

Gardens of the Riviera

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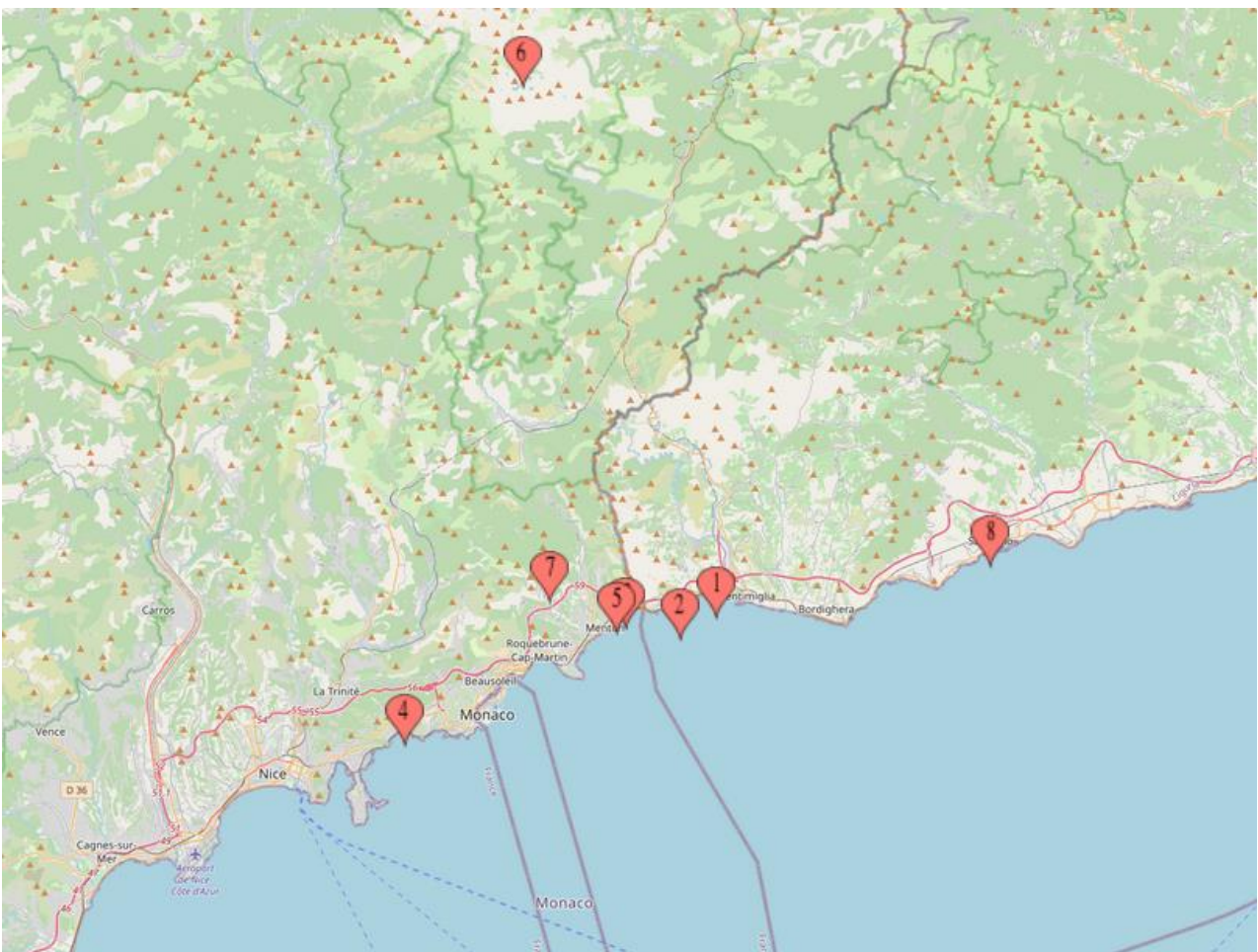


Aims & Objectives

The intention of my project was to visit the gardens of the French & Italian Riviera and explore the surrounding natural habitats of a sub-tropical climate. I spent 10 days at the Hanbury Botanical Garden, living alongside Carolyn Hanbury, in a flat overlooking the site. This botanical hotspot was a base while I explored other gardens in the local area. My main objective was to visit 5 major botanical gardens along the French/Italian Riviera. These included the Hanbury Garden, Boccanegra Garden, Val Rahmeh Botanical Garden, the Exotic Garden of Eze, and Serre de la Madone. I also aimed to explore smaller private collections and document the plants and trees native to the Mediterranean.

