

11: From Aix-en-Provence to Nice

An absolutely heavenly morning – I am so glad that I stayed put yesterday and left my departure until today. Over breakfast with the girls, Marta and I eat plenty of bread and jam. Marta wants to have a look around Aix today and tomorrow she will set off on her bike. At nine o'clock, the American girl and I exchange addresses, I wish the girls and the two Algerian lads goodbye, then I hop on my bicycle and set off. As it is a Sunday morning, there is little traffic and few people are about.

In no time at all I make my way eastwards across the city, via a sleepy-looking Cours Mirabeau where the cafés are beginning to open, and soon I am out in the countryside, cycling along the appropriately named *route Cézanne*. I pass houses with yellow walls and red tiled roofs, rows of cypress trees, olive trees and beautiful meadows. Although the road is uphill here and there, the going is easy enough. Several energetic young French cyclists whizz past me and greet me cheerfully. Luckily for them, they have no load to carry.



Montagne Sainte-Victoire, near Aix-en-Provence

Soon the vista opens up and the dramatic mass of Mont (or more correctly *Montagne*) Sainte-Victoire looms out of the light morning mist. I now realize that I am now in real Cézanne countryside, admiring what must have been one of the artist's favourite views. The scenery becomes outstandingly beautiful at Le Tholonet, where trees line the road. I stop to admire an elegant period house, flanked on either side by trees and reflected in the water of a small rectangular lake. Viewing such a pleasing scene in the stillness of such a fine and fresh summer morning makes me feel good to be alive.

I continue at an unhurried pace, now cycling easily, now walking the bike uphill, and slowly gain altitude. The road begins to twist this way and that, and as I slowly leave civilisation behind, I climb up into a forest, though I can still see the great mountain to my left. Now I understand why most of Cézanne's paintings of it look washed out. The top of the mountain is a great pyramid of granite, which in bright

sunshine dazzles the viewer and illuminates any mist surrounding it. When the trees thin out, I am able to see spectacular valleys and wooded mountains below me on both sides. The scenery here is truly breathtaking.

Finally I go whizzing down a hill and arrive in the little village of Puyloubier, where I stop, climb up the steep narrow streets and buy some provisions before the shops close. I then continue along a flat stretch to the next village, Pourrières, where I look for a restaurant but find nothing. Reluctantly I drop down to the main road and head for Saint Maximin-la-Sainte Baume, passing through the village of Pourcieux. According to a sign that I have seen, there is supposed to be a restaurant here, but I cannot find it. As I begin to lose energy before I reach Saint Maximin, I stop at a cheap refreshment booth on the side of the road where, for just 24 francs, I eat a salad followed by sausages and chips. Bread and water are included in the price. I relax afterwards and write yesterday's diary, then leave at 2.30 p.m.

Although it is hot by now, it is by no means unpleasant cycling here as the roads are quite level. As I have understood this to be a mountainous region, I am agreeably surprised to discover that I can cover quite a distance with ease. The little town of Saint Maximin is noisy and touristy; once I have passed through it, I find my way back to the country roads where the scenery is quite pleasant but not as dramatic as before. I make my way to Bras (stop sniggering – that *is* the name of the village), which is full of young lads racing about on motorbikes. The local café is packed with youngsters sipping drinks. I refresh myself at the village fountain – how pleasantly cool the water is! – and stop to pick some delicious blackberries when I am back on the road.

Next, I freewheel downhill to a narrow, peaceful valley and pass through a hamlet named, appropriately, le Val. Here I see vineyards on each side of the road and mountains in the distance. Then comes Vins-sur-Carami and the Carami river, where I see some very dramatic high rocks. One of them has a small church perched on the top. Then, at a junction of roads by a small lake, I am suddenly jerked back into the modern world: I have arrived at a touristy beauty spot. Here I find parked cars, refreshment stalls, brightly-painted signs, caravans, and lines of washing in the adjacent fields. From here onwards, as I approach lake Carcès (which turns out to be not very attractive), I encounter more traffic on the roads.

