



# THE CĪMIEZ HILL

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NICE  
PATRIMOINE



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[1] The garden at the Arènes de Cimiez featuring the Roman amphitheatre, the olive grove and the monastery, the Villa Gubernatis (Matisse museum) and the archaeological dig site. Photo City of Nice

With its archaeological ruins, museums, old hotels and Belle Époque villas and gardens, the Cimiez hill emerges as one of Nice's most fascinating sites. To take the time to explore it on foot is to delve into Nice's rich past that stretches from Antiquity to the present day, in the exceptional setting of a residential district.

## THE ANCIENT HILL

Two hills stand gazing out over one another: the Castle and Cimiez hills, split by the Paillon, a coastal river that is now covered by the Promenade du Paillon. The two hills were inhabited in High Antiquity by Celto-Ligurian tribes. The *Vediantiens* fortified one slope close to the present-day Cimiez monastery, nicknamed the "sacred wood". They placed themselves under Rome's protection when the Romans chose to establish the city of *Cemenelum* on the surrounding plateau at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. In doing so, the Romans were merely giving Latin form to a local name, *Cemenelum* [1].

The site was not chosen at random, as it lay alongside the *Via Julia Augusta*, the long road linking Rome to Spain. The choice of site was primarily military, as *Cemenelum* was a garrison town

behind the front lines, designed to stand between the Emperor Augustus's legions and the fiercely defensive Alpine tribes. The site was flat and raised, with water being brought down from the surrounding hills. On the other side, the Greeks built a trading post in *Nikaïa* (Nice) on the site of the current Castle hill.

Once peace had been restored to the region in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, *Cemenelum* became the administrative capital of the new Roman province of *Alpes maritimæ*. A Gallo-Roman city developed. An amphitheatre (improperly called "the Arenas") and three baths [2] were built in the 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD, and their vestiges make up the current archaeological site which is also rich in a number of dwellings. Because the amphitheatre could seat up to five thousand spectators, *Cemenelum* must have been home to at least ten



[2] The *Cemenelum* archaeological site, ruins of the northern baths. Photo City of Nice

thousand inhabitants. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman conquest spread northwards, resulting in a loss of *Cemenelum*'s status as a prefecture, which was instead transferred on to Embrun. *Cemenelum* declined as the neighbouring city of *Nicæa* rose (in Latin, from which we get the French word 'Nice').

As Christianity spread, the two cities each received a diocese, perhaps as early as in 314 for *Nicæa* and in 439 in *Cemenelum*. The ancient thermal baths to the west were transformed into a Christian basilica and baptistry. Yet in an illustration of its dwindling power, from 466 the diocese of *Cemenelum* was annexed to that of *Nicæa*. Despite barbarian invasions, the site of *Cemenelum* continued to be inhabited to a greater or lesser extent until the 8<sup>th</sup> century, with the ancient buildings occupied by dwellings and farms. Following a final razing in the era of Charles Martel, the majority of the population clustered together in Nice, on the Castle hill. The former capital of the Alpes-Maritimes gradually fell to ruin. It was used as a stone quarry and the remaining vestiges were buried under weeds and farming plots [3]. It disappeared from the archives, as did most of Nice's written history in the times known as the 'dark' ages.



[3] The Roman amphitheatre cultivated for crops in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Watercolour engraving taken from the *Corografia dell'Italia*.

## THE HILL IN THE MODERN ERA

At the foot of the Cimiez hill, on the slope over which the ancient *Via Julia* once ran, the Saint-Pons Abbey was founded around the 8<sup>th</sup> century by the Benedictine monks, designed to replace the ancient funerary basilica erected over the tomb of Saint Pontius. This monastery outside the city became the first local makeshift trader to deal in personal property, real estate, leases and taxes in the Middle Ages. At the time, it was a significant site of pilgrimage. Monks were able to spread across the entire region, building numerous churches as they went. It was thus that in 1450, they turned the modest chapel dedicated to Mary that had been built a few centuries earlier in Cimiez into a single-nave church, not far from their abbey and from the Roman amphitheatre where their dedicatory saint, Pontius, was raised to martyrdom in around 257. As their income dwindled in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Benedictines were unable to keep up with spending in their community. In 1546, they relinquished their land in Cimiez and the chapel to the Franciscans, whose monastery, located on the present-day Place Saint-François in Nice's old town, had been sacked during the Franco-Ottoman siege of the city three years before.

