Sentier du Littoral: Nice to Villefranche-sur-Mer

The Coastal Footpath from Port Lympia to the Bay of Villefranche

> "The view is breathtaking, blue as far as the eye can see, and the trail winds its way along the properties." — Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur Tourism, on the Sentier du Littoral [1)]

Of all the walks within reach of our address, the Sentier du Littoral is the one that takes our breath away — every time, without exception, regardless of how many times we have walked it. Where the Promenade des Anglais is Nice performing itself for the world, the Sentier du Littoral is the city in private: the rocky, salt-scented, wave-loud other coast that hides immediately behind Castle Hill and runs along cliffs and coves all the way to Villefranche-sur-Mer.

The path is part of the national Sentier du Littoral network, a coastal footpath that stretches along much of France's Mediterranean and Atlantic shoreline. [2)] The Nice section — from Port Lympia eastward around the Cap de Nice headland to Villefranche-sur-Mer — is among the most accessible and rewarding stretches of the entire network: close to the city, technically modest, and scenically extraordinary.

This entry complements and expands upon the brief description given in our Walking in Nice guide. It provides the detailed, section-by-section account that anyone planning to walk the path needs before they set out.

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At a Glance

Attribute	Detail
Total distance	5.3–6 km one-way (depending on start point)
Duration	1.5–2 hours walking; allow 3–4 hours with stops
Difficulty	Medium — path is mostly flat but includes multiple staircase sections dug into rock; not suitable for pushchairs or wheelchairs
Terrain	Rocky coastal path; wooden footbridges; sections of compacted track; two staircase sequences
Elevation gain	Modest but cumulative — the path rises and descends repeatedly over the cliff face; total gain approximately 100–120 m across the route
Start point	Jardin Félix Rainaud (Coco Beach), east of Port Lympia; coordinates 43.688394, 7.294411
End point	Port de la Darse, Villefranche-sur-Mer
Return options	Train (10 min, Nice-Ville); Bus lines 15 or 600
Best season	Year-round; best September–June; avoid July–August midday heat
Signage	Well-marked; yellow waymarks and “Sentier du Littoral” signs at all junctions
Dogs	Permitted on lead
Swimming	Several accessible rocky coves and one sandy beach (Plage de la Plateforme) en route

Getting to the Start

From our address at 4 bis Boulevard Dubouchage, the walk to the trailhead takes approximately 25–30 minutes on foot, passing through the most enjoyable part of the city. We recommend this approach rather than taking a bus, as the walk out is part of the experience.

Our recommended route from home to trailhead:

1. Walk south from our door to Place Masséna (3 min)
2. Cross Place Masséna and continue south through the Jardin Albert 1er to the Promenade des Anglais (5 min)
3. Turn left (east) and walk along the Promenade seafront toward Castle Hill (10 min)
4. At Quai des États-Unis, continue past the base of Castle Hill along the quay
5. Pass the fishing boats at the mouth of the old port and continue along Boulevard Franck Pilatte to Port Lympia (8 min)
6. From Port Lympia, continue east along the quay to the Jardin Félix Rainaud and the restaurant La Réserve — this is Coco Beach, the trailhead (5 min from Port Lympia)



If we begin before 8h30 in summer, the morning light falls on the east-facing cliffs ahead of us and the sea is at its calmest and most translucent. The Jardin Albert 1er is quiet at this hour, the quay smells of salt and fishing boats, and Port Lympia has a working-port atmosphere that evaporates by mid-morning when the restaurant terrasses fill. Starting early transforms the entire experience.

Alternatively, Bus Line 81 from Place Garibaldi (two stops east of Place Masséna on Tram Line 1) runs to Port Lympia and continues east along Boulevard Franck Pilatte to within a few minutes of the trailhead. Tram Line 2, direction Pont Michel, stops at Port Lympia.

The Route: Section by Section

The path divides naturally into five sections, alternating between the cliff footpath proper and two short road sections where private property blocks the coastal line. We describe it here from west to east — Nice to Villefranche — which gives a gradually unfolding panorama of the bay of Villefranche opening ahead as we walk.

Section 1: Port Lympia to Coco Beach

Distance: 800 m Surface: Paved quay *Effort: Flat, easy*

From the Port of Nice, the route follows the quays to the Jardin Félix Rainaux, where walkers find the coastal path to Cap de Nice. This opening stretch along the quay is a pleasant warm-up: the working port on our left, the first views of the Cap de Nice headland ahead, the fishing boats and pleasure craft anchored in the basin.

Coco Beach — officially the Jardin Félix Rainaud — is a small rocky inlet below the first cliff, known to locals as “la piscine” (the pool) for the protected swimming it offers. It is one of Nice's best-kept secrets: accessible only on foot, popular with local swimmers, and entirely invisible from the road above. The path starts at the Jardin Félix Rainaud, after the restaurant La Réserve, and overlooks the famous Coco Beach, nicknamed “the pool” by locals and many regulars.



Coco Beach is one of our favourite spots in Nice — not for swimming (the path demands we keep moving) but for the moment when the city suddenly disappears behind the first cliff and we are alone with the sea, the rock, and the sound of waves. It takes approximately 25 minutes from our door to reach this point. The contrast with Boulevard Dubouchage could scarcely be greater.

Section 2: Coco Beach to Cap de Nice

Distance: approximately 1.5 km Surface: Rocky coastal path, wooden footbridges, compacted track *Effort: Easy to moderate; path undulates close to sea level*

The path starts gently, hugging the coastline with the Mediterranean constantly at our side. Following the rocky trail, we soon feel like we have entered a different world, with waves crashing against the rocks below.