I now turn off for le Thoronet, passing forests and endless quarries of red earth and signs that warn of danger ahead. I stop at a low wall for a quick improvised meal. On the road again, I pass the Abbaye du Thoronet, now closed for visitors. I'm not too disappointed as it does not look very interesting. As no accommodation is available in the nearby village, I press on and take the road towards Lorgues, which means heading north-eastwards. I have considered sleeping outdoors this evening, but as clouds have now made an unwelcome appearance, I decide to find a room for the night.

I drop down into a heavenly valley basking in the setting sun, pass a river and some exclusive houses, then find myself on a main road. From here I make my way to Lorgues. It is noisy and touristy, but has a one-star hotel. I am offered a small room for 45 francs and I must pay an extra 10 francs for breakfast tomorrow morning, even though I make it clear that I do not want it. In my room I wash myself and some clothes, then write my diary. I am delighted that I have covered so much ground today on minor roads and have seen such stunning scenery.

While washing, shaving and dressing this morning, I take the precaution of eating my own breakfast, knowing full well that the hotel's offering will not keep me going

for long. Sure enough, all I get is a cupful of strong, bitter coffee, a few shrivelled slices of lightly toasted stale bread, a tiny morsel of butter and a dish of jam. Although it does not add up correctly, I have to pay 65 francs for the room and the breakfast.

Today is a close, gloomy morning. In order to avoid the main road, I take a narrow country road up to the little village of Flayosc. The scenery here has definitely lost its magic, probably because of the dull weather. Although the road is very quiet and the views are by no means ugly, there seems to be something lacking.



Rebouillon, Provence

I find myself back on a main road as I approach the village and it takes me some time before I find the next country byway. At last I am on it and heading northwards to Montferrat, but again I must take another busy main road. This brings me slowly and painfully uphill to the village, skirting the reasonably dramatic Gorges of Châteaudouble. At the beginning of the ascent, I pause to admire the picturesque village of Rebouillon in the valley far below. Putting the bike into its lowest gear, I struggle on; when I eventually reach Montferrat at 11.30, I stop to give my bum a rest and buy some food for my lunch. After I have washed some fruit and vegetables in the village fountain, I leave and continue climbing uphill. At last I find a turning on to a minor road and go zooming downhill to a pleasantly quiet valley. I find an old church, where I sit on a rough stone seat in the ruined porch, and eat a picnic lunch away from bothersome insects. I have decided on this strategy as restaurants seem to be few and far between in this region.

I rest for a while after eating and study a little Italian, then leave. The weather is now changeable: sometimes sunny, sometimes cloudy. I drop down into a dramatic and picturesque valley as I approach the village of Bargemon. I then continue via a hilly road around the mountains to Seillans and finally freewheel down to Fayence. Today's journey is more exacting as there is decidedly more hill work – already I am getting tired. At Fayence, I realize that I should have taken a different route in order to avoid the main road that looms ahead. However, as I am unwilling to go winding around more mountains along a circuitous route, I decide to continue along this main road to Grasse and see what it is like. Fortunately, there is little traffic on it.



Bargemon, Provence

I have decided to visit Grasse as several people at home have recommended it to me. As I approach this well-known town, the road becomes a little busier and slightly hilly now and then. I pass a lake, lush greenery, mountains dotted with villages and houses, and, nearer the road, exclusive villas with swimming pools. I stop to pick some blackberries, continue and stop again at Peymeinade to do some more shopping. I eventually climb uphill to the noisy and busy city of Grasse, to which I take an instant dislike.