As a gardener working at Tresco Abbey Garden, an aim of the trip was to explore the similarities between the plants in the Riviera and Tresco. I aimed to enrich my gardening palette for planting borders in the future through exposure to sub-tropical planting choices. I hoped for the botanical exuberance of the Riviera to develop my botanical knowledge, facilitating a transfer of knowledge across students, staff, and visitors throughout my career at Tresco Abbey Garden.

The unique micro-climate of the French Riviera and bordering Ligurian Riviera in Italy is regarded as the real Côte d'Azur. Frosts and snowfalls are very rare here and summer heat does not exceed in intensity. The Mountainous slopes of the Alps offer protection from the North while the coastal air ensures high humidity. In this climate, plant species regarded as sub-tropical can thrive. In what follows is my botanical journey uncovering the plants and gardens that define the Riviera. As a passionate photographer, I captured some of the gardens and incredible landscapes in 50mm using colour film. I hope these photos encapsulate the natural wonder of the Riviera.



The Hanbury Garden



Coming off the train and gazing up at the foot of mount Saint-Paul, it felt like I had died and gone to botanical heaven. The air was humid and palm trees and cypress dotted the immense landscape. The streets were filled with flowering plants unrecognisable to my eyes used to a temperate climate. A black Fiat-500 sped up alongside the kerb and stopped, a petite lady with thick sunglasses stepped out. This was Carolyn Hanbury. She spoke in an affluent tone while her mannerisms gave banal impressions. Her dislike of the French became clear when picking up essentials in a supermarket before crossing the border. Apparently, they are all rude and bad drivers unlike their Italian cousins.

We crossed the border into Italy in a matter of five minutes. Upon arriving at the Hanbury, I took to exploring every ounce of the garden, a task that would take numerous days throughout my trip. The costal hillside in Mortola was purchased by Thomas Hanbury in 1867. Thomas was a wealthy tea broker who had spent his time as a youth living in China operating foreign affairs. His Asiatic influences inspired him to plant his garden with similar exotic species native to South Africa, Australia, and America. These attracted the attention of the scientific world at an international level and Thomas found himself quickly receiving specimens from botanic institutions. He developed the garden with his botanist brother Daniel Hanbury, along with the landscape architect Ludwig Winter. The wealth of microclimates derived from the sloping landscape enabled the three to get creative. Their plantings include an Australian forest in the lower garden, a Mediterranean zone on the West and East, and a Citrus grove protected in the middle.

It is difficult to put into words how impressive Hanbury garden is. I had heard it called a giant Tresco, and it was, and then some. The array of species was simply astounding in all 18 hectares of this subtropical paradise. The first plant to titillate my excitement was a blue flowering *Plumbago auriculata*. This rampant climber has phlox-like flowers and could be seen trailing along the railway line towards Menton. A giant *Euphorbia pulcherrima* lit up the track along the top terrace. Its leaf-like vibrant red bracts stood out from the backdrop of rocks crawling in *Lampranthus*. Along the top of the garden, I came upon an outstanding *Yucca australis*. At over 9m tall and with a trunk up to 1.5m wide, this was one of the most imposing Yuccas in cultivation. Thomas Hanbury introduced the only American moth which performs fertilization, and it wasn't until 2014 that a fruit finally formed.

