Russians in Nice & the French Riviera

Few foreign peoples have left a deeper mark on Nice than the Russians. Their connection to the city spans nearly two centuries — from the first Tsarina who wintered here in 1856 to the community of 50,000 Russian speakers who call the Côte d'Azur home today. They built the largest Orthodox cathedral in Western Europe here. They named streets after their Tsarevich, buried their princes in the hills above the sea, and sent their greatest writers to recover their health in the Mediterranean air.

For a Russian visitor arriving in Nice today, the city offers something rare: a place where Russian history is not merely remembered, but still physically present.

> *This page is part of the Celebrities of Nice & the French Riviera series.*

I. Why Russians Came to Nice

French was not only the language of diplomacy and international refinement across Europe — it was also the language of the Russian aristocracy, shaping the way nobles thought, spoke, and even dreamed. Russia and France were bound by culture, language, and eventually by formal military alliance. During the 19th century, travel in France was considered a form of cultural and intellectual apprenticeship.

Nice added something more specific: its Mediterranean winter climate was considered medically beneficial, particularly for tuberculosis — the great affliction of the 19th century. The French Riviera was a favourite spot, where the European aristocracy had launched the fashion of the rainy season. Some also came to treat tuberculosis, which was then rampant.

A further strategic element emerged after the Crimean War. After Russia lost the Crimean War in 1856, it could no longer keep its war vessels in the Black Sea. Still needing a naval base in the Mediterranean, it made a deal with the Kingdom of Sardinia to use the harbour of Villefranche-sur-Mer for its fleet. Russian officials followed, and a community began to form.

Beginning in the mid-19th century, Russian nobility visited Nice and the French Riviera, following the fashion established decades earlier by the English upper class and nobility. In 1864, immediately after the railway reached Nice, Tsar Alexander II visited by train and was attracted by the pleasant climate.

II. The Imperial Family in Nice

Empress Alexandra Feodorovna (1798–1860)

Wife of Tsar Nicholas I — the first Tsarina to winter in Nice Alexandra Feodorovna (Charlotte of

Prussia)

Nice connection: Winter 1856
Legacy: The first Russian church in Western Europe

In 1856, Alexandra, aged 48 and widowed, was the first Russian Tsarina to winter on the French Riviera. She came for her health, but that was not the only reason. Her son, Tsar Alexander II, sent her to strengthen Russia's relationship with the King of Sardinia. She was accompanied by her other son, who was commander of the Russian Navy. While Alexandra charmed the King, her son negotiated an agreement to dock Russian ships in the port of Villefranche-sur-Mer.

During her stay, the Russian Orthodox community wanted a church, but the state religion of Piedmont-Sardinia was Roman Catholicism. Alexandra used her considerable influence to resolve this, and the result was the first Russian Orthodox church ever built in Western Europe.

What remains today: The Église Saint-Nicolas-et-Sainte-Alexandra, 6 rue Longchamp, Nice — consecrated in 1859, still in use, and still the oldest Russian Orthodox church outside Russia. It is named for Tsar Nicholas I and his wife. Not generally open for tourist visits, but worth seeing from the outside.

1)

Empress Maria Alexandrovna & the Death of the Tsarevich

Wife of Tsar Alexander II Maria Alexandrovna (Marie of Hesse) · Nicholas Alexandrovich, Tsesarevich of Russia

Nice connection: Regular winter visitor; tragedy of 1865
Address: Villa Bermond (now the site of the Cathedral), off Boulevard du Tzarewitch

The second Tsarina to winter regularly in Nice was Maria Alexandrovna, wife of Alexander II. Her legacy in the city is inseparable from one of the most poignant events in Russian imperial history.

In the spring of 1865, Tsarevich Nicholas Alexandrovich — the heir apparent, aged 21 — continued to decline from cerebro-spinal meningitis, and he died on 24 April 1865, at the Villa Bermond in Nice. On his deathbed, Nicholas expressed the wish that his fiancée, Princess Dagmar of Denmark, should become the bride of his younger brother Alexander.