At the tourist office I am given a list of hotels, most of which are too expensive for my rapidly decreasing funds. I head off – uphill again – for the cheapest one, and am advised to try the youth centre, which is farther up and beside a swimming pool. As the road is so steep and the place so far away, it takes me a long time to reach it. When at last I arrive, and by now quite out of breath, I discover that it is full. Cursing loudly, I return to the hotel, only to be told that it too is full. The next hotel I find is also full, save for a room for three for over 100 francs. I find a third establishment, tucked away in a corner. I climb the stairs to the second floor and am greeted by an old lady who tells me that she only has rooms for two at 78 francs. Reluctantly I decide to take one. Slowly and painfully she shuffles to a room and shows it to me. It will do.

I fetch my bicycle and luggage, collapse on to the bed and rest. What a waste of time coming here! It has not been a particularly exciting day; all that I have succeeded in doing is becoming completely exhausted. I stay put in my room, washing, eating and writing my diary. I retire to bed at about eleven o'clock, study some Italian and read, but for some inexplicable reason I am unable to sleep. Perhaps I am just overtired.

Having tossed and turned for much of the night, read again for a while and finally dozed off, I wake at about 6.30 a.m. and leave early. Cold and cloudy outside, the rising sun struggles to shine through the greyness. In the gloom, I make my way to the old quarter and wheel the bicycle through the narrow streets. I am not particularly impressed by what I see. The only lively place is the market and the only things of beauty are the squares and their fountains. The cathedral is locked at this early hour. Nearby, a square overlooks a spectacular view of the surrounding mountains. I sit on a stone bench and breakfast on bread, cheese and a pear, washed down with apple juice. I leave shortly afterwards and set off for Vence, which I have been told is worth

visiting. As it is so cold, I have to stop and put on a thick jumper. I would never have thought that I would need to do this in the south of France! I take the main road to Nice, which is busy and brings me through a built-up area, but the scenery from it is quite dramatic. Although it is a little hilly in this region, I am able to freewheel downhill for most of the way.

I eventually turn off this road and take a quieter one to Vence, passing even more splendid mountain scenery. I am delighted to discover that I can cycle with such ease here, travel at a relaxed pace and enjoy the vistas around me to the full.



Tourette-sur-Loup, Provence

I now approach a little old-world town clinging to a mountainside, with a sheer drop below. This is Tourette-sur-Loup, which certainly looks worth visiting. As I amble around the tiny streets, the sun obligingly peeps out from behind the clouds. It is a fascinating place, full of picturesque corners and lots of steps. Apart from a few locals carrying bags of fresh bread or tidying their neat and tiny houses, there are very few people about. I suddenly hear a loud splash as a bowl of dirty water is thrown out into the street. Even though the town is in the middle of nowhere, I am surprised to discover that it is not full of tourists. I find my way to the Hôtel de Ville in order to look at an exhibition of paintings but, as it is still early, the gallery is closed.

I finally tear myself away and continue my journey to Vence. Colourful flowers line the road and now the air is delicately scented with fragrances drifting from nearby perfume factories. Vence turns out to be a noisy, busy town. Reluctantly I make my way to the town centre and pop into the tourist office, where I get a rough idea of where the youth hostel is in Nice. I then find my way to the old quarter, where I buy some more provisions. Although the buildings are interesting here, the place is ruined by all the gaudy trappings of tourism. As soon as I have bought the ingredients for a picnic lunch, I leave and cycle off into the hills towards Saint Jeannet. This is another tiny village clinging to the side of a mountain. I make my way up to it and take a quieter road to the next village, Gattières. I find a peaceful spot with a fine view

overlooking the mountains and sit down to my picnic lunch. Afterwards I lie down and doze for a while.



Approaching Nice, Provence

I set off again at two o'clock and continue my journey. The road twists this way and that; I turn a corner and am stopped in my tracks by the stunning panoramic view before me: far below me are valleys, yellow stone villas, trees and vineyards, all now basking in bright sunshine. In the distance is the city of Nice and the intense blue of the Mediterranean. I am thrilled with this dramatic view of the Med – this is my first time to see it, even though I was beside it when at the bottom of the Camargue region recently. In my haste to depart from Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer, I never bothered to glance in its direction!