There was a collection of giant Agaves in rocky delve, championed by the glaucous leaves of *Agave franzosinii*. *Agave attenuate*, or the swan agave, had produced a charming arching flower over the walk towards the middle borders. In this area of winding paths surrounded by dense trees, the leaves of *Cupressus cashmeriana* hung like Himalayan chandeliers. There grew a collection of mature *Encephalartos* first planted in the 19th century. These palm-like cycads were around 250 million years when the dinosaurs roamed the earth and capture ones prehistoric imagination. Species include *Encephalartos longifolius*, *E. altensteinii*, and *E. natalensis*. The cycads were dwarfed by *Strelitzia nicolai* and *Syagrus romanzoffiana*. A walkway lined by *Salvia canariensis* and *S. madrensis* led me to the olive grove and citrus orchard. The orange flowers of *Thunbergia alata* were creeping through old specimens of *Olea europaea*. In the lower half of the garden I stood under a *Cudrania tricuspidata* and ate one of the red fruits. This species in the Moraceae family is from East Asia and the fruits can be used to make wine. Around the base of the tree were the pink blooms of the invasive *Oxalis articulata*, a similar species to the Scillonian field weed *O. pes-caprae*. On my return to the villa, I was charmed by large terracotta pots filled with *Russelia equisetiformis*, a trailing bush with horsetail-like foliage. I spent every moment possible across the next 10 days further exploring the Hanbury. The garden is so vast and packed with plants it would take a lifetime to complete.

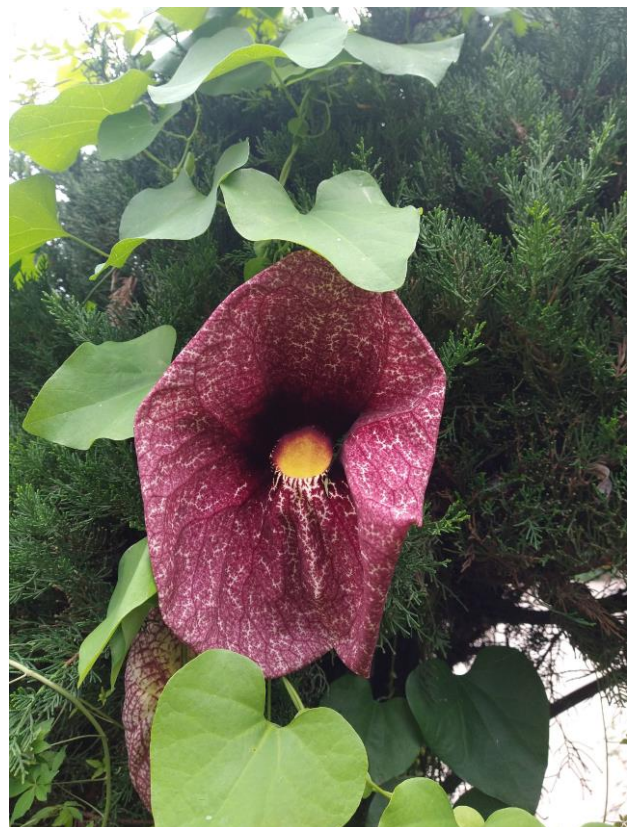


Val Rahmeh Botanical Garden



Just over a hectare in size, the Val Rahmeh Botanical garden makes the most of Menton's extraordinary geographical position. The garden has a humid microclimate sheltered by the mountains and open to the sea which allows it to house a diverse range of species. The humidity remains between 70% and 88% which is vital to the tropical species grown there. Upon entering through the house, the formal terrace sprang to life in beds planted with black *Datura* and *Strelitzia reginae* in full flower. *Syagrus romanzoffiana*, a palm native to South America, towered over the formal lawn, with ceramic pots of *Zamia furfuracea* spilling out the sides underneath. Working with *Phoenix canariensis* on Tresco, I was used to these impressive pineapple-like date palms, however I was in awe by *Phoenix acaulis* and its rigid glaucous foliage which blended the garden into the cream villa stood behind. It was difficult to resist pocketing the abundance of seeds that littered the floor.

On the way towards the Tropical region, the giant flower heads of *Aristolochia littoralis* scrambled along a low trellis. The fruits of *Dovyalis caffra*, or the Kei Apple, made a nice snack along the way. The temperature got colder as I walked into the lower half of the garden. The canopy was created by a giant *Ficus macrophylla*, the roots of which were spreading out across the pathway. There was *Monstera deliciosa* climbing up through the trees strangling anything that crossed its path towards the sun. In this delve I saw *Persea americana*, the avocado tree, and *Citrus medica* var. *sarcodactylis*, or the fingered citron. This type of Citrus is also called Buddha's hand due to the finger-like appearance of fruit and grown for its exquisite form and aroma. Through an opening to a pond containing the giant pads of *Victoria amazonica*, the chandelier-like flowers of *Caryota urens* dangled impressively in the afternoon sun. Towards the sloping exit two final rows of palms, *Macrozamia moorei* and *Phoenix sylvestris*, guided me towards the gate and out of the sub-tropical paradise.