As he lay dying in Villa Bermond, the people of Nice stood outside in silence, mourning with the Imperial Family. His parents bought the grounds and villa in which the Tsarevich died. They tore down the villa, and built a chapel in the exact location where his deathbed had been.

The story has one more remarkable thread: Princess Dagmar, the young Danish fiancée who had rushed to Nice to be at Nicholas's bedside, did marry his brother Alexander — who became Tsar Alexander III. Their son was Nicholas II, the last Emperor of Russia, who was named in memory of his uncle who died in Nice.

What remains today:

- The **Chapelle du Tsarévitch** (Chapel of the Tsarevich), Boulevard du Tzarewitch — the memorial chapel built on the exact spot of the deathbed. Open to visitors.
- **Boulevard du Tzarewitch** — the street itself is named for him.
- **Avenue Nicolas II** — the avenue leading to the Cathedral, named in his memory.
- A bust of Tsarevich Nicholas Alexandrovich Romanov stands in Nice. Three years after his tragic death, a memorial chapel appeared on the territory of the Villa Bermond, and the adjacent street was renamed Tsarevich Boulevard.

> *→ Candidate for its own page: The Tsarevich of Nice*

[2)]

Tsar Alexander II & the Cathedral

Alexander II of Russia · Russian Orthodox Cathedral, Nice

Nice connection: Patron of the Cathedral; father of the Tsarevich who died here

In 1864, immediately after the railway reached Nice, Tsar Alexander II visited by train and was attracted by the pleasant climate. Thus began an association between Russians and the French Riviera that continues to this day.

During the second half of the 19th century, the French Riviera, and more particularly Nice, became a regular place of residence for the Russian Imperial Family. An important Russian colony settled there, leading to the construction of an Orthodox place of worship, one of the most important outside Russia.

The Villa Georges, 10 Boulevard Dubouchage, is the place where Katia, the morganatic wife of Tsar Alexander II, lived after her husband was killed, and where she died. She is buried in the Caucade cemetery.

Tsar Nicholas II & the Cathedral

Nicholas II of Russia

Nice connection: Principal funder of the Cathedral of Saint-Nicolas

In 1896, the 49-year-old widow Maria Feodorovna (formerly Princess Dagmar) learned of plans to build a new Russian Orthodox Church in Nice, as the one on Longchamp had become too small for the growing community. She took the project to heart. Her son, Tsar Nicholas II, paid for most of the church from his private funds.

The result was the Russian Orthodox Cathedral, Nice — the **Cathedral of Saint-Nicolas** — completed in 1912, the year before the Romanov dynasty celebrated its 300th anniversary, and just five years before its violent end.

The Orthodox Cathedral of St. Nicholas was designed by Mikhail Preobrazhensky, professor at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. It is inspired by the architecture of the Cathedral of St. Basil in Moscow. The cathedral follows the plan of a Greek cross and has a bell tower dome covered entirely with gold leaf. Its red brick façade is decorated with magnificent mosaics.

Today the cathedral continues to serve the Russian community of the region, numbering about 50,000, and is open to tourists as well.

What remains today:

- Cathédrale Saint-Nicolas de Nice, Avenue Nicolas II — the largest Eastern Orthodox cathedral in Western Europe, recognized as a national monument of France. Open Mon–Sat 9h–18h, Sun 12h–18h. Modest entry fee. Dress modestly; no photography inside.
- To the north of the Cathedral is the Lycée du Parc Impérial, originally a palace built to accommodate the Imperial Family during their stays in Nice.

> → *Candidate for its own page: The Russian Orthodox Cathedral of Nice*

III. The Writers

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904)

Playwright & short story writer Anton Chekhov · Three Sisters · The Seagull

Nice connection: Multiple winter stays, 1891–1901
Addresses: Hôtel Beau Rivage, 107 Quai des États-Unis (first visit, 1891); Pension Russe (later Pension Oasis), 23 rue Gounod (winters 1897–98, 1900, 1901)

At the beginning of December 1897, Chekhov went to the French Riviera, settled in Nice, and dreamed again of a visit to Africa. While he was at Nice, France was in the throes of the Dreyfus affair. Chekhov began studying the Dreyfus and Zola cases from shorthand notes, and becoming convinced of the innocence of both, wrote a heated letter to his publisher Suvorin, which led to a coolness between them.

