

There is more to France than Paris, Nice and Cannes

Think France, think Paris, think Nice, think Cannes. However, Explore France are promoting other areas including Pas-de-Calais, the Loire Valley and Corsica as well as one of their undoubted gems, Antibes, which is, of course, on the French Riviera.

The PR machine came to Scotland's Capital with a clear message, consider France for a holiday destination and also look further than the big hitters and the initiative comes hard on the heels of the promotion for the Rugby World Cup which ended last weekend in Paris and in the build-up for the Paris Olympics next summer.

So, where to start? Corsica. Been there, enjoyed it, even if it was only for four hours after our cruise docked there. It's not easy to get to, but we loved it, sun, sand, sea, mountains and local shops.

Yes, it was geared to tourism, but not mass tourism. It had a small town feel and it boasts 120km of coastline, 30 beaches and coves, rivers and streams, forests, lakes, protected natural areas and a deep gulf which is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

It's ideal for hiking tours, cycling, diving and water sports,

horse riding and fishing as well as arts and crafts, local products and a cultural and religious heritage. Of course, many link Corsica with Napoleon Bonaparte. However, the former Emperor of France, who once ruled half of Europe, has become a figure of some controversy in his native Corsica.

Some consider him an idol, others not so and our guide at the event "did not want to talk about" Napoleon.

Ajaccio port and airport is a popular arrival point and you can enjoy wine from one of two estates in the region, but you can also see snow on the high peaks during the winter.

Visit villages and picturesque Girolata does not have road access but it was where the Ottoman pirate Dragut was taken prisoner in 1540. There is also local produce to taste including meat, cheese, honey, jam, olive oil and glazed chesnuts.

The island also produces cutlery, pottery and ceramics, basketry and coral jewellery. Indeed, this is a place to chill.

Back to the mainland and the Cote d'Azur and Antibes. Picasso loved the place and so did we. There is a museum dedicated to the artist who accepted the offer to set up a studio in one of the rooms of the castle.

He painted there for six months, leaving almost all of his creations during that time to the museum however there are other museums, a provincial market, an artisans market, night markets in July and August and guided tours of the town created by the Greeks and developed by the Romans which became a fortified border city under Henri IV and Louis XIV.

There are coastal walks and street art and there is also a gourmet tour to discover local flavours and the historical heritage. Nearby, there is Juan-les-Pins which captivated Maupassant and Monet during their stays on the coast and there

is jazz during the summer. Summing up, Antibes is an ideal centre with rail links to Paris and along the coast and air links to Scotland via nearby Nice.

Towards the north of the country lies the Loire Valley in Central France. It is, of course, one of the world's best-known area for wine, from the Muscadet region on the Atlantic coast, to the Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume near Orleans.

Chateaux, pretty villages and bustling markets and great food are available and you can use your car, public transport or hire a bike and the suggested hub is the town of Tours and the best times to visit are spring, early summer and early Autumn to avoid the heat.

Further north lies Pas-de-Calais, an area which many British tourists speed through on their way south to the sun after exiting the cross-Channel ferry at Calais, but tourism PR people suggest you take time there to explore. It is the closest area to the UK.

The area has a tradition of industry like textiles and clothing manufacture, iron and steel production and heavy metal production as well as coal mining, and it is one of the most densely populated departments of France, but don't let that put you off, I'm told.

Of course, there are memorial sites from the First World War, what are described as delightful villages, great food – try moules frites and chips – washed down by local beer, on what is called the Opal Coast which runs to the seaside town of Le Touquet with a wide beach and which has become a sporting hub. It is lively at night.

You can play golf on courses like La Foret and La Mer, stroll around 200 masterpieces from the Louvre in Paris in the Galerie du Temps (Gallery of Time) and there are a number of tours available.

So, the message from the PR team is clear, give other parts of France a chance and you will be surprised.

PICTURE: The opening night of the Rugby World Cup in Paris, but PR chiefs want you to consider other areas of France to visit. Picture ***Nigel Duncan***