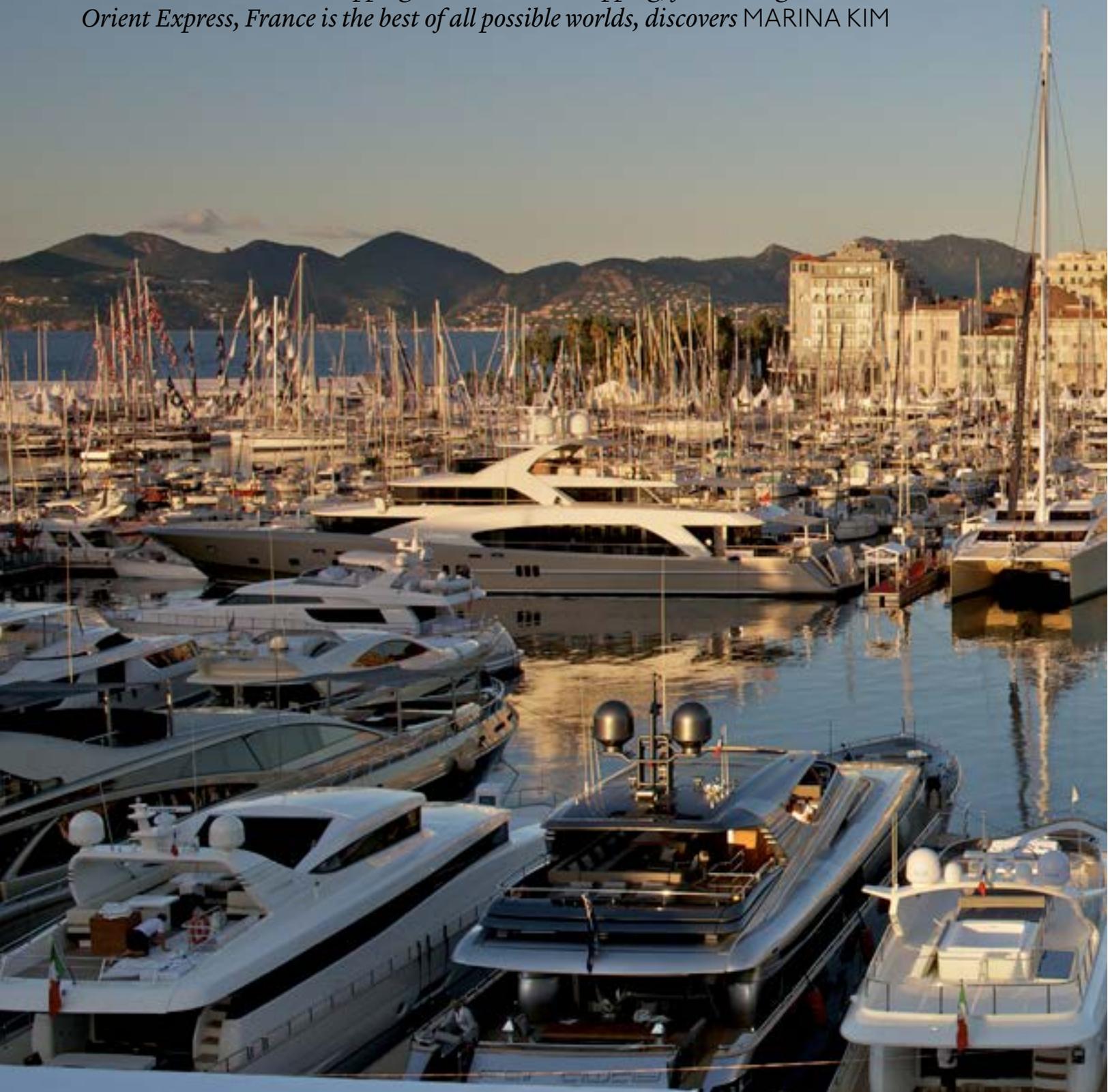


# *FALL IN LOVE WITH* **FRANCE**

*From Parisian window shopping to Riviera boat-hopping, from skiing to the Orient Express, France is the best of all possible worlds, discovers* MARINA KIM



Sometimes, looking for excitement and exotic romance, you travel the world and the seven seas, only to come back and fall in love with the one you've known all your life. Although, it is never possible to know a femme fatale like France inside out.