Nietzsche hiking trail

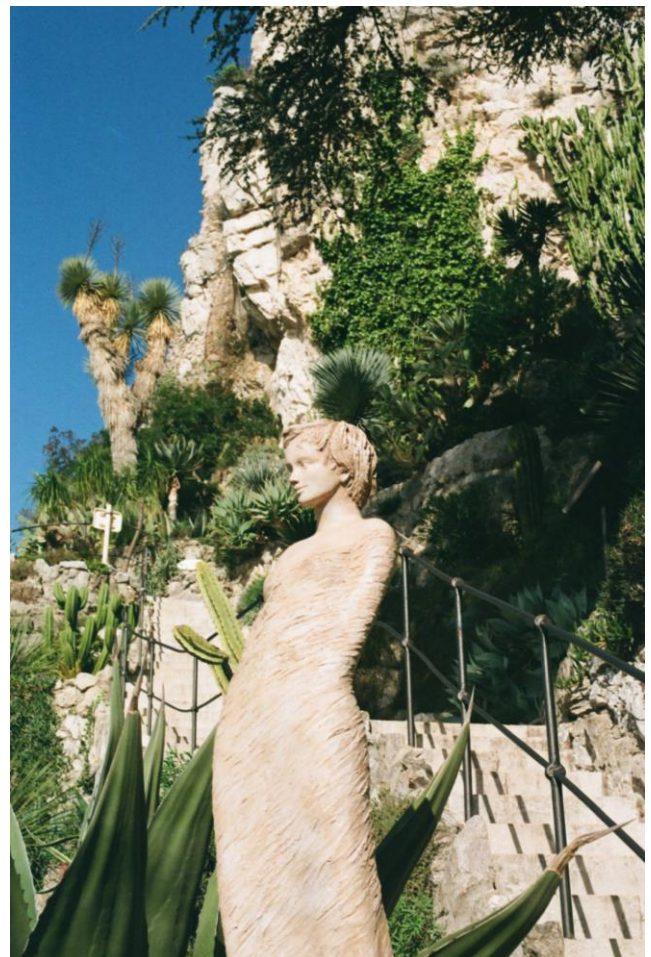


The Nietzsche hiking trail was a valuable experience in exploring the native plants that inhabit the mountainous cliff face of the Riviera. The trail was named after the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who is said to have found inspiration for parts of his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* while climbing to the mountaintop from sea level. The route is almost 3 miles starting at sea level in Èze-sur-Mer, and rising 430 meters to the village of Èze. Èze is one of 16 perched villages in the Alpes-Maritimes and the most ancient part of the village is the remains of a 12th-century fortified castle. It takes nearly 2 hours from Èze-sur-Mer to reach the medieval village of Èze.

Setting off from the train station in Èze-sur-Mer, the beautiful sunshine led me to delayer some clothes and fill my water bottle up once more. The first half of the trail took me facing the sea and the bay Èze as the sun continued to beam down. In the transition from cultivated gardens to hard rock, the yellow creeping flowers of *Senecio angulatus* consume patches of bare ground. There was *Calicotome spinose*, the thorny broom, making dense scrubs across the landscape, with dry seedpods gently hanging. Plants that I was familiar with popped up occasionally along the way. *Salvia rosmarinus*, *Lavender angustifolia*, and *Lobularia maritima* had sprung up through sand and rock in their native mediterrain home. *Pistacia lentiscus*, a small shrub native bearing abundant black berries, had created thick mats of vegetation along the trail. Plants spreading fast through these scrubs included *Erigeron canadensis* and *Clematis vitalba*. An occasional *Opuntia ficus-indica* could be seen traversing the steep rock, abundant in red fruit due to its precarious position. Halfway through, the walk turned inland and up the forested Vallon du Duc, before reaching the village to find the Exotic Gardens of Èze.



