

An Englishman in Grasse

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A Walk around Grasse's Old Town

I am sometimes asked for recommendations about what to see when visiting Grasse's old town. What follows is a personal choice of what I find interesting. I apologise to anyone who thinks I've missed something important and to anyone else who thinks I have included sites which they don't like. Please take it as you find it!

I've described the route and included some photos of where to turn left or right: they are intended to help you find your way, not to show the places which I talk about. I've also included a street map, which you will find [at the bottom of this page](#), although you might find it easier to use Google Maps or a similar app on your phone. You can also download the map and/or this whole page to a PDF if you wish.

The time it takes to walk my route is very dependent on how many places you go into. You could do it in 90 minutes, but you might need one day or more if you want to visit all the sites!

Places which I suggest are worth visiting are in red. [Highlighted links](#) are to my blogs.

I suggest starting at the pedestrian exit from the Cours Honore Cresp car park, just by the Fragonard perfumery. Start with a coffee at the Café des Musees if you wish, then walk down Grasse old town's main street (at this point it's named rue Ossola) for about 100 metres until you see **Musee Fragonard** on your right. You'll pass several Fragonard shops on the way.



Musée Fragonard is a free private museum for the art collected by the Costa family, who own the Fragonard perfumery. What I really like to see there is the magnificent interior of a hotel particulier of the eighteenth century with a garden of the same period visible from the windows (unfortunately, you can't go out). As far as the art is concerned, I recommend the paintings by Fragonard and his sister-in-law Margeurite Gérard on the first floor, although there is some interesting contemporary art as well



Leaving the museum, keep walking down the street until you see a café called Croissant Rose, behind which take **rue Tracastel** a little downhill. You are now walking along the defensive ditch which once ran outside the tenth century walls. On the right, you'll see a door marked 'Pensionnat Ste Jeanne', with a new plaque next to it about the Reseau Marcel network. Six young Jewish girls were hidden here in the Ste Jeanne boarding school during the Nazi occupation. The network was created by a Jewish couple and was aided by two priests, with the active connivance of the Bishop of Nice. It saved over 800 children in all.



Continuing down rue Tracastel a short distance, take the long flight of steps to your left named Travers Vauban, emerging on to the Petit Puy square right in front of the **Cathedral**. Personally, I'm not so keen on the interior, but there are three paintings by major artists inside, two early Rubens and a Fragonard. If you go in, take the side exit and turn right. Otherwise, take the passage to the left of the cathedral. Either way, continue and you'll come to the **Point de Vue**. The table d'orientation shows you what to look for. Especially look for the Palais de Justice (once the site of the Chiris perfumery), the Roure complex, also an old perfume factory, the Palais Provençal, which was the site of Alice de Rothschild's 'winter



cottage', the **Bon Marché quarter** and the bridge over the Rossignol valley which was originally part of the Chemin du Sud railway.

Return the same way, passing alongside the **Bishops' Palace (now the Town Hall)** on your right (unfortunately you can only go into the reception). Pass the tower of the palace (which pre-dates the bell tower of the cathedral); turn right and immediately right again into the Palace's peaceful **Cour d'Honneur**. From there, you can look down on the attractive rue de l'Eveque; the 10th century wall ran immediately below you.



Leaving the Cours d'Honneur, keep straight on along rue Gazan (not rue Mougins Roquefort), leaving the war memorial on your left, until you reach the main street again (here it's named rue Marcel Journet).

Turn left for about 10 metres and you'll see **Maison Venturini**, where fougasette, a Grasse speciality, is baked. Now turn back about 20 metres and you'll see the narrow travers des Soeurs to your left; there's a **small plaque** at its top telling us that Catherine dei Medici stayed there in 1533 on her way to marry Henri II of France. Her visit is said to have triggered the making of perfumes in Grasse.



Follow the main street again for about 80 metres until you see the **Duplanteur** chocolate shop on the corner of rue Reve-Vieille. Even if you don't want to buy chocolate, do have a look inside. Leaving the shop, turn back along the street for about 25 metres, then turn right up rue de l'Oratoire. After about 80 metres (uphill!), you'll see the stone archway of the Oratory with a stylised belfry outside. Turn round and you'll see the sign of **Maison du Patrimoine**. It has some interesting displays, and I recommend the maquettes which show how the old town developed.



