenner makes an entrance, 2015.



**GLORY DAYS**  
From far left: Leonardo DiCaprio at the amfAR Cannes gala, 2015; Sofia Coppola, 2014; Paris Hilton, 2018. Opposite: The Hotel du Cap, 2005.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JEFF VESPA/AMFAR/RETIREE/GETTY; DANIELE VENTURELLI/AMFAR/2017/GETTY; PASCAL LE SEGRETAIN/GETTY; GEORGE PIMENTEL/AMFAR/15/GETTY; GISELA SCHOBER/GETTY; DAVE M. BENNETT/AMFAR/4/GETTY; KEVIN TACHMAN/AMFAR/15/GETTY; PASCAL LE SEGRETAIN/AMFAR/0/GETTY;

COURTESY OF HOTEL DU CAP-EDEN-ROC

In a departure from the blowout affairs the du Cap hosts during the film festival, the hotel will reward vacationing regulars for their loyalty this summer with a series of less ostentatious parties marking the 150th birthday. “They will be elegant, no bling-bling, low-profile events, where the guests feel at home,” says Perd.

The launch fete for the Grand Hotel du Cap d’Antibes on February 26, 1870, was a more lavish affair, hosted by its principal investor, Russian Prince Alexis de Plestcheyeff. He’d taken over the property from Hippolyte de Villemessant, owner of the newspaper *Le Figaro*, who had hoped to open a rest home there for exhausted writers.

But with France soon drawn into the Franco-Prussian War, the luster around opening quickly wore off. By 1877 the hotel was offered up in a bankruptcy sale, dishes and furniture included. It remained on the market for years, before Italian hotelier Antoine Sella arrived as manager in the late 1880s. He eventually bought the hotel, with the help of a loyal guest, British aristocrat William Onslow.

During World War I, the winter resort welcomed wounded soldiers with “copious snacks and a slug of our best crus,” a French periodical, *L’Ambulance*, reported in 1917. By the roaring ’20s it was beginning to attract a more glamorous clientele. Fitzgerald’s friends, American expat bon vivants Gerald and Sara Murphy, are often credited with launching the summer season there when they booked half the hotel for their entourage in the summer of 1923—introducing Picasso and Gertrude Stein to the place. The Fitzgeralds arrived the following year.

The seafront Eden-Roc pavilion, built as a teahouse in 1914, added a saltwater swimming pool that became the epicenter of the new summer season. (It remains a focal point today.) The swimming club that sprang up around it included a restaurant and a playground of diving boards, high-wire ropes and trapezes (all still there) protruding into the Mediterranean. Hotel rooms were added to the building in 1987, with balconies perched at the edge of the sea.

Sella’s son André took over after his father’s 1931 death and brought the hotel into further prominence, pioneering the guest curation that’s still a hallmark and raising prices en route. “The rich will pay like maharajas to live like boy scouts,” he once said.

During World War II, German occupiers filled the hotel’s garden with mines. The Eden-Roc pavilion, destroyed by U.S. Navy bombs in 1944, was rebuilt by the allies after they requisitioned the property toward the end of the war. American officers celebrated the first anniversary of the D-Day invasion with their European commander, General Eisenhower, there in June 1945. By the launch of the film festival the following year, the hotel was the chic place to stay once again. “Of the 10,000 who apply during the season for rooms at the Hotel du Cap, only 100 are chosen at a time,” reported the *New York Times* in 1949.

In 1964 German industrialist Rudolf Oetker pointed out the hotel to his wife, Maja, from their yacht. “Look, that’s one of the most famous hotels on the Côte d’Azur,” he told her. “It’s very beautiful but too expensive for us.” Oetker had been looking to expand his hotel portfolio beyond the Brenners Park in Baden-Baden, purchased by his father in 1941. Five years after sailing



by he bought the Hotel du Cap, promising to preserve Sella’s vision and retain all of his staff. Irondelle, Sella’s protégé, became the new general manager.

Almost 50 years later, the hotel is the crown jewel of the Oetker Collection, a luxury group encompassing Le Bristol in Paris, The Lanesborough in London and Eden Rock in St. Barths, among other properties. The Oetkers began spending a lot of time at the Hotel du Cap in the high summer season, staying in their own villa next door. Their children got summer jobs there, while Maja took a hands-on role overseeing the understated interior design. In 2011, four years after her husband’s death, she completed a \$67 million renovation of the original 19th-century building, adding modern amenities while preserving the conservative mix of 19th-century furniture and floral-patterned curtains and bedspreads. She took a step back recently, passing the design baton to her stepdaughter, Bergit, Countess Douglass, who is working closely with Philippe Perd. “I think that’s a big reason for the success of the hotel,” says Gilles Bertolino. “The owners are really very invested. They’re always here, attentive to details.”

Perd, who took over from Irondelle in 2005, has brought a dose of modernity to the hotel, but he’s done it, he says, with his loyal guests in mind. “Before they check out, we sit down with our regulars and get their opinion on what we have planned,” says Perd’s deputy, Laurent Van Hoegaerden. Former EMI Records chairman Charles Koppelman, a patron since 1978, says the transition has been almost seamless. “As great as the hotel was,” he says, “it’s now even better.”

Wi-Fi, credit cards and televisions were among the first things to arrive. By the pool, lounge chairs replaced mattresses on the ground. In the 14 years

since he started, Perd has added a spa, champagne bar and the Grill, a second, more casual restaurant. “They haven’t done ridiculous, ugly alterations or anything,” says photographer, entrepreneur and art collector Jean Pigozzi, who inherited his family’s villa next door to the hotel.

Two years ago Perd launched a program to rotate contemporary art through its 22 acres, bringing in abstract sculptures by Tony Cragg last summer. And he courted amfAR, which in 2009 moved its gala to the du Cap from its longtime home at the Moulin des Mougins restaurant in the hills above Cannes, recently committing to continue at the hotel for the foreseeable future. “We’ve raised a lot more money at the event since we moved to the du Cap,” says amfAR CEO Kevin Robert Frost.

This year’s amfAR gala drew a thousand or so guests to the hotel in late May, with supermodel Kendall Jenner and actress Eva Longoria swanning down a mobbed grande allée and into the big tent where Tom Jones and Mariah Carey performed. The guest list looked different this year, reflecting recent shakeups in Hollywood in the #MeToo era and the rise of the social-media influencer. The hotel, where *Pulp Fiction*’s Palme d’Or win was celebrated 25 years ago, has begun to respond to a transformed cultural landscape and to the faster pace of life in the 21st century.

“Today people say, ‘If I got a lot of likes it means I’ve had a good vacation,’” says head concierge Bertolino. “I try to talk about the history of this hotel with new guests to help them understand. This hotel, at first it was going to be a villa for writers who came to rest and find inspiration. I tell them, nothing has changed; it’s still a place where if you take the time, you’ll relax, clear your head, and the hotel will inspire you.” ●