Exotic Gardens of Èze



Sitting on high 429 meters above the sea, the Exotic Gardens of Èze were built on the site of a medieval fortress in 1949. The garden is divided by the topography of the mountain; the south side contains hundreds of cacti, succulents, and xerophytes that bake in the sun, while the north side contains plants from Mediterranean and humid regions planted into caves and cascades. The sublime panorama platforms and shopping culture that now encapsulates the charming village of Èze meant the garden was a tourist hot-spot. The footfall was so high that the small paths which meander around this relatively tiny garden had been meticulously pruned. The spiny leaves of *Dasyliirion quadrangulatum* had been cut back to resemble a bad haircut and the leaves of *Agave* abruptly sliced as to not infringe on the walkways.

There were towering *Euphorbia candelabrum*s, a succulent tree native to Africa with candelabra-like branching stems. Large cacti such as *Trichocereus terscheckii*, which can reach more than 10 meters in height, and *Ferocactus pilosus* with its red prickles, decorated the slopes. A familiar sight to Tresco was *Aloe succotrina*, but unfamiliar was *Aloe marlothii*, an aloe with thick fleshy leaves and a rosette of up to 1m. *Euphorbia milii*, a plant I have grown indoors, was reaching an immense size clambering over the bare rock face. The slow-growing *Nolina longifolia* was a delight to see; the specimen at Èze could easily be centuries old. The walk descending through Èze was decorated by species of *Bougainvillea* which seemed to consume this old French village. The charm of the garden and sublime views were well worth the hike up and down.



Boccanegra Garden



I was invited to dinner by Ursula Salghetti Drioli, dedicated plants woman and owner of Boccanegra garden. She is very good friends with Carolyn Hanbury as both gardens are only 2 miles from each other. The garden is situated in Italy, in the municipality of Ventimiglia. There is no parking or signs for the entrance as it is a private garden, yet this secret place is coated in botanic history. It was in 1906 that the site was bought by English gardener Ellen Willmott. She preserved the olive grove of the original estate and begun by planting bulbs, lavender, lentisk, and rosemary. Her interest in exotic flora led her to plant her Rivera garden with aloes, agaves, and opuntias, as well as species from further afield like *Agathis robusta* and *Encephalartos longifolius*. Some of the plants she put in place are still there today including three giant *Melaleuca preissiana*. By the time Willmott lost her fortune and had to give up the estate, Boccanegra rivalled Villa Hanbury for its botanical richness and harmonious combinations. The subsequent owners saw improvements to the house and gardens and in 1969 it was bought by Guido Piacenza, Ursula's husband, an entrepreneur and botanist.

I was shown around by Phoebe Jays, who had been volunteering there for 3 months, along with Harry, senior gardener of the Jungle biome at Heligan. The first thing to catch my eye was two dome shaped wooden structures supporting climbing *Stenocereus*. These spikey cacti are where dragon fruit comes from, and I was lucky enough to eat one fresh off the plant. Agaves had been a favourite of Ellen Willmott's so the garden was filled with them. One *Agave ferox*, nearly 150 years old, stood next to another ancient *Agave weberi*. We made our way down the sloping terrain, passing the giant *Aloe speciose* and flowering *Acacia angustissima*. A young *Cussonia paniculata* stood above some windey steps. The blue compound leaves of this South African species created a beautiful contrast against the backdrop of lush evergreen foliage. Inside Ursula's glasshouses were hundreds of potted *Adeniums*. The species was a personal favourite of hers and grown solely for that reason. They are commonly called the desert rose and native to Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Her species included *A. arabicum*, *A. obesum*, *A. multiflorum*, and *A. boehmianum*, unfortunately not in flower so the sweet scented flowers remained unveiled. The garden was significantly wilder compared to Hanbury, but packed with rare and interesting species hidden amongst the undergrowth. The garden is so phenomenal, that I hope to spend some time working at Boccanegra with Ursula next year.