The minor monks built a first cloister topped with units, had a cistern dug out and repaired the church, where they placed magnificent Louis Brea altarpieces that had been salvaged from the destroyed convent. *Piéta* (1475), *Crucifixion* [4] (1512), *The Lamentation of Christ*, are three of the Brea's most significant masterpieces, a dynasty of Nice painters that was active across the entire region. Louis Brea, who was approached by the future Pope Julian II in 1490, played a key role in the development of religious paintings from



[4] Crucifixion, altarpiece by Louis Brea, 1572.  
Photo City of Nice

the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. In the 1660s, the church was expanded with the addition of an apse and side chapels, scattered with walnut sideboards, stalls, a pulpit and an impressive golden altarpiece on the high altar. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a vast outdoor cloister was built overlooking the vegetable patch, as was an entrance portico. In 1844, the latter was replaced with a façade in the troubadour style that was in fashion at the time [5], a Gothic romantic style that the kings of Piedmont chose to decorate the Hautecombe abbey where their ancestors were buried. In 1804, the seraphic cross of 1477 was erected in the monastery's square, although it had initially been housed in



[5] The Cimiez monastery square, troubadour-style façade (1844) of the church and seraphic cross (1477, copy).  
Photo City of Nice

the Franciscan monastery in Nice's old town. Vandalised in 1979, this marble Calvary was restored and placed inside the church. A copy can now be seen at the original site.

To the left of the church was the Cimiez cemetery [6] where a number of patricians, artists and members of bourgeois society from Nice and abroad were buried, sometimes in tombs that are characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's demonstrative and eclectic funerary art. It is here too that the painters Raoul Dufy and Henri Matisse, as well as the writer Roger Martin du Gard, are buried.



[6] The Cimiez cemetery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century  
Oil on canvas by François Bensa.  
Photo City of Nice

A museum was founded inside the 17<sup>th</sup> century convent buildings, painted with a fresco depicting Franciscan life in Nice from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Following laws on the separation of the Church and State in 1901, the monastery's gardens [7] became the property of the local council. They were landscaped into an Italian-style garden



[7] The gardens at the Cimiez monastery.  
Photo City of Nice

and opened to the public in 1927. The charm of its rose gardens and the spectacular views seen here make it a delightful place for a stroll and a favourite for newly-wed photo sessions. Outside of the Franciscan convent complex, the Cimiez hill was a farming space where olive groves were dotted among plots of farmed land, grazing pastures and vineyards. A number of Nice's nobles had holiday homes and gardens here within the farmland. The most famous of these is the Palais de Gubernatis, now home to the Musée Matisse [8]. From 1670 to 1685, the president of the Sénat de Nice Jean-Baptiste Gubernatis transformed a traditional farmstead into a sumptuous Genovese villa embellished with trompe-l'œil décor. The property extended out across the entire present-day archaeological site, now covered in fields. The ancient baths were home to farms.



[8] Northern façade of the Villa Gubernatis, present-day Matisse museum.  
Photo City of Nice

## CIMIEZ IN THE BELLE EPOQUE

Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of these vast estates were bought in order to build opulent villas nestled in wooded grounds. The Gubernatis estate was handed over to the Garin de Cocconato family in 1823 [9] who turned it into an English holiday residence at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1863, the Brazilian ambassador to Russia, Da Silva, bought 9 hectares of land he named Liserb (an anagram of 'Brésil'), transformed into



[9] The Garin de Cocconato property prior to being bought by the City in 1923.  
Nice, Bibliothèque de Cessole library. Copy City of Nice

plots of land from 1924 on. Under the Second French Empire, the lower section of Cimiez and the Carabacel district were largely made up of residences and hotels for winter visitors.

As with most of Nice's hills, Cimiez was lacking in water. With the joining of the Vésubie canal and the Gairaut waterfall in 1883, Nice's hills and gardens were irrigated with drinkable water. The shrewd developer and Nice architect S. M. Biasini joined forces with the director of Crédit Lyonnais, Henri Germain, to divide the southern slope of the Cimiez hill into plots. They bought most of the plots of land and opened the city's longest straight road, the Boulevard de Cimiez [10], inaugurated on 31 December 1884. Once levelled, the land was sold at huge profit to real estate companies, residence groups who built villas and apartment buildings, and hotels. Thus,



[10] The Boulevard de Cimiez and grand hotels circa 1920.  
Photo Jean Gilletta. Copy City of Nice

the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-lits built the Riviera Palace here in 1893. Two years later, an electric tram connected the hill to the city centre.

