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The swimming pool and private beach at France's Cheval Blanc St.-Tropez.

THE NEW



For decades, St.-Tropez has been the flashy epicenter of the French Riviera, a town where rock stars and Hollywood celebrities arrive on mega-yachts to dance the night away. But that glamorous façade is now giving way to something more organic. **LINDSEY TRAMUTA** checks out a trio of hotels forging a quieter path.

Photographs by
ANAÏS BOILEAU

WAVE



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Clockwise from right: Window shutters and palm trees are St.-Tropez motifs; a boat docked in the harbor; a view of café-lined Rue Henri Seillon, near the harbor.





Dépaysement—the French term for a disorienting but refreshing change of scenery. Usually, it’s drastic, like the feeling of waking up in a foreign country after a full day and night of travel. But sometimes it can describe something closer to home.

St.-Tropez, it turns out, today gives new meaning to *dépaysement*. As a Parisienne who regularly travels around France, I had for years observed how all of those champagne parties and late nights on the beach had taken their toll on the landscape. Change was long overdue. The application of the Loi Littoral, a coastal-protection law introduced in 2019 to prevent increased erosion, forced surf-side restaurants, beach clubs, and boutiques to reapply for their permits and rebuild their structures using sustainable materials. Businesses closest to the water now have to be entirely dismantled at the end of each season.

The law has resulted in the closure of some long-running favorite restaurants, such as La Plage des Jumeaux and Tabou. It has also allowed luxury hotels, such as La Réserve and Byblos Beach, to open their own establishments on the beach for the first time—a step away from the loud beach clubs of the past toward an experience more in tune with the natural environment.

In a way, these efforts are a return to the area’s roots. St.-Tropez first entered the popular imagination through a series of dreamlike images of nature when painters Paul Signac and Henri Matisse brought widespread attention to the sleepy fishing village on the Côte d’Azur and its soft Mediterranean palette. Their canvases instilled desire among early-20th-century European and American travelers, but it was the popularity of the 1956 Brigitte Bardot film *And God Created Woman* that really put the region and its Pampelonne Beach on the map. Since the sixties, jet-setters, especially Americans and Russians, have made this tiny seaside spot their playground, returning yearly for that uniquely *tropézienne* mix of sun and fête, beach and booze.

The atmosphere of extravagance and excess is precisely why I did not want to come back after my first trip in 2015, which left me feeling underwhelmed and out of place—I prefer a laid-back wine bar over a brassy discotheque. And I was disappointed by the careless regard for the natural environment I witnessed, noting the way majestic stretches of the coastline were littered with trash and cigarettes.

My latest trip was a wholly different experience. Aside from seeing a new respect for the environment, I noticed more things about the guests while hotel-hopping. On my first night at the Lily of the Valley hotel, I sipped a glass of Côtes de Provence from the nearby Château Saint-Maur winery and scanned my fellow diners on the patio. Everyone was ogling the bubblegum sunset. Occasionally, I heard snippets of hushed conversations about hiking, biking, and swimming plans for the next day. The crowd was a mix of sharply dressed yet unpretentious Europeans (because of COVID-19, there were few non-EU guests). Their ages spanned from

thirties to seventies, and they evidently shared my motivations for coming to the hotel—a good meal with a spectacular backdrop and an opportunity to reconnect with the dramatic natural beauty of the Côte d’Azur.

For some in town, the positive outcomes of this reshuffle extend beyond the environment and the new crowd—they represent a much-needed rebirth. “St.-Tropez was becoming outdated,” said Lucie Weill, the cofounder (along with her father, Alain) of Lily of the Valley. “Dining had become pricey and mediocre while the spirit of excess was falling flat for travelers who were looking for a balance of rest and play. Now there’s new energy.”

There is also an increased emphasis among restaurant owners and hoteliers to highlight local products and flavors. Eric Frechon, who was chef at the Michelin-starred restaurant at Le Bristol, in Paris, was brought in to develop the Mediterranean-style menus at La Petite Plage and L’Italien, both overlooking the harbor, while Pharrell Williams and chef Jean Imbert chose St.-Tropez for ToShare, their second culinary collaboration after Swan, in Miami.