Vallée des Merveilles

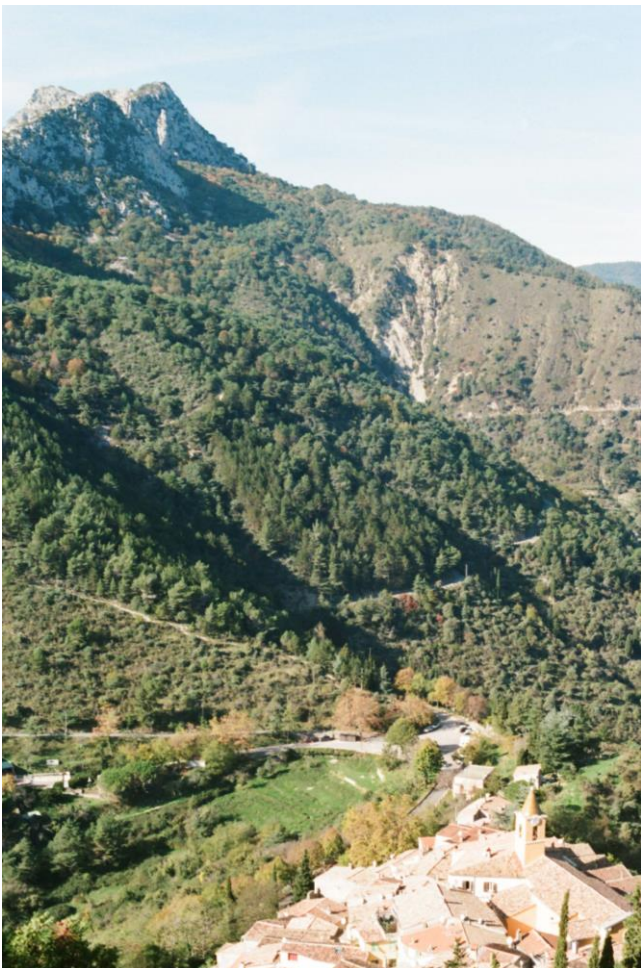


The difference in flora from the coast to the mountains was dramatic. The towering palm trees waved their green fronds goodbye as I travelled further North. Only 40 miles inland, the lush, evergreen foliage turned a shade of brown as I got closer to my destination of Fontanalba. The mountains were covered in thick forests of *Larix deciduous*, a deciduous pine tree conducting its autumn colour crescendo. Shades of warm orange and zesty brown brightened up the hill sides; it was a surreal autumnal experience during a sub-tropical garden trip. At the foot of Mont Bégo, a mountain which rises to 2,872 meters on the French/Italian border, I was plotting my hike in what the French call la Vallée des Merveilles, or in English, The Valley of Wonders. This valley is part of the Mercantour National Park and holds the second largest quantity of open-air Bronze Age petroglyphs in Europe. It offers the austere beauty of a mineral and chaotic landscape with imposing peaks and multiple tranquil lakes.

I had planned a route around the Eastern slope which are said to reveal the richness of the welcoming flora. Ascending towards Lake des Grenouilles within the larch thicket, I spotted several plants growing among the forest floor. The first was *Helleborus foetidus*, the stinking hellebore, a plant I have only seen in cultivation. There were the dead heads of *Digitalis*, *Oenothera*, and *Echium vulgare* scattered along the way. Something that caught my attention was *Aneomone hepatica*, an herbaceous perennial in the *Ranunculaceae* family. It typically flowers in the spring with light blue flowers but the dotted leaves were more than enough to charm me. I stopped for lunch at Lake des Grenouilles which appeared like a mirage reflecting the grey rock face clouded by low mist. On my decent, I spotted *Sempervivum soboliferum* and *Saxifraga paniculata* growing wild in the moss covered banks among the giant rocks. I returned to Fontanalba passing grazing cows and running streams from the lakes atop. I witnessed the *Larix* forests turn into *Cuypress* and olive grove with every hairpin turn back towards the coast.