From now on the scenery is quite breathtaking; dropping down to Gattières I pass olive, cypress, plum and now palm trees – the last confirming that I am definitely in the south. Next comes the long, almost straight valley of the River Var, which runs straight down to the sea and is flanked on its east side by main roads. A strong wind blows up from the Mediterranean and suddenly a refreshing whiff of sea air reaches my nostrils. I drop southwards along one of the main roads for a short distance, but turn off for the mountains once again in order to avoid the heavy traffic down at the coast. The zig-zagging roads bring me up and down the mountainsides, and I stop to pick blackberries. It is strange to be in the middle of nowhere yet poised above a bustling city nearby.

At last I turn southwards and go zooming downhill towards Nice. Very soon I find myself cycling along the wide streets and boulevards. Although they are busy, they are not as congested as I have imagined them to be. The city is big and sprawls over a large area, but it is by no means ugly. I stop briefly to buy some soap and fruit, and head for the youth hostel, which is a little out of town in the direction of Villefranche and perched on top of a steep hill. By the time I reach it and join a short queue, I feel thoroughly exhausted after pushing the bike uphill in the heat.



Nice: harbour and Port Lympia

When the hostel is opened, the first few lads are given beds in the dormitory and the young warden announces that there are no more beds left. However, he explains that we can sleep on the terrace. As I am in no mood to leave and find alternative accommodation, I accept the offer and pay up.



Nice: sunset from the youth hostel

After a refreshing wash, I sit down to a leisurely but simple meal which amounts to a repetition of today's lunch. I then wash some clothes, watch a dramatic sunset over the city and expansive bay from the terrace and go down to the kitchen, where I write my diary. I eventually retire to my 'room with a view' (and what a view it is!), where I gaze at the twinkling lights far below and climb into bed.

This morning I wake before seven, feeling fresh after a very solid and good sleep. After taking a look at the city in the morning light from the terrace, I go downstairs for a hot shower before anyone else. Breakfast is served from 7.30; a queue forms and we are given bread, butter, hard-boiled eggs and either coffee, chocolate or tea. I choose tea.

Leaving the bicycle here, I then walk towards the city using the steps down the hillside, which shortens the journey. Next I take a long though pleasant road towards

the Cimiez district, arriving at the monastery just before ten o'clock. I take a look at the rather fussy church, which fails to impress me, and walk back to the Archaeological Museum and Musée Matisse, both of which are in the same building. Like most of the museums here, admission is free. The archaeological section, which contains Roman artefacts, is not particularly impressive but I enjoy looking at the Matisse paintings, drawings and sculpture, although it takes me a little while to get into the right mood in order to appreciate this artist's style. I realize that he certainly knew how to paint and draw, for his early works, done in the 1890s, are excellent. Included in the collection are some rough drafts of his planned decorations for the chapel in Vence. The artist died here in Nice in 1954 and was buried in the cemetery near the church and monastery up the road.

I spend an enjoyable hour here and then leave to take a look at the Roman ruins nearby – this costs me just one franc. This proves to be quite interesting, but although the ruins are extensive, there is not very much to see. I encounter some Russian tourists here. I am amazed to discover that there are so few people about, considering that Nice is such a popular place in this region.

Afterwards I walk down the fine Boulevard de Cimiez and visit the modern Musée National Marc Chagall. Here I spend some time examining the strange and brightly-coloured paintings of this highly unusual artist of Belarusian-Jewish origin, born in 1887. His paintings, done in different styles, prove to be quite radical; many of them are almost childish and dream-like, with people depicted larger than life, sometimes floating or flying in the sky. I view a large collection of drawings, plans and paintings all based on the theme of 'The Temple': churches, synagogues, Greek and Roman temples, and so on. Included in this section is one of Claude Monet's many views of Rouen Cathedral and several Dutch paintings of church interiors. In a separate room I find interesting stained glass windows by Chagall, which are quite extraordinary, and in another room designed for musical recitals, I stop to examine a harpsichord made by William Dowd with the interior of its lid decorated by the painter.