And other new hotels are also hitting all the right notes—from standout gastronomy and thoughtful design to restorative wellness and outdoor experiences. These places are drawing in a younger, more local, and noticeably more discreet clientele. Today, it’s the gentler side of St.-Tropez that makes it worth a visit—and these three new properties are the best spots to experience it all.

LILY OF THE VALLEY

Alain and Lucie Weill opened their hotel in 2019, and it is unlike any other in the area. For one, its location on the southern coast of the peninsula is remote and wild, a 20-minute drive from the heart of St.-Tropez. The property sits at the top of a winding private drive in the small town of La Croix-Valmer, known for its dramatic headlands and hiking trails. It overlooks the Plage de Gigaro, a three-mile stretch of unspoiled beach that I could easily access on foot, though the hotel provides a shuttle and electric bikes. If Pampelonne is for festive beachgoing, Gigaro is where locals go to connect with nature and take in the raw beauty of the Côte d’Azur.

That distinctive setting is why Alain Weill knew La Croix-Valmer was the right place for his restorative-hospitality concept. One of France’s Fortune 500 media moguls, he has been visiting this under-the-radar section of the peninsula for more than 50 years and was convinced of its potential. But the new build needed to fold into the landscape, not stand out from it. The rustic-modernist result



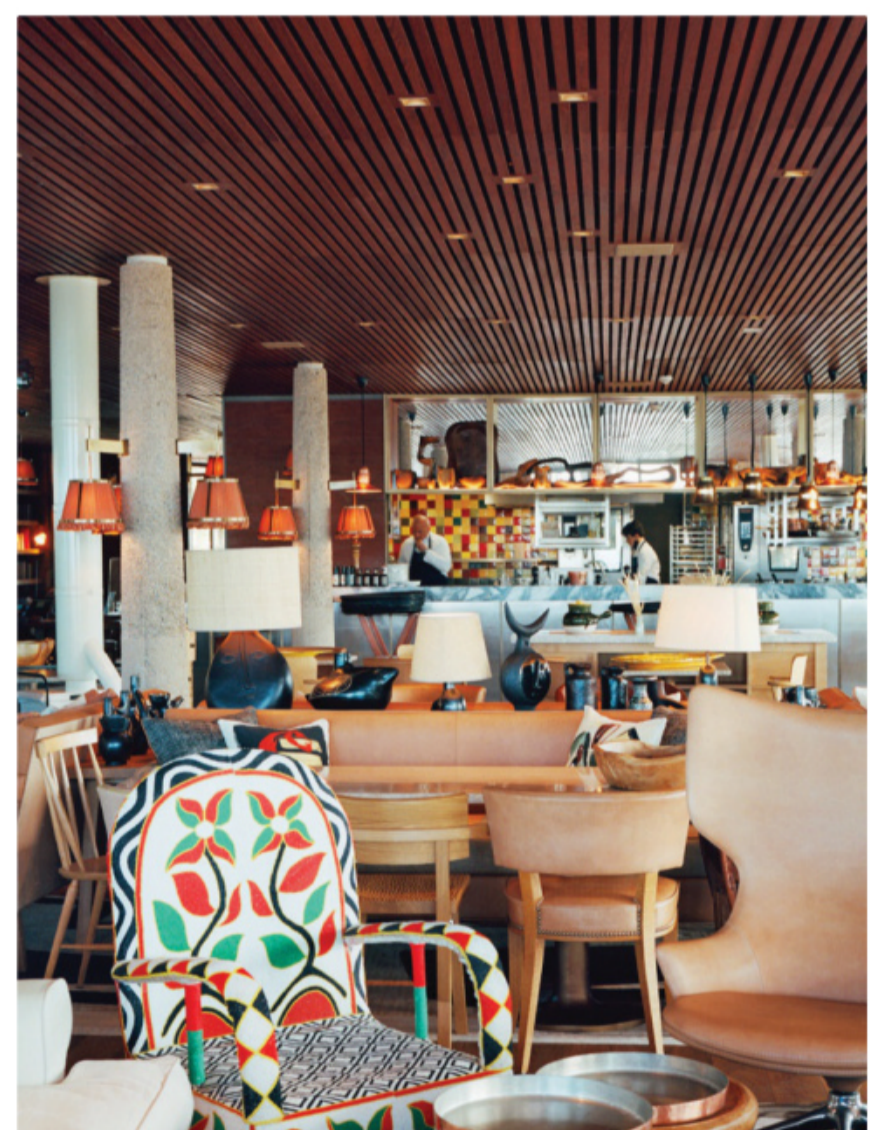


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A greenery-fringed
guest room at Lily
of the Valley.