Sainte-Agnès



At an altitude of almost 800 meters above sea level, the small village of Sainte-Agnès is said to be the highest coastal village in Europe. I stand by its second classification as one of the 'most beautiful villages in France'. Three miles North of Menton, and many winding hair-pin turns that ascend the Alpes Maritimes, the village stands on a rocky hill giving it far reaching views across the Mediterranean landscape. The Romans first constructed a fortress there some 2000 years ago, while a substantial concrete bunker was built for defences just before the Second World War. The ruins of a castle built in the 12th century are located at the peak, and attached is an abundant yet small medieval garden beautifully maintained by a local volunteer despite the challenging lack of soil.

During the Middle Ages, the medieval garden was essential for growing edible and medicinal plants when leaving the enclosed castle walls was too dangerous. It grew to become a garden of pleasure and expanded into a productive olive grove and small vineyard. The central piece of this tiny paradise was a medlar tree, or *Mespilus germanica*, the fruits of which were cooked down into jams and jellies. The bottom terrace contained aromatic herbs such as lavender, sage, and rosemary which were too tempting not to taste. *Salvia canariensis*, with its long purple racemes, captured the south-facing sun in this tranquil space. I had my first encounter with *Smilax aspera*, a climbing plant with a weedy habit used as a food and medicine. Among the medicinal plants were pockets of annuals such as *Zinnia elegans*, only just planted by the volunteer gardener. The breath-taking scenery of this small garden was enough to include it in my favourite spots of the trip along the Riviera.



Town of Sanramo



Sanremo has carved its place into my imagination as a botanical hotspot - the most impressive town I saw on this trip. Sanremo is located in the Liguria region of Italy and has become a popular year round tourist destination. Like most places on the Riviera, it was an important social centre for wealthy Englishmen and Russian entrepreneurs. The impressive Empress Promenade is one of the symbols of the splendour that Sanremo had in the 19th century. The coastal promenade, paved with alternating marble slabs, guides your way into the town centre. Some of the palm trees that make the promenade unique are those that were donated by the Tsarina during this time when the Russian community would often holiday here. *Phoenix* palm trees decorate the promenade, including *p. dactylifera*, *p. reclinata*, and *p. theophrasti*. The slender stems of *Washingtonia filifera* tower over the road towards the central square and giant *Araucaria heterophylla* dot the distant landscape.

A small park dedicated to Franco Alfano, Italian composer and pianist, contained some very impressive specimens of plants familiar to me. Almost double the size to the one on Tresco, an enormous *Araucaria bidwillii* stood in the park. Known as the bunya pine, it is a large tree in the Monkey puzzle family native to Australia. There was also *Jubaea chilensis*, or the Chilean wine palm, one of the most spectacular and cold hardiest of all the feather palms. A short walk along the coastal footpath was enough to see some of Sanremo's 'weeds'. Covering walls and fences was *Lantana camara* with its delightful orange flowers, and *Ipomoea indica*, the morning glory flower known for being a non-native invasive. The castor oil plant, *Ricinus communis*, was growing happily on waste ground colonising any bare gaps it could find.



Les Colombières



Les Colombières is a villa in Menton designed by Ferdinand Bac between 1918 and 1927. The pencil cypresses and iconic red neo-Classical villa can be seen from the town below. Bac was given full rein by the owners to remodel the original house and create a garden out of the orchards of olives. As a live in landscaper, architect, and decorator, he worked in harmony with the gradients of the land and designed viewpoints which lend a veil of mystery. A characteristic of his work are optical illusions embedded into the landscape exemplified by long avenues of cypress. This playful approach to landscaping gave Bac quite a renowned quality along the Riviera, however he fled during the second world war and never returned.

