

FRENCH RIVIERA SECURITY UPDATE

The South of France is an idyllic and beautiful place. However, as security expert Ed Hill reports, all is not what it seems.

AS THE MED SEASON IS ONCE AGAIN UPON US, MANY YACHT owners will be heading to the south of France for their annual summer retreat. Famed for its glamorous beach resorts, favourable climate and glamorous lifestyle, the French Riviera (or Côte d'Azur) is a mecca for the rich and famous during the summer months. The charming coastal resorts of Saint Tropez and Cannes along with the independent principality of Monaco have become synonymous with opulence and elegance.

However, opposites attract and it's no surprise that where there's wealth, there's crime. In March this year, a team of armed robbers audaciously held up the Cartier jewellery store in Monte Carlo forcing the Monaco police to spring into action and close the principality's borders in a bid to prevent their escape.

Monaco

Scratch further beneath the surface of the French Riviera's glitzy image and you may discover an unpleasant underbelly that the local tourist authorities would prefer you didn't see. The recent Monte Carlo jewellery heist isn't an isolated incident concerning organised crime within this region.

In the summer of 2015, Formula One racing driver Jenson Button was burgled while he and his wife Jessica slept at their luxury villa in St Tropez. The thieves made off with £300,000 worth of jewellery including an engagement ring. However, what made this incident more intriguing was that the thieves used gas to sedate their victims before breaking in. Even more alarming was that the local police admitted that this type of crime was becoming a growing problem in the area.

Some French authorities were quick to downplay the use of gas on this particular raid however this wasn't such a unique occurrence. Reports indicate that there has been a surge of similar crimes all across the Riviera. The situation has got so bad that the US Embassy in Paris warned American citizens of "recent trends" in residential burglaries by "well-organised burglary rings".

Whilst burglary of luxury apartments in the region are nothing new, statistics of crime rates throughout the Cote D'Azur provide unpleasant reading. According to statistics from the département des Alpes-Maritimes region, within one year there has been an overall increase of 8% in robberies. This includes a total of 48 armed robberies and a further 1,545 "unarmed" robberies.

Nice

The overall picture for Nice isn't too flattering either with around 33,000 crimes reportedly committed every year. The webpage of An Irreverent Insider's Guide to Nice claims that robbery in the city is on the rise with the number of 'beach grabs' sharply increasing. Criminals are targeting beaches where bathers are naturally more relaxed and sometimes leave their personal belongings unattended while they go for a dip in the sea or to purchase refreshments.

Another increasing crime is 'bag grab' which is particularly prevalent on the



beach or on the promenade. Organised thieves stalk their victims from a safe distance before snatching their bag and making their getaway on an unregistered scooter that is ready and waiting nearby.

The aim of this type of crime is to catch the victim off guard and is usually accomplished within a matter of seconds.

Nice is also dubiously famous for another kind of street robbery known as the Vol a la Portiere, or the Car Door Grab. This usually occurs at traffic lights or in a car park and involves the victim's car door being forcibly opened and having their valuables snatched. Tourists in hire cars are often the target of this type of crime. On one occasion even the local Mayor had an attempted vol a la portiere when he was parked on the promenade!

It's quite often the case where foreigners, usually tourists, are the victims of crime in the south of France. Viewed as being easy prey, foreigners are typically less familiar with their surroundings, are more relaxed in 'holiday mode' and rarely want to undergo the added hassle of reporting the crime to the French police.

One less publicised yet frequent crime is the targeting of yacht crew. There have been a number of cases, particularly in Antibes, where crew have been mugged when returning to their yacht after a night out. Yachts moored in marinas throughout the Cote d'Azur where security tends to be lax, have also been known to have been boarded and had valuable items stolen.

The French Riviera is undoubtedly one of the world's most glamorous locations. The glamour along with the region's laid back lifestyle, provide the perfect mix for criminals wishing to make a quick and easy profit. Unfortunately, many visitors to the region become embroiled into the relaxed pace of life and switch off to the potential threats.

Stay vigilant

The key to having an incident free stay on the French Riviera is to stay relaxed but remain vigilant. Pay attention to crime reports in the area and where possible, seek local advice from a trusted source. Always be aware of the location of your valuables whether it's your passport, wallet, designer handbag or expensive watch. Remain in well-populated areas and don't stray off the beaten track, especially at night. Most importantly, always put yourself in the mind of the criminal and ask yourself whether you're presenting an easy target. If you are, then do something about it.

The crimes highlighted above are certainly not exclusive to the Cote d'Azur. Most of these crimes happen in many of the world's major cities on a daily basis. Remaining vigilant and applying a little common sense is all that's needed to ensure that your stay is memorable for the right reasons.

Ed Hill is an experienced security specialist with over twelve years' experience. A former Royal Marines Commando, Ed now runs his own security and risk management company that specialises in the protection of High Net Worth Individuals, VIP's and celebrities. For more information, please visit www.intrepid-risk.com