

## 4. — The hotel as artist’s studio

*F Scott Fitzgerald immortalised it and generations of artists and Hollywood actors have checked in. The Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc is the epitome of Côte d’Azur cool.*

That the Côte d’Azur is a playground for the rich and famous is an established fact, proved each summer by photographs of Hollywood’s elite traipsing around sun-drenched Riviera towns and lolling on the decks of flashy yachts moored off its shores. But no destination has played such a significant role in making it so as the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc, the magnificent Napoleon III-style palace on a private point between Juan-les-Pins and Antibes. This cream-coloured hotel was a creative haven before the notion was fashionable.

Though the Du Cap has been painstakingly preserved – an alleged €52.6m, seven-year-long restoration starting in 2007 that added modern amenities is referred to as “the most expensive renovation that you can hardly see” – it was already remarkably ahead of the curve when it was built in 1870. It was a clever antecedent to the glitzy retreat that the Côte d’Azur would become. Created as a writers’ retreat by Auguste de Villemessant, the founder of French newspaper *Le Figaro*, the grand edifice was something of a white elephant: a gorgeous oasis off the au-courant grid that greeted only a few guests. Nineteen years later, under the ownership of Italian hotelier Antoine Sella, it officially became a hotel, accommodating guests during the winter months (Victorian fashion declared that the Mediterranean summer climate was detrimental to one’s health).

In the 1920s the hotel began its reign as a sanctuary for artists, welcoming guests such as George Bernard Shaw and French writer Anatole France. American patrons Gerald and Sara Murphy set up camp at the Du Cap in 1923, bringing their exclusive coterie of pals including Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and Jean Cocteau along for the ride, and in turn officially shifting it into a summer destination. F Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, heroes of the Lost Generation, ensconced themselves here in the 1930s, with Fitzgerald memorialising the hotel as Hôtel des Étrangers in his iconic final novel *Tender is the Night*. His ingénue protagonist Rosemary Hoyt seeks solace from her new turn as a celebrity and falls in love with the enigmatic Nicole and Dick Diver (based on Sara and Gerald Murphy) on the little beach that they “invented” where the hotel’s lawns meet the sea.

It was in the same decade that Eden-Roc Pavilion, the glamorous beach club and complex

carved into the rocks just above the water, was expanded to accommodate new generations of artistes, including Marc Chagall, who painted the beach cabanas. From the 1920s through to the 1960s, the Du Cap cemented itself as a creative oasis without comparison. It played host to the sultry French actress Suzanne Georgette Charpentier, known as “Annabella”, and her Hollywood heartthrob husband Tyrone Power. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor checked in, as did Pablo Picasso (who even agreed to hand-draw the new restaurant menus) and his Russian ballerina wife, Olga, who danced in Diaghilev’s troupe.

The Du Cap didn’t begin to accept credit cards until 2012. Entrepreneur and film-maker Charles P Finch, who grew up spending summers there with his thespian parents, the actors Peter Finch and Yolande Turner, says that for the right sort of person “exceptions were made, paintings were swapped”. He recalls watching as bronzed beauties stretched out on poolside mattresses and basked in the sun, anointing themselves with fragrant Mediterranean olive oil from little bowls of the stuff placed there for exactly that purpose. “I remember it for its sensuality,” he says.

Finch remembers the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc – today the jewel in the crown of the Oetker collection, which includes Le Bristol Paris and Courchevel in the French Alps – as a “family retreat” where the lucky broods would reconvene each summer, laughing and luxuriating. “By the 1970s the hotel had been taken over by the super-rich,” he says. “Brigitte Bardot, David Niven, Italian magnate Gianni Agnelli, my father, they all came for lunch off their boats or for a night or two but they didn’t stay for long because they had their own houses.” Today the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc plays host to the star-studded AMFAR benefit each year and our modern-day celebrities continue to frolic in its salons and on its manicured paths. “This said, the era of moving in for a long stay or season has passed.”

### About the writer

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### Pictured:

Top: Eden-Roc pool carved into the cliff below the pavilion, 1948. Above: view of Eden-Roc Pavilion from a yacht, 1948