

# Sunday Travel



**HIT THE DECK** Sampling the oligarch-at-play routine – for €26 a head

“A cab from Nice to Cannes is a wallet-emptying €100. With BlaBlaCar it costs me €9

From plucky start-ups to multibillion-pound platforms, the sharing economy has infiltrated pretty much every area of life over the past decade. The world of travel is no exception. You'll have heard of Airbnb and Uber, but there are hundreds of so-called peer-to-peer apps and travel services out there, helping you arrange everything from airport transfers and city tours to currency swaps and dinner in a local's flat.

The sharing economy is guided by a single basic principle: what's mine is yours, for a fee. And that fee – due to the ease with which the supplier and the customer can directly communicate with one another – can be a fraction of what you'd have paid using more traditional travel services.

These days, you could construct an entire holiday using only the sharing economy – so that's what I did.

The Côte d'Azur in summer is the most rarefied of playgrounds: all Ferraris and facelifts, Gucci loafers and gin palaces. In short, the ultimate test of the sharing economy. If I could save money here, in July, it could work anywhere.

An easyjet flight to Nice, then I'm ready to begin the experiment. Friends generously describe my French as rusty, but on this trip there's a linguistic spring in my step, thanks to the one-to-one lessons I've been taking with Maria Romanoff. The sharing economy, powered by the internet, has made it a

# Share Options

Is it possible to book an entire holiday just using the sharing economy – and how much can you save?

On the French Riviera, Duncan

Craig attempts to live the high life for less



**HIGH FLYER** A private jet home

lot easier for people to make a bit of cash on the side by “sharing” their skills. I found Maria after the quickest of googles. She's an interpreter who now offers language lessons over Skype. No group classes, no journey time, just a patient polyglot in my pocket. The 30-minute taster session is free – so it wouldn't have mattered too much if she weren't any good. Thereafter, it's €17 an hour. As a learning experience, it wasn't exactly Dead Poets Society, but I found it stretching and absorbing. My French improved *rapidement*.

The taxi service Uber has revolutionised city transport using a model that viciously undercuts established services. The ethics of how its drivers are treated is a debate for another day; I have money to save.

Standard cab from the airport? “About €50,” I'm told. Ten minutes after sending out the

Uber version of the Bat-Signal, I'm speeding towards the city in Richard's aggressively air-conditioned VW Passat. I'm staying just up the road from his favourite restaurant. “Here's their card,” he says as he helps me with my case. “Say that Richard the driver sent you. They'll look after you.” I'm emailed the bill seconds later: €22.

More local knowledge follows. Showaround operates in nearly 8,000 cities under the tagline: “Find a local to show you around.” A third of the locals signed up to the platform offer their services free of charge. Mine, Diana, is asking €22 an hour, so it better be good. It is. Diana, who has lived in Nice for five years and is married to a Niçois chap,

is as clued up on *belle époque* architecture as she is on the city's favourite son, Garibaldi. Loads of fun, too. No earnest pocket histories, just breezy banter and some cracking under-the-radar spots: the peaceful, hilltop Cimetière du Château, with its splendidly elaborate gravestones; a hole-in-the-wall in Le Vieux Nice selling slices of oniony *pissaladière* tart for just a few euros.

For the next step of my adventure, I have to get from Nice to Cannes. The estimate from the first cabbie I ask is a wallet-emptying €90-€100. For 32km. Uber says it'll be upwards of €60. I'm curious to test out BlaBlaCar.

Set up in Paris in 2006, it's a city-to-city service in which you hitch a

ride in the car of a local heading your way. It carries more people annually than British Airways, and the critical mass of members (40m and rising) is now such that, on popular routes in Europe, you can rely on it almost as you would a timetabled service. I search for a ride and the smiling face of 21-year-old student Amandine pops up. She's leaving Nice in half an hour, and going via Cannes to Cassis. Cost to me? Just €5. *Mais oui!*

We agree to meet at the station, a five-minute walk for me, and she pulls up in her Nissan Micra, waving excitedly. In the back are two other strangers: Fabrice, 39, who is rollerblading back to Nice from further up the coast, and 20-year-old Silya, who's visiting her boyfriend in Marseilles. All speak English (their loss); all use BlaBlaCar habitually. “Aren't you worried you might pick up some weirdo stalker?” I ask Amandine, sounding like some weirdo stalker. Apparently not. There's a robust vetting process (I'm verified through email, phone and social-media accounts when I sign up) and all transactions are handled electronically, removing the potential for any awkward on-the-spot haggling.

As Amandine expertly navigates the busy Riviera traffic, we chat all the way there – hence the name BlaBlaCar – and she takes a detour to ensure I'm dropped exactly where I need to be. Good job no one in the car is on a tight schedule. Later, a review pops up on my phone. “Duncan est un passager très sympathique. Il est très intéressant et gentil.” Which is nice.

You can't come to the French Riviera without getting out on a boat. Not my words, but those of a former Cannes policeman, Patrick Waldmann, who for the past few years has been topping up his retirement fund by taking guests out in his 28ft speedboat. They come to him through Click&Boat – the Uber of the boating world. Peer-to-peer pier-to-pier, if you like. I've corralled three Côte d'Azur-based friends into helping me test it out. We meet at the Port du Moure Rouge marina, in eastern Cannes. Patrick, 65, is also waiting there: broad smile, mahogany tan, shorts the colour of the azure waters we're soon plying. We buzz down the coast to Cap d'Antibes, detouring nosily past a six-storey gin palace. On the top deck, a pneumatic blonde is rubbing sun cream into a fat cat's bald head – an unimprovable vignette of life on the Côte d'Azur.

