

# An art and shopping tour of Marseille

Our writer takes a locally guided tour of colourful Le Panier, the oldest district in the French city of Marseille, one of Europe's 2013 capitals of culture

**Liz Boulter**  
The Guardian, Friday 4 January 2013 22.45 GMT  
[Jump to comments \(49\)](#)



One of the streets of Le Panier, Marseille. Photograph: Alamy

A slight mix-up led to a happy accident. We thought we were meeting Eva, tourist "greeter" and founder of artists' network Les Femmes du Panier, at Marseille's town hall at 3.30pm. She thought it was 4pm. But in our half-hour wait, my husband and I had a ringside seat for several local weddings, a phenomenon both international and very Marseille. The couples were of north African origin, and the Muslim tradition was there in the joyful beating of drums and cymbals as they emerged from their civil ceremonies. But the brides wore thoroughly European white frothy dresses, and had their photos taken in a vintage American sports car.

As France's biggest port, Marseille has attracted immigrants for centuries, and today it's a city built on diversity, and proudly distinct from the rest of the country. Its status as European capital of culture 2013 has sparked a major spring clean: when we were there six major museums were closed for a facelift. But we weren't there for museums; we had come to see creativity at grass-roots level – in the oldest part of the city, Le Panier.

A working class area since the 17th century, it was also, being close to the port, the first home for successive waves of immigrants. It's a place of colourful stone facades, narrow alleys, steep steps and sunny courtyards.

In another city such a district might have been colonised by the middle-class and hip, but Le Panier has kept its character. Oldsters originally from Algeria or Indochina, Corsica or Greece chat on chairs in the sun while kids play noisily.

There are a few smart apartments here, but they are on upper floors: narrow streets make lower storeys dark even in summer. That leaves cheap space ripe for turning into studios and workshops by a new wave of arrivals: young artists and designers, many of them women. And it was these that Eva wanted us to see on her free tour.



Artwork on sale in le Galhia Noir. Photographs Colin Boulter

Heading north up steep steps we plunged into Marseille's past. Rue de la Caisserie was laid out by Greek settlers more than 2,000 years ago, and has been busy with shoppers, strollers and drinkers ever since. On it is a house where Napoleon Bonaparte lived with his mother and sisters when he was a young officer in the coastal artillery (part of it is available as a holiday let – [homeaway.co.uk/reviews/p1024500](#)).

Round the corner at 28 rue de l'Evêché, rubbing shoulders with a greengrocers and a charcuterie, we found the workshop and tiny boutique Cecile aux Etoiles, full of gorgeous clothes in deceptively simple designs made by Cecile, who is on hand for on-the-spot alterations. At number 38 is Le Galhia Noir ([legalhianoir.com](#)), a treasure trove of goodies opened in June 2012 by a women's design collective comprising Kiko (paintings, furniture, textiles), Sacha (contemporary patchwork and other soft furnishings) and ceramicist Aurore Guillemain ([verre-2-terre.com](#)) who emerged from the little workshop where she makes jewellery and tiles and pots covered in weird plants and animals to greet Eva effusively and show us around.

There was a similar vibe at Atelier Celadon ([atelier-celadon.com](#)), at 40 rue Sainte Françoise, where not only can you browse and buy beautiful contemporary glass, ceramics, and astonishingly expressive mosaics, you can take courses in these three media too. Up the steep steps of rue des Repenties (named for the "fallen" women "rescued" from the streets and marched down here to church each week) is UnderArtground ([undartground.com](#)), a rare male offering. It was started by local artist Julien Cassar, who opened a pop-up gallery in 2010 showcasing his own pieces and those of friends. No work cost more than €100, and they all sold. So Cassar set about finding permanent premises, and opened here in 2012 with an Aladdin's cave of eyecatching artworks and quirky gifts. Summer sees Apéro Sunshine evenings, with drinks, nibbles and live music.



Papier maché street art

Round the corner on rue du Petit Puits, an artist who just calls himself Miguel has turned the front of his house into a riotous display of papier maché art: plants and animals in fantastic and colours. A handwritten notice proclaims that in Le Panier, art is public; and another politely for donations from fans and photographers. And the beauty is that heavy rain ruins papier maché: come back after a storm and Miguel's show will have been made anew.

But for me, and for super-chic Eva, shopping has to include clothes. She loves the work of Adjanass ([adjanass-creations.com](#)), a striking young woman from Togo who takes cloth from her native country (a variation on batik learned by African soldiers fighting France's Indochina wars) and makes dresses, skirts and tops that look Indonesian, but use Africa's vibrant colours. In her shop on rue du Panier, we watched as she took a red-flowered dress that was a little big on one customer and with two minutes' work on her sewing machine had it fitting like couture. Cushions and duvet covers in African patterns are seriously tempting too.



My-Linh Mary's shop

My favourite was Birdsong ([birdsong.fr](#)) round the corner on rue de l'Evêché. The gorgeous clothes and jewellery inside are made, with inspiration from vintage French fashions and trips to Asia, by young half-Vietnamese designer My-Linh Mary, who smiled at us from the back of the shop. Across the street Eva and I rooted around in a fascinating shop full of antique and retro furniture, opened by My-Linh's boyfriend just the week before.