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Plage de Gigaro,
the beach nearest
the property.



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From left: Ceramics and
vintage art and
photographs at Club
House, Lily of the Valley's
café; Le Vista, another
restaurant at the hotel.



consists of 44 rooms and suites, an open-plan restaurant, a pool, and a wellness center that all face the Mediterranean from a canopy of olive bushes, ancient umbrella pines, and tumbling vines. Wide-open spaces and cleverly designed perspectives mean the water's horizon or the electric-green hillsides are always in view—I saw them even when I was downward-dogging in a group yoga session.

With the usual glitz at a refreshing remove, designer Philippe Starck focused on the coastline, creating spaces that recall breezy California villas and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. He used earthy tones, textures, and materials—lots of tropical woods, tiger marble, thatched lampshades, and Provençal ceramics.

Blurring the limits of outdoors and indoors are guest rooms with private terraces that resemble wild gardens. Each comes outfitted with a plush double daybed, a full-length mirror, and sparkling bay views. Surrealist cushions by the artist Ara Starck, the designer's daughter, lend warmth and pops of color, while stylish fireplaces in Le Vista, the property's main restaurant, bring the heat for cooler summer nights and winter afternoons.

And that's the other feature that makes this a game-

changing spot: it is open year-round. Well into the off-season, the hotel's energy is kept alive by those in search of self-care. The culinary-obsessed book dinner and drinks at Le Vista for chef Vincent Maillard's elegant Mediterranean menu, full of produce from nearby farms. Showstopping sunsets bathe the adjoining pool in powdery-pink light.

The health-minded traveler, meanwhile, arrives for a four-to-21-day retreat at the Shape Club, a half-acre wellness complex that includes an 80-foot pool, sleek fitness rooms for Pilates, Biologique Recherche facial treatments, and ayurvedic massages. Sports coaches and dietitians tailor

the programs to individual goals, from weight loss to better-quality sleep. The concierges, meanwhile, can point guests in the direction of the Domaine du Rayol, a 50-acre botanical garden, or a local winery to sample rosé. *lilyofthevalley.com*; doubles from \$1,457.



◀ A suite at Hôtel Lou Pinet. Below, from left: Beefbar, one of the property's restaurants; an Ugo Rondinone sculpture welcomes guests at the hotel's entrance.

HÔTEL LOU PINET

The family that founded the Maisons Pariente hotel group—which includes Crillon Le Brave, in Mont Ventoux, and Le Coucou, on the slopes of Méribel—has a long history in St.-Tropez. Patrick Pariente and his daughters, Kimberley Cohen and Leslie Kouhana, spent every summer there until the excess of the 80s and 90s turned them off to the area. Fast-forward to what the family now calls “St.-Tropez's renaissance,”



*The pool at Hôtel
Lou Pinet.*



and they're celebrating by leaving their personal mark on the region.

The trio tapped Parisian interior architect Charles Zana, whose years of experience designing private villas in the area made him an obvious choice, to overhaul what was the lusterless Benkirai Hotel & Restaurant. The brief: re-create the golden age of Riviera chic. Zana's design, big on a mix of textures common to the region, such as linen, stone, cane, and ceramics, is a winking homage to vintage St.-Tropez before the lavish boat parties trumped the simpler pleasures.

Of course, it helps that the 34-room property looks straight out of a Slim Aarons photograph, tucked away from the crowds of the Place des Lices in what feels like a secluded private residence. Rooms are set up in a series of stone and

terra-cotta-roofed villas around a central pool that's shaded by two historic pines. I spent my afternoons sipping pastis underneath candy-colored parasols beside the turquoise-tiled pool or strolling the gardens that had been filled with aromatic plants and flowers by French landscape artist Jean Mus. Sculptures by Tony Cragg and Ugo Rondinone are set throughout the outdoor spaces.