Satisfied that I have seen enough, I leave at about 12.30 and walk to the city centre in search of food. Much to my surprise and inconvenience, it begins to rain; fortunately I find a reasonably cheap restaurant and manage to get indoors just before the rain begins to pour down from the heavens. I am surprised at how quickly the weather can change here – earlier it has been hot and sunny. Ravenously hungry by now, I make short work of an indifferent but large meal consisting of tomato salad, chicken with potatoes and vegetables, and a heavy pudding. I feel absolutely stuffed when I am finished.

Fortunately the rain has eased off a little by the time I pay 35 francs and leave. I now walk around some of the grubby streets of the old quarter. I notice that the street names are written in French and Niçard, the local dialect that very few people speak nowadays. Nice itself is a very old city, founded in around 350 BC by the Greeks, who named it Nikaia after Nike, the goddess of Victory.

I find my way to the Palais Lascaris, a seventeenth-century palace now used as a museum, but discover that it will not open until 2.30 p.m. I walk over to the nearby Cathédrale de Sainte-Réparate, a fine building originally begun in 1650, to take a look inside. The Baroque interior is fussy; it contains ten chapels and three organs. Feeling very sleepy after my large lunch, I sit down and take the opportunity to doze for a while.

I then return to the palace and spend some time admiring its fabulous interior, which includes painted ceilings and gilt ornamentation. Now owned by the city of Nice, it is used as a museum. It contains a collection of photographs, taken at the turn

of the century, of local people and scenes. In addition, there are models of people in traditional costumes at work, fine period furniture, and, in one room, an Erard square piano that I presume must be in playing order. As it continues to rain outside, I dally here for some time, enjoying the elegant surroundings.



Nice, old quarter

When the rain eases off, I venture outside, but soon it starts again. By now it has turned miserably cold and I am in summer attire, with nothing to protect me from the rain. Somewhat dejected by now, I duck from one shop to another, wondering what to do or where to go – it is too early to return to the hostel. Finally I buy a postcard, stick a stamp on it and then, sitting in a little bar where I drink some tea, I write to some friends at home. I then walk back to the main road, where I buy some fruit, and catch the number 14 bus back to the hostel. On it, I meet two girls who, like me, are staying there: one is Welsh and the other is American.

By now I feel somewhat run-down and believe that I may be catching a cold. However, something happens that immediately lifts my spirits: looking out the window I see a girl in the queue jumping up and down and waving at me – it is Marta! When she is admitted, she runs over to me and gives me a hug. We are delighted and somewhat astonished to see each other again, especially after such a short time. Immediately we explode into excited conversation. Over our evening meal (I just eat a banana and an orange and drink lots of tea), we exchange notes on the routes that we have taken to get here and discuss plans. Afterwards we talk about things in general until bedtime. It is a pleasure to be with her as we share so many interests; she tells me that she has studied architecture at university. We decide to spend tomorrow together, visiting some of the museums.

I finally retire to bed feeling quite exhausted at 11 o'clock, and, putting aside my unfinished diary entry, I quickly fall fast asleep.

Another gloomy morning. I'm up at seven in order to wash my hair and I'm first to take breakfast, which arrives late. I sit with Marta and some young Irish people.

At about 8.30 Marta and I set off down the steps to the city, where we head for the seafront and the famous Promenade des Anglais. On such a raw, cold morning and at such an early hour, the place looks ghastly: the stony beach is almost deserted and the endless line of slick modern hotels looks ugly.