The most famous writer in residence at the Pension Russe was Anton Chekhov, who finished the second half of *Three Sisters* there in 1900–1901, famously while the actors back home in Moscow were already rehearsing the first two acts. Despite complaining that Nice was “a bad place to write,” he appears to have done much of his best work there, writing scenes, letters, and short stories — always meticulously dressed, always by an open window regardless of the weather.

A plaque commemorates Chekhov's stay at the Hôtel Beau Rivage on the Promenade des Anglais, and a street — Rue Anton Tchekhov — is named for him in Nice.

What remains today:

- **Hôtel Beau Rivage**, 107 Quai des États-Unis — plaques at the entrance note Chekhov's stays.
- **Hôtel L'Oasis** (the former Pension Russe), 23 rue Gounod — commemorative plaques on the

facade. A quiet courtyard hotel, still operating, where both Chekhov and Lenin stayed.
- **Rue Anton Tchekhov** — a street in Nice named in his honour.

> → *Candidate for its own page: Chekhov in Nice*

3)

Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924)

Revolutionary & first Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin

Nice connection: Visits in 1909 and 1911
Address: Pension Russe (Hôtel Oasis), 23 rue Gounod; also 24 Boulevard Gambetta

Lenin — future architect of the Russian Revolution — visited Nice twice as an exile organising the Bolshevik movement from Western Europe. Lenin stayed at the Pension Russe in 1911. He had already come to Nice in 1909, writing to his sister: “It's splendid here — dry, warm air, the southern sea…”

The irony is considerable: the man who would destroy the Russian aristocracy was lodging in the same modest guesthouse where Chekhov had recovered his health a decade earlier, in a city whose boulevards, orthodox cathedral, and aristocratic cemeteries were the creation of the very Tsars he would overthrow.

What remains today: The commemorative plaques at **Hôtel L'Oasis**, 23 rue Gounod, note both Lenin's and Chekhov's stays — making it perhaps the only hotel in the world that hosted both a founder of modern drama and the founder of Soviet communism.

4)

IV. The Russian Heritage of Nice Today

The Russian Quarter: Streets & Architecture

Nice retains a remarkable concentration of Russian-named streets and buildings in the area around the Cathedral:

- **Boulevard du Tzarewitch** — named for Tsarevich Nicholas Alexandrovich who died here in 1865
- **Avenue Nicolas II** — leading to the Cathedral, named for the last Tsar
- **Lycée du Parc Impérial** — originally built as an Imperial palace for the Romanov family's stays
- **Musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret** — built by the wife of Prince Lev Viktorovitch Kotchoubeï, private adviser to Tsar Alexander II. One of Nice's finest museums, on Avenue des

Baumettes.

- **Villa Georges, 10 Boulevard Dubouchage** — where Katia, Alexander II's morganatic wife, lived and died after the Tsar's assassination. A residential building today.
- **Domaine de Valrose** (now the University of Nice campus) — formerly the extraordinary estate of Baron Von Derwies, Russian industrial magnate.

The Russian Orthodox Cemetery at Caucade

Russian Orthodox Cemetery, Nice

Address: Chemin du Monastère, Caucade, Nice (Bus line 8, stop Caucade)
Hours: Daily 9h–1

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Sources: Margo Lestz / CuriousRambler.com; NiceAzur.com; Wikipedia
2)

Sources: Wikipedia; Unofficial Royalty; CuriousRambler.com; NiceRendezvous.com
3)

Sources: EasyHiker.co.uk; TerresDecrivains.com; Brandeis University / Chekhov biography; Britannica
4)

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