Leaving the Maison du Patrimoine, continue up rue de l'Oratoire for another 80 metres and turn right into rue de la Fontette, just before the 'Androide' shop. Almost immediately, walk through an arch on your left, named Passage des Tanneurs, into Place Lieutenant Morel. You will see the new **Médiathèque**. This is the old area of tanneries, the **quartier Rouachier**. The little stream running down the steps harks back to when water was crucial to the tanning process. This area would have stunk to high heaven! La Tannerie and Mama Rosa are both good for lunches.



Now take the rue de Rouachier out of the square (on the opposite side from the Médiathèque. Turn left into rue Dominique Conté and after 25 metres right into rue Quatre Coins which leads into the **Place aux Aires**. The buildings on the left mark the line of the 12th century walls – the Place was outside the walls until they were extended in the 14th century. Plenty of choice here if you should want lunch. I quite like La Mamma, and for something a little lighter, Les Delicatesses de Grasse.



Exit the Place aux Aires almost opposite where you came in via rue du Thouron. At the top of the little rise, you'll see the Fontaine du Thouron. It has an attractive double staircase and is one of the first fountains fed by La Foux, Grasse's original water source and without which the town would never have existed.



Take the steps up and you come to **bd Jeu du Ballon**, part of the route Napoleon. The 14th century walls, which kept Napoleon out of the town, followed the line of the buildings on the left side of the boulevard (the last tower was only demolished in the 1930s). Napoleon did not enter the town because he was afraid that he and his men might not be allowed out again! To your right, the rising road signed towards Digne and St Vallier de Thiey is supposedly where Napoleon turned away from the town, towards his next stop at St Vallier. If you walk about 40 metres past the little roundabout, you'll see, tucked under the retaining wall, a monument to Napoleon's passing by, a fountain marking the historic outlet of



La Foux and a small Napoleon museum (which rarely seems to be open).

Turn back and follow the [bd Jeu du Ballon](#) in the opposite direction (away from the rise of the route Napoleon). After 100 metres, see the **Officers Club** on the right at no. 15 and then **Credit Agricole Bank** on the other side. It was originally Grasse's theatre, designed by the architect of the Villa Noailles in Hyeres, Robert Mallet-Stevens. Continue a little further and the entrance to the **International Perfume Museum (MIP)** is on the left. If you go into the MIP, which I thoroughly recommend, skip to * below and we'll meet at the exit. Otherwise, continue down the slope for 50 metres or so, and just past some steps, turn left into a small triangular square, the Clavecin. There, you can see the statue to J-H Fragonard.



(* When you exit the museum, turn right and take the steps up. At the top turn left again to see the statue of J-H Fragonard.)

Carry on along the small triangular square ('Clavecin' means a harp) and turn left down the steps at the end and cross the road into the **Cours Honoré Cresp**.

Pass along the balustrade of Cours and see the views to the sea and the **statue of the Amiral de Grasse**. Towards the far end and away from the balustrade, you'll find the **Cours Fountain** (dry today) designed during revolutionary times. The symbols on it might be typically Fascist or Communist rather than Christian. Nearby is a 'lutrin' (lectern) of a painting of Grasse by Raoul Dufy, which is in the Beaubourg in Paris.



Go to the end of the Cours and through the little car park to an alley and steps which run in front of the Pharmacie du Cours. It's called the Impasse des Bains, but it's not a dead end! Follow the steps down, turn left and follow the path, then take the steps down at the end. That will bring you into impasse Fragonard, where stand the **Musee Villa Fragonard**, in which J-H Fragonard took refuge in 1791, and, in the cellars accessed via its garden, the **Musée de Marine Amiral de Grasse**. I recommend the first for its Revolutionary drawings by Fragonard and the second for its model ships based on the Admiral's victory over the English in 1781 which effectively ended the American War of Independence.



After leaving the museums, retrace your steps to the gates and take the pedestrian crossing directly across bd Fragonard into the Jardin des Plantes. Follow the path straight ahead and after leaving the garden by the gate to your left, turn right towards the **Fragonard perfumery**. It is free to enter...and you don't *have* to create your own perfume!



After leaving the perfumery by the same entrance, look down **rue Mirabeau**. At the bottom of the hill is the exotic façade of the Hughes Ainé perfumery, just below the entrance to the **Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Provence (MAHP)**. The museum itself is quite interesting, but I think the house and garden, another eighteenth century hotel particular once owned by Mirabeau's sister, well worth seeing in its own right.

From the top of rue Mirabeau, you'll see our starting point again.



Grasse Old Town Tour

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