We were shown around by one of the gardeners, Irene Cambi, after meeting for tea with Michel Likierman, the current owner of the estate. The garden begins at the Jardin de l'Obelisque, where a circular lawn surrounds a pool planted with *Nelumbo nucifera* from which a stone obelisk rises. From this viewpoint the whole of Menton could be seen. Following evergreen hedges of *Viburnum tinus* and *Pittosporum tobira*, we came across an old carob tree. This *Ceratonia siliqua* is said to be over 600 years old and the oldest in France, divided in two by a lightning strike long ago. A long stairway decorated with giant paired terracotta jars takes you to Orpheus's cliffside walk and up to where Bac was buried. A mature olive stands dividing an uneven staircase towards the top. On the forested East side of the garden the land drops away to a botanically rich slope. Margaret Likierman had a large influence on this part of the garden and rejuvenated the planting. She replanted the terraces with sub-tropical species from across the globe. Two very large *Brachychiton* fill this space, *B. rupestris* and *B. acerifolius*. *B. rupestris* is native to Queensland and in the Malvaceae family, defined by its smooth, peculiar bottle-like trunk. Three young *Dracaena Draco* trees had been planted by Likierman. These dragon trees are from the Canary Islands and famous for their red, blood-like sap. The spikes of a mature *Ceiba insignis* were irresistible to touch. This species of South American tree is prized for its large magnolia-like flowers. Ornamental plantings included *Salvia discolor*, *Tagetes lemmonii*, and South African *Clivias*. The knowledge shared by Irene on our walk was invaluable. She is an amazing plants woman and continues to develop Les Colombières into a fantastic garden which blends exotic species and interesting artwork.



Conclusion

The botanical exuberance of the Riviera has been inspiring. My trip surpassed my expectations of what I thought the plant life would be like within this coastal micro-climate. I have seen such a diverse range of species, some familiar to me on Tresco, and others breaming with the potential to grow. From the *Ipomoea indicia* and *Wigandia caracasana* that grow like weeds on the roadside, to the streets of *Phoenix* and incredible *Yucca australis* that dominate the landscape, they have all been influential in developing my understanding of sub-tropical plants. Traveling only 40 miles North and seeing shedding *Larix deciduous* demonstrates the sensitive conditions that these tender plants need to survive. I am very grateful to have seen these plants thriving in an ideal condition and can't wait to experiment growing similar species on Tresco.

Unfortunately, due to the off season, some of the gardens I wished to visit were closed. Serre de la Madone had only just stopped allowing visitors to enter and the Pallanca Exotic Garden near Sanremo was closed for winter maintenance. A couple of rainy days prevented me from seeing Villa Rothschild and exploring Monaco, allowing me to further explore Hanbury in my waterproofs. Carolyn Hanbury's contact at Le Clos de Peyronnet was away on holiday so I was unable to visit the private garden. Despite these closures my trip was still filled with bountiful garden visits and plant hunting walks.

Throughout my trip I have made invaluable contacts that I can call upon again in the future. Irene Cambi, who gave a private tour at Les Colombières, previously worked at Bristol Botanical Garden and agreed to meet up if she ever visited the UK. Harry, the senior gardener of the Jungle biome at Heligan, was also inspired by the sub-tropical plants wishes to stay in touch to see which species are successful in Cornwall. The volunteer gardener at Boccanegra, Phoebe Jays, is set to spend a month in South Africa next year studying plants. With my knowledge of South African species I offered my help in identifying anything she came across throughout her travels. I have made good friends with Carolyn Hanbury and Ursula Salghetti Drioli, and have put my name down to volunteer at Boccanegra for three months next year. If anything has come of this trip it's my desire to go back and spend more time surrounded by the Italian culture and exotic plants.

I was captivated by the ubiquitous sub-tropical colour and planting style of the Rivieran gardens, and there are certain species I plan to try on Tresco. These include the delightful *Lantana camara* with its bulging orange flowers and the blue trailing blooms of *Plumbago auriculata*. Mirroring the giant terracotta pots at Hanbury, I wish to try planting the pots on Tresco with *Russelia equisetiformis* to capture the Mediterranean style. There is a lack of ornamental pine trees on Tresco so trying *Cupressus cashmeriana* would be an ideal start. I also plan to grow cacti such as the Dragon fruit and *Selenicereus hamatus* against the humurus rich bark of *Phoneix canariensis* to create a flowering obelisk. Sharing these planting choices with the rest of the team on Tresco will help pass on my knowledge of species adapted to a similar climate. I will also talk about my experience when conducting tours around Tresco Abbey Garden. Comparing the height of genus such as *Araucaria* and talking about the native conditions of *Pistacia lentiscus* will help visitors get a sense of special micro-climate of the Isles of Scilly. The photographs I have captured will form part of a presentation I plan give to students and volunteers to inform others of the magic of the Riviera.