We walk on, talking about this and that. Rather surprisingly, Marta starts apologizing for her small boobs and mentions that in the past (when, presumably, her hair was shorter) she was often mistaken for a boy. Deciding to be frank, I tell her that I have a collapsed ribcage, which developed when I was young, and that when I was in Paris the previous year, I was frequently mistaken for a girl – thanks to my fashionably long hair and naturally long eyelashes. That, I explain to her, had really upset me. Just to make matters worse, when I showed my mother a photograph of a group of people in which I was included, she pointed to me in the photo and asked, ‘Who’s the girl?’ I found it quite difficult to convince her that it was me.

We finally reach the old town centre and make for the Musée des Beaux-Arts, arriving at ten o’clock when it opens. The inside of this magnificent nineteenth-century mansion, built by a Russian princess, is deserted. Although it lacks the splendour of anything in Paris, it is very interesting nonetheless. It contains sculpture, paintings, sketches by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (a French sculptor and painter), and large paintings by French artists such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Claude Joseph Vernet and Charles-André van Loo. The high point of our visit, however, is the room full of French Impressionist paintings, including one of Monet’s pictures of women bathing, some fantastic landscapes by Sisley (one featuring trees is exquisite), and fine works by Armond Guillaumin, Jean-François Raffaëlli, Félix Ziem and Edgar Degas. We sit for ages looking at these wonderful masterpieces, enjoying the experience together. In the next room are the typically rough paintings of Raoul Dufy, executed in bright colours, and some dreadful works by an artist from Nice named Gustav-Adolf Mossa (1883–1971). We glance at some modern art but stop to admire some lovely works painted during the *Belle Époque*: portraits and scenes by artists such as Besnard, Constant, Carolus-Duran and Flemang. Exhausted by now, we flop down on a large, soft backless sofa and rest against each other, back to back. Before we leave, we pop in to take another look in the room full of Impressionist pictures. Happy, we then leave in search of something to eat.

We end up in a rather noisy *brasserie*, where we just order the *plat du jour* for 25 francs. I have a delicious dish of chicken, *ratatouille* and chips, followed by bread. Fed and happy, we leave and walk to a nearby café, where we drink coffee until 2 o’clock. As Marta is feeling very tired today, she decides to relax and write some letters while I visit the nearby Musée Masséna, built in 1900.

This, I discover, is designed on the lines of the Italian villas of the First Empire and is therefore quite splendid inside, even though this period of architecture does not interest me that much. On entering, a man sitting behind a desk asks me, in French, where I am from. As I realize that he has notes about the exhibits in various languages, I decide to make things easy for him by saying, ‘Angleterre’. Scowling, he picks up a leaflet in English and throws it at me angrily. Stupid me – why didn’t I say ‘Irlande’? I take the leaflet without comment and enter the first room.

The museum contains a rather average collection of religious art, watercolours of Nice in times gone by, and a collection of artefacts, documents and photographs. Overall, the exhibits give a good impression of the splendours of Nice in the old days. Because of all the marble and stonework in the building, it is pleasantly cool inside. From time to time I gaze out of the windows, admiring a fine view of the sea framed by palm trees – by now the sun is shining. It is lovely out when I leave; although the

sky is blue, I discover that a stiff but refreshing breeze is blowing. By now people are walking along the promenade or sitting on deck chairs (at 1.90 francs each) overlooking the sea and beach, which is now full of sunbathers – some of them topless.