The calm, dazzlingly clear channel between the islands of Ile Saint-Honorat and Ile Sainte-Marguerite, a few kilometres off Cannes, is where we drop



**Top, Promenade des Anglais in Nice. Above, sampling local dishes through “immersive dining”**

anchor, spending a lazy couple of hours perfecting our oligarchs-at-play routine: sunbathing, quaffing, dipping, dozing.

The cost of our five-hour trip, including fuel and (safety-vetted) driver, was €260. That's €65 a head, or €29 if we'd filled all nine spots on board. “With a professional company, you'd pay three or four times that,” Patrick says. And the rest. The cheapest quote I could find on the dock in Cannes was €1,300, excluding fuel.

## DUNCAN'S BILL: HOW THE SHARING ECONOMY COMPARES

**LANGUAGE LESSONS** Skype lessons with Maria Romanoff start at €19 an hour after a free 30-minute taster session (okallcorrect.co.uk). Private one-to-one tuition with a tutor from Average lessons are €19 per hour on verbalplanet.com. **TAXI** Uber from airport to Nice, €21 (uber.com). Standard city taxi, approximately €50.

**CITY TOUR** Showaround one-to-one tour with Diana, €21 an hour (showaround.com). Average cost of tours offered through the Nice tourist office, €47.

**CITY TRANSFER** BlaBlaCar from Nice to Cannes, €5 (blablacar.co.uk). Standard taxi, €90-€100.

**BOAT TOUR** Five-hour speedboat tour of Cannes (nine passengers) with Click&Boat, €256, including fuel (clickandboat.com/en). Half-day hire of a boat and driver through the professional charter firm Yacht-riviera.com, from €1,279, excluding fuel.

**DINNER** Three-course “immersive dining experience” with VizEat, from €18pp, including wine (vizeat.com). Three-course dinner with wine at a central Promenade des Anglais restaurant, from €56pp.

**CURRENCY** WeSwap currency exchange, €226 for £200, including 1% commission (weswap.com). Bureau de change at Gatwick airport, €205 for £200.

**ACCOMMODATION** An Airbnb apartment sleeping four in the Musicians' Quarter starts at €97 a night, (airbnb.co.uk/rooms/1049339). Doubles at the four-star Mercure Nice hotel start at €170 a night.

**PRIVATE JET** An “empty leg” private flight from Nice to London Luton starts at €445pp, based on eight sharing (privatefly.com). A full private jet charter on the same route costs up to €55,000.

And so it goes on. I am wine and dined in the chic apartment of Jean and Marie-Ange, through VizEat – “the world's largest immersive food experience platform”. The likeable thirtysomethings have hosted groups of up to six travellers at a time. Tonight, it's just me. I'm filled full of delectable *cuisine niçoise* – tapenade, crispy chickpea fritters called *panisse* and tagliatelle with *poutargue*, a salted, cured fish roe – and we drink rosé and chat animatedly about Macron and Brexit. The evening costs me a grand total of €18.

I head to Nice's main shopping street, Avenue Jean Médecin, to test out WeSwap – a service that definitely sounds better written down. It's a currency-exchange app where you “swap” (in an anonymous, fiendishly clever techy way) your travel money with that of other travellers coming the other way. You sign up and are sent a card that you load with an amount of sterling to be exchanged into one of 18 currencies. As long as you do this at least seven days before you need the funds, the fee is just 1%. The €226 I get for my £200 doesn't exactly have me rushing to Vuitton and Hermès, but it compares favourably with the €205 the bureau de change at Gatwick had offered me.

And every night I get to stroll back to my art deco Airbnb apartment in the swanky Musicians' Quarter, with its stylish cage elevator, high stucco ceilings and parquet floors. There's an erudite book collection, Miles Davis's Kind of Blue on the record player, and morning and afternoon terraces flooded with sunlight and birdsong. It can sleep four and costs €87 (€97) a night – nearly £70 less than the price of a double at the four-star business hotel down the street.

And there, in neat microcosm, is why Airbnb has grown in just nine years from an optimistic start-up to a £24bn global behemoth through which roughly three people a second check in at a property. I'm a traditionalist – well, a Luddite – at heart, and this is my first Airbnb. It's inconceivable that it'll be my last.

My trip ends on a considerable high. PrivateFly is an online broker that has 7,000 privately owned aircraft on its books. “When the owners aren't using them,

they make them available for others through us,” says Viv Diprose, the head of communications. And while a full standard charter is still at fantasy-price levels – anything up to £50,000 for a top-of-the-range jet flying from London to

Nice – with careful planning, plenty of flexibility and a following wind, it is possible to grab a spare seat on an “empty leg” for a far less eye-watering sum. In essence, pilots need to get somewhere to pick up a high-net-worth individual, and may as well take some passengers while they do so.

Which is how I come to be boarding a £2.8m Embraer Phenom 100 at Nice airport to fly home for just £400. Steep, certainly, but hardly preposterous, particularly given the savings the sharing economy has netted me over the preceding days. It'll ruin me, of course, just not necessarily financially: air travel can never be the same again after you've been chauffeured straight to the steps of an executive jet, 15 minutes after arriving at the airport, with your passport only briefly taken from you to be checked.

The Haribo and pretzels on board are slightly disappointing, the complimentary Moët is anything but.

Duncan Craig was a guest of PrivateFly, Airbnb, Click&Boat, VizEat, Showaround and easyJet.

The real Riviera: the true story behind the Sky Atlantic series; see Style