She is never going to be predictable, even if you move in together. Dressed in Chanel and Dior, Isabel Marant and Balmain, she exudes chic, and perhaps you've found her ever so slightly intimidating, with her knowledge of Voltaire and Balzac, Sartre and red wine. She is not easy to crack, and that's why you like her.

Let France surprise you. Leave kissing at the top of Eiffel Tower for her less sophisticated lovers. There is a lot more to discover about France than you could possibly imagine. Even

the journey there can be a destination in itself when done on board the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express.

Set off from London Victoria station to Dover in the vintage carriages of the British Pullman. The train gets you into the spirit of the 1940s - and I hope you are dressed accordingly. Leave your Levi's for the red-eye to New York.

The 30-minute transit between Dover and Calais is the only annoying part of the journey, but you'll soon forget all about it once you are on board the Orient Express on the other side of the Channel, heading to Paris in style.

After settling into your private cabin - which is a work of art in itself - change for dinner (you will feel wholly out of place here without black tie or a glamorous frock), and visit the Bar Car for an aperitif. The Orient Express is not a place to find a

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Clockwise from left: the Diamonds Are Forever yacht; Val d'Isère; a cabin in the Venice-Simplon Orient-Express; the train's dining room

lover, but to travel with one, as most people on board the train are couples. Well, we are heading to the most romantic city in the world, after all.

A piano is the last thing you would expect to see on a train, but here it looks natural in its art deco setting. Dining is also a beautiful experience, as all dishes are freshly prepared on the train by skilled French chefs. You wouldn't want this journey to end, but all too soon you arrive in Paris and it's time to disembark. As a final, elegant touch, well-groomed porters in white gloves unload your luggage.

I stayed in the Hotel de la Trémoille, close to the city's museums. And while my intentions were cultural, the proximity of the shops of the Champs Élysées proved dangerous. If you want to explore further, France loves the fast life, too. The best place to party, high on exquisite champagne, is the Côte d'Azur. Cannes is at the heart of it all. The town is famous for its annual film festival in May, and the boat show in September.

Le Festival de la Plaisance de Cannes boat show took place in September and was attended by 45,000 people. It is certainly worth getting your private plane to. A very short journey from London, it certainly has better weather than the UK - even in September the sun was still shining high, showing off the 580 boats, including 150 world-premiere editions, in their full glory.

This is the place to buy small to medium boats. However, there were a few bigger vessels on display at the show this year, such as the 61-metre Diamonds Are Forever, owned by an eccentric

American in love with James Bond films or, my personal favourite at the show, Pellegrina, owned by a Ukrainian oligarch.

Buyers here are fishing for something between 20 and 46 metres. So, if you are not planning a world cruise, and need less space than is to be found on Noah's Ark, this is the place to get yourself a boat. An added bonus is that the festival is the only European event on the calendar to offer visitors sea trials.

The atmosphere at this time of the year is relaxed, and everyone is friendly - well, apart from taxi drivers. For a delicious lunch near the show, try the restaurant on Le Martinez hotel beach, or take a boat to the Petrossian to taste salmon and caviar. For late-night partying and dining, Baoli is still the place to be.

From boats to skiing in one of France's chic resorts - Courchevel, Méribel, Chamonix and Val d'Isère, it's all just a short hop away.

Chalet Le Chardon in Val d'Isère was my choice when I visited. It's a group of five stylish chalets with glorious big windows in the living room, looking straight out onto the mountain slopes to get you inspired for your next day's skiing.

Naturally, there is a hot tub waiting for you in the chalet on your return from the pistes. The only disappointment is that it is filled with water, not champagne. That said, you are likely to have been drinking the latter in La Folie Douce before you came down the mountain, so your body now finds water an alien liquid. Bring on the bubbles! Your chalet boy or girl will do exactly that. "France, je t'aime," you whisper, hoping she will hear you. If you say it with passion, she might invite you back, whatever the season. ■

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