I rejoin Marta in the café. We leave and sit on the wall of the seafront, where we gaze out at the dark blue sea, the white and bronzed bodies of the sunbathers, and relax. Never expecting to derive any pleasure from such a place, I now find that I am thoroughly enjoying myself just sitting here, breathing the sea air and chatting to my delightful companion. Neither of us is in any hurry to leave or to do anything. Lying on the beach, straight in front of us, is a well-proportioned young lady, topless, who looks as though she has just stepped out of a *Playboy* magazine. Wearing trendy sunglasses, she turns this way and that, striking up provocative poses, and reads (or at least, puts on a show of reading) a magazine with a photo of Princess Diana on the cover. At one point, she sits up and begins rubbing her shapely breasts with suncream. Marta, who sits to my left, gives me a gentle dig in my side and says, teasingly, ‘Go on, Charles – I’m sure she’d like you to go down and help her.’ I stay where I am, put my arm around her, draw her gently towards me and say, ‘I’d rather stay here and have you by my side’. We remain together like this for some time, enjoying each other’s company, until we finally move and amble off towards the old quarter, where we wander along some of the narrow streets. We finally part at five o’clock and Marta heads back to the youth hostel. What a pity, I think to myself: it seems that every nice girl I meet is in a relationship; so far I have been very unlucky with girlfriends. Back in 1975, when I attended a course in commercial art in Dublin, I dated two girls in quick succession (the first dumped me and I dumped the second), and I stupidly let a third girl – and a very elegant, sensible girl – slip through my fingers. Was this a case of twice bitten, once shy? It could have been third time lucky. Unfortunately, since then I’ve had no girlfriends. Anyway, I’m now in Nice, I’ve met somebody I can talk to, and the weather is fine.

I now climb the *colline du château* where I enjoy a fine view of the bay and harbour from the top of the hill and make my way back down to the old quarter, where I end up sitting in a café in the square by the cathedral. I order a *croque monsieur* (a half *baguette* stuffed with cold meat and salad) but I have to make do with a pâté sandwich. To go with this I drink a deliciously cold half litre of beer. I sit, relaxed, over this simple repast, and soak up the peaceful and very French atmosphere. By now the tourists have returned to their hotels and the exuberant French are now around me, drinking their *apéritifs*, laughing and talking. Students amble around or sit on stone walls, pigeons fly here and there, dogs play and church bells ring out the time. Now I am glad that I have spent some time here – originally I had planned to bypass the city. However, by this stage I feel it is time to move on; if the weather is favourable tomorrow, I will make a dash for the border and cross into Italy.

I finally leave the square, walk to the seafront and, using one of the public telephones, ring home. My dad answers; I tell him the latest news and ask him to ring RTE in order to find out when I am due back to work. He tells me that there has been a vacancy at a viol course in Basel, but, of course, he has been unable to contact me. I wish him a belated happy birthday, which was yesterday, the first of August.

As the sun sets dramatically over the sea, I walk along the Quai des Etats Unis, swing around by the Port Lympia on the other side of the hill, and, as dusk falls, I climb up the hill to the hostel. I arrive there by nine and spend the rest of the evening writing my diary.

A wonderful morning: sunny and windless, and ideal for my short journey to Italy. I am up early. After a shower, I oil my bicycle with some oil that Marta has kindly let me use, and join the queue for breakfast. Once again Marta and I tuck in, alternatively going up to the counter for more bread. Before I leave, Marta and I say goodbye; we look forward to meeting again soon in Venice. I am genuinely sorry to leave her.

I set off at about 8.30 but waste a little time trying to find the road that leaves the city. My first choice doubles around and brings me back to the hill! Eventually I'm on my way and I proceed at a good, though relaxed, pace. I head eastwards along the coast, amazed at the lack of heavy traffic – even though it is a Friday. Although I do not care much for all the seaside resorts that I pass, I quite enjoy this journey along the coast, with the wonderful blue Mediterranean on my right. It certainly makes a change from what I have been experiencing and seeing so far: lots of countryside and towns full of museums and art galleries. Keeping to the winding coast road, I quickly make my way through Villefranche, Beaulieu (which, as the name implies, is beautiful), then Monaco and Monte Carlo (neither of which impresses me). I finally reach Menton just before the border by about eleven o'clock. I stop to change the remainder of my French money and IR £50, then do some shopping for a picnic lunch.

At twenty to twelve I leave this picturesque town, cycle for another kilometre or so and approach the tunnel that marks the border. Mentally I bid France *au revoir* and plunge into the darkness. When I emerge at the other side, I will be in Italy.