On either side of this boulevard, sprawling hotels were beginning to pop up, including the Alhambra, Winter Palace and the Hôtel de Cimiez to name but a few, as did a plethora of villas where rich holiday-makers set up for the winter season on the Riviera, the ultimate winter destination for aristocrats and members of high society. The idea was to impress, to flaunt one's wealth, and sometimes the breadth of one's cultural sensitivities. Because of this, an eclectic range of façades and interior designs can be seen, from the oriental-inspired style of the Villa Surany and the Hôtel Alhambra, to the Neo-Gothic flair of the Villa Valrose and the Belgrano manor's Neo-Renaissance feel [11].



[11] The Belgrano manor on Avenue Edouard VII Nice, Bibliothèque de Cessole library. Copy City of Nice

Cimiez became one of Nice's most elegant boroughs. Its tourism, and then residential industries, were mainly spurred on by Queen Victoria's stays here from 1895 to 1899. After having resided in a number of the Côte d'Azur's cities and towns, the monarch spent the winters of 1895 and 1896 in the Grand Hôtel de Cimiez (the present-day Cimiez hospital) while S. M. Biasini built the Excelsior Hôtel Regina [12], an immense 400-room luxury hotel overlooking a sweeping garden with the sea as a backdrop. Designed to keep the Queen and her escort in Nice, and to lure



[12] The Excelsior Regina luxury hotel Postcard circa 1920. Copy City of Nice

in wealthy winter holiday-makers through this royal seal of approval and unrivalled comfort, the Regina was inaugurated by the Queen in 1897. Queen Victoria stayed here until 1899 in the western tower where she had her apartments. A statue [13] sculpted by Maubert has stood here since 1912, a reminder of the queen at the entrance to the Regina's gardens.



[13] Statue of Queen Victoria by L. Maubert, 1912 Photo City of Nice

## CIMIEZ TODAY

The disappearance of a number of empires during World War I, the impoverishment of the aristocracy, economic crisis and behavioural changes have gradually led to luxury hotels closing their doors and being transformed into apartments, sweeping grounds parcelled up into lots, and the breaking up of villas, often stripped of their original embellishments. A number of residential apartment blocks were built during the 1960s and 1970s. Numerous public buildings retain memories of the

vast grounds where the rich and wealthy from around the world once rubbed shoulders, such as the Villa Paradiso, built in 1896 by Baron Van Zuylen, President of the Automobile Club de France, who used it to entertain major manufacturers, drivers and collectors. Bought by the city in 1943, it housed the Music Conservatory until 2007. Opposite lies the Musée National Marc Chagall on a plot of land from the Olivetto estate, gifted by the city in order to house the *Message Biblique*, donated by the artist to the French state. The museum was opened in 1973 in the presence of the painter himself and André Malraux, the great writer, minister of culture and the brains behind the initiative. Another great artist, Henri Matisse, had often frequented Nice from 1917 on. In November 1938, he purchased two apartments on the 3rd floor of the Regina, where he created a number of masterpieces, including many of the cut-out watercolours so characteristic of his later years. He died here on 3 November 1954.

Donations made by the artist, his wife and heirs to the city of Nice were showcased in 1963 on the first floor of the former Villa Gubernatis. On the ground floor, items from digs on the ancient site can be seen. A spectacular victory, as the Garin estate was put up for sale in 1923, along with the villa and the ancient site, and plans to parcel off the land began. If this had been allowed to take place, a round-shaped apartment block would have been built inside the walls of the amphitheatre. After lengthy proceedings, the town council ultimately bought the site in 1941 and the villa, since renamed the 'Villa des Arènes', in 1950.

In 1986, the new archaeological museum was inaugurated on a site close-by, while the expanded and renovated Musée Matisse opened its doors once more in 1993.

A beacon of culture thanks to its museums and exhibitions, Cimiez is also famed for its concerts and shows. Operas and



[14] Concerts in the cloister, Cimiez monastery Photo City of Nice

ballets have long been performed in the amphitheatre, featuring stars such as Régine Crespin and the Bolshoi Ballet. Then, spurred on by American producer George Wein, the Jazz Festival ushered the world's greatest jazz musicians into the Arenas' gardens from 1974 to 2010. Classical music is still represented here with the Concerts du Cloître [14] held since 1957 by the Académie Internationale d'Eté, bringing together professors and concert musicians leading master classes.

Last but not least, the traditional celebrations of the Festin des Cougourdons for the Annunciation of Mary and May festivities [15] to celebrate the arrival of spring take over the Jardin des Arènes and the Place du Monastère.



[15] May festivities in the garden at the Arènes Photo City of Nice

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