Inside, rooms are spacious and bright. White walls and linen curtains are warmed by creamy wood furnishings, sunny poufs and banquettes, tapestry headboards featuring abstract motifs, and decorative pieces found at antiques markets by the Pariente family. I found the most striking and destination-appropriate splash of color, however, in the restaurant, Beefbar (despite its name, it also serves excellent grilled fish and ceviche), which was conceived by Monaco-based restaurateur Riccardo Giraudi: a vibrant fresco by contemporary artist Alexandre Benjamin Navet depicting a retro St.-Tropez. It spans the entire length of the bar.



But it's the lighthearted sensuality of the place—from the vintage chess and backgammon boards in the lounge to the art-collector crowd I saw sipping cocktails at sundown—that inspired me to skip the old town and linger on-property to see who I might meet. The wellness aspect deserves a mention, too. A Tata Harper spa with two treatment rooms and a fitness center can be found at the edge of the garden—guests go down a few stairs and into a grotto (the owners take discretion seriously). What the operation lacks in capacity it makes up for in highly competent personal coaches, available upon request for morning yoga sessions beneath the pines, and *apéro*-hour games of *pétanque*. loupinet.com; doubles from \$603.

CHEVAL BLANC ST.-TROPEZ

The fourth property from LVMH's Cheval Blanc brand sits on ideal real estate, less than a 15-minute walk from the harbor, for those who want to be close (but not too close) to the center of St.-Tropez. Aside from the blush-pink façade of the balustraded 1930s mansion and original works by ceramist Roger Capron (located in the stairwell on the way to guest rooms), few stylistic features of its former incarnation as the *Résidence de la Pinède* remain. The owners reduced the number of guest rooms to 30 and added an exquisite Guerlain spa, where my favorite detail was the collection of vintage perfume bottles, which are available to take home as pricey souvenirs—they sell for anywhere from \$250 to more than \$12,000.

What has carried over, however, is an elegant, multigenerational, and multilingual clientele (accompanied by what appeared to be some of the best-looking dogs of Europe) and the sterling reputation of *La Vague d'Or*. Helmed by Arnaud Donckele, it's not only the peninsula's only Michelin three-starred restaurant; it's also one of the country's premier culinary institutions.

Beyond that, the interiors were overhauled by designer Jean-Michel Wilmotte, known for his work on *Hôtel Lutetia* and the *Carrousel du Louvre*, in Paris. The look leans nautical: rooms and suites, including two duplexes, are done up in crisp ivory and beige, trimmed in the same rich Riviera blue that is



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A piece by ceramist Roger Capron at Cheval Blanc.

found in the rugs (the designs are based on sketches by Capron), the staff uniforms, and the Bentley parked out front that ferries guests to and from town. Gio Ponti lights and furnishings, bathrobes designed in the spirit of Dior tulip dresses, and contemporary works by Carlos Cruz-Diez all infuse character into an otherwise sober aesthetic.

Among the hotel's most rarefied features is the sliver of sandy Bouillabaisse Beach reserved for guests (it's the only St.-Tropez property to sit directly on the seafront). At the edge of the patio,

la plage is neatly lined with 60 loungers and umbrellas—plus accommodating staff that looked after my every need as I watched the boats go by. Beach service included visits from a massage therapist, who applied my SPF 50 (an absurdly decadent amenity I’ve never experienced anywhere else).

The concierges—the hotel calls them “alchemists”—will hook you up with golf outings, kitesurfing sessions, private shopping experiences, and tables at any of the hard-to-book restaurants on the peninsula. But, really, all I wanted to do was enjoy the hotel. And on my last day, when the live music kicked off under the pines as the sun dipped beyond the horizon, it felt to me as if St.-Tropez had finally found its true nature. chevalblanc.com; doubles from \$4,571. 🌐

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Vintage fragrance bottles at the Guerlain spa.



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The main building at Cheval Blanc, which dates from 1936.