By then we were ready for a drink and a sit-down, and Eva took us to Place Lorette. Once a hospital, then a garage, it is now a cafe and day room for Moroccan-inspired furniture and homewares made by owner Sarah Nawi. All deep sofas and glowing lamps and fabrics, it is a real family affair: her dad did the conversion, while Moroccan dinners, served on reservation, are cooked by Sarah's mum. There's traditional couscous on Thursday lunchtimes too.

Next day we lazed on the city's sandy Catalans beach, just a few minutes from our hotel, the oh-so-Marseillaise Richelieu. Reached by scruffy stairs from the street, it has no bar, no lift and off-hand, if friendly, staff. But our room had a comfy bed, a brilliant rain shower, and two cute balconies opening on to a glorious seascape, with views of the bay and the Frioul islands. In an inversion of the usual phrase, the hotel was all knickers and no fur coat, and we rather liked it.

The same goes for Marseille as a whole: bit scruffy, bit special. The centerpiece for 2013 will be the huge new MuCEM (Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations), opening in June. There is a grand opening ceremony next Saturday, but in what some might call typical fashion, few of the other major museums will have their facelifts finished before spring. By then, with its wave-like Pavillon M on the newly pedestrianised Vieux Port, the city will feel smart, cultured and maybe not very much like Marseille – so be sure to make time, after the old masters and modern treasures, to check out a different sort of genius among the women of Le Panier.

• *The trip was arranged by the French Tourist Board ([uk.franceguide.com](#)). Flights were provided by easyJet ([easyjet.com](#)) which flies from Gatwick to Marseille from £70 return. Hôtel Marseille Richelieu (+33 491 310192, [hotel-marseille-richelieu.com](#)) has doubles from €74 including breakfast. For details of Marseille greeters see [marseilleprovencegreeters.com](#)*

Share 152  
Tweeet 41  
+1 7  
Share 2  
Email

Article history

**Travel**  
Marseille · France · City breaks · Weekend breaks · Short breaks · Cultural trips · Shopping trips

**More features**

**Related**  
**2 Mar 2012**  
What's new in France's big cities in 2012

**31 May 2011**  
Where to eat, sleep and have fun in Marseille

**24 Apr 2010**  
Summer in French cities: insiders' guide

**29 Nov 2009**  
Krakow: from our correspondent

PIXMA MG5350 - Wifi ...  
89 €  
PROTEZTEZ EN !  
GROSBILL.COM

**Half price city breaks**  
Book with Guardian Holidays and take a 3 night Eurostar city break to 8 top European cities with up to 50% off.  
**Learn more and book now.**

**guardianholidayoffers**  
Art Deco and Art Nouveau in Lille & Antwerp - from £599  
Cannes and the Cote D'Azur by rail - from £799  
Find hand picked holidays for hundreds of destinations  
Belgium Search

**Today's best video**

**Kangaroo on the loose in car park**  
A three-year-old kangaroo bounds through Melbourne airport car park

**Cat caught smuggling saw into prison**  
Prison authorities catch a cat carrying a saw and a mobile phone

**Greek children score amazing goal**  
A team of Greek children pull off a great team goal straight from kick-off

**Horn-sledging championships**  
Annual horn-sledging contest takes place in Germany

**On Travel**  
Most viewed Latest

Last 24 hours

1. Must like water slides ...
2. January travel news and deals
3. 20 of the best bargain beach holidays for 2013
4. 30 of the best bargain adventures in 2013
5. Family travel Q&A: live now

More most viewed

**Get instant travel insurance cover**

Trip type: Annual Multi-Trip

Destination: Europe (exc. Algeria, Israel, Jord)

From: 8 Jan 2013  
Please note: You will not be covered for holiday cancellation until your policy starts.

Cover for: Individual(s)

Traveller ages: 1: 2: 3: 4:

This insurance is introduced to you by OG Enterprises Limited (A Guardian Media Group Company) which is an introducer appointed representative of Insure & Go Insurance Services Ltd, which is authorised and regulated by the Financial Services Authority (FRN 309572)

Search

**More recommended short breaks**

**guardianbookshop**

**This week's bestsellers**

1. **Old Ways** by Robert Macfarlane £12.00
2. **Patrick Leigh Fermor** by Artemis Cooper £16.00
3. **Tired of London, Tired of Life** by Tom Jones £10.39
4. **Pocket Atlas of Remote Islands** by Judith Schalansky £10.39
5. **Bradshaw's Handbook** by George Bradshaw £8.00

Search the Guardian bookshop

Search

**Travel services**

Home exchange Guardian home exchange allows you to swap homes and live like a local all over the world.

**Section Classifieds**

**Sponsored feature**

**Need to transfer money overseas?**  
Find out how others have saved money and got the best deal. Plus, win a £25 M&S voucher

**guardianjobs**

Find the latest jobs in your sector:

Arts & heritage	Health
Charities	Marketing & PR
Education	Media
Environment	Sales
Government	Senior executive
Graduate	Social care

Browse all jobs

Guardian Search

**theguardian** Oracle Applications Functional Analyst London | Competitive GUARDIAN NEWS AND MEDIA