This is the most consistently beautiful section of the path. The trail winds along the base of the Mont Boron cliffs, just above sea level, with the rock dropping directly into the water on the seaward side and the wooded hillside rising steeply above. The vegetation here — wild fennel, rosemary, sea

lavender, and various Aleppo pine — is typical of the Mediterranean garrigue: aromatic, low-growing, and deeply characteristic of the Riviera cliff environment.

Notice the historic villas higher up on Mont Boron: Château de l'Anglais, Villa Le Roc Fleuri, and Villa Beau Site — Belle Époque and eclectic revival buildings perched above the cliff, visible from the path as fragments of tower and terrace above the treetops. The Château de l'Anglais, with its Mughal-inspired towers, is particularly recognisable and is documented in our Architecture guide as one of Nice's notable exotic-revival buildings.

At this section's furthest point, we reach a waypoint where it is our choice whether to climb the many stairs up to the main road, or make a short detour to Plage de la Plateforme — which we would strongly recommend.

Detour: Plage de la Plateforme

The Plage de la Plateforme is a small rocky beach accessible only from the coastal path — no road access, no concessions, no crowds. It is the most secluded swimming spot on this entire stretch of coast and is rarely busy except on summer weekends. Bring a towel and plan a stop: the combination of clear shallow water, enclosing rock, and silence is exceptional. [3)]



We always stop at Plage de la Plateforme on any walk when the sea is calm enough for swimming. The water here is exceptionally clear — the rocky bottom is visible at 4–5 metres depth — and the enclosure of the cove means it is warmer than the open sea. A short swim here, then continuing dry on the path, adds perhaps 20 minutes to the overall time and is worth every one of them.

Section 3: The Road Bypass — Boulevard Maeterlinck

Distance: 800 m Surface: Paved road *Effort: Flat road walking; the only section without sea views*

At the Cap de Nice headland, private property — the Palais Maeterlinck estate — blocks the coastal line and forces the path briefly inland. A long series of stairs awaits, allowing us to reach the Basse Corniche, on Boulevard Maeterlinck, to reach the second part of the path. We simply walk about 800 metres along the boulevard and the path starts again on the right at the stairs.

The Palais Maeterlinck is itself of some interest: it was the residence of the Belgian Nobel laureate Maurice Maeterlinck, whose play *Pelléas et Mélisande* was performed at the Artistique club on our boulevard in 1912. The vast Belle Époque villa is now a luxury hotel; its grounds extend to the cliff edge, hence the path diversion. The road section passes below its perimeter walls.



The 800-metre road section is the walk's only dull passage. The Basse Corniche carries a moderate amount of traffic and has no footpath separate from the road in some stretches. Stay well to the right, face oncoming traffic, and be alert. The road section is mercifully short and the return to the coastal path at its eastern end is immediately obvious — the “Sentier du Littoral” sign is visible from the road and the stairs leading

back down to the cliff are on the right.

Section 4: Pointe des Sans-Culottes to Villefranche

Distance: approximately 2 km Surface: Rocky coastal path; stairs cut into rock *Effort: Moderate — the most demanding section, with the greatest stair content*

This is the section that most walkers describe as their favourite, and it is ours. This section is more rugged, but offers an enchanting setting and an immersive experience in the vegetation — more shaded, and full of magnificent coves.

After passing the blockhouse of the Pointe des Sans-Culottes — restored and secured by the Department — we go up and down a series of stairs dug into the rock to enjoy the panorama of the famous bay of Villefranche-sur-Mer. Opposite, we can see the Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat peninsula, a real garden overlooking the sea.

The blockhouse at the Pointe des Sans-Culottes is a concrete German Second World War fortification, one of several along this coastline. Its name, however, is much older — the “sans-culottes” were the radical republican faction of the French Revolution, and the headland was named in the revolutionary period. The combination of 18th-century political history and 20th-century military archaeology embedded in the same cliff is entirely typical of Nice's layered relationship to its own past.

The stairs cut into the rock in this section are the path's most physically demanding feature. They are not technically difficult, but they are steep and uneven, and the handrails — where present — should be used. In wet or misty conditions this section becomes genuinely slippery; we do not walk it after rain or in the *mistral*.

The views that open as we climb and descend each staircase are the walk's finest moments: the bay of Villefranche appearing progressively ahead, its perfect horseshoe shape framed by the Cap Ferrat peninsula to the south and the cliffs we are walking along to the north. The depth of the bay — the deepest natural anchorage on the French Riviera — is visible in the dark blue of the water at its centre.

Section 5: Arriving in Villefranche-sur-Mer

Distance: approximately 500 m Surface: Path descending to quay, then flat harbourside walking *Effort: Easy finale*

At the end of the path, we arrive in the Lazaret district of Villefranche-sur-Mer and pass the Paganini Tower — which according to legend sheltered the remains of the violinist — and its glazed earthenware roof, the only surviving vestige of the old Lazaret. The Lazaret was a quarantine station where ships arriving from plague-affected ports were required to hold their passengers before entering the harbour — a reminder that the beauty of Villefranche's bay has always been shadowed by the history of epidemic disease.

The connection to our own wiki is direct: Niccolò Paganini, the violinist who died in a house on Rue Droite in Vieux Nice in 1840 and whose presence is documented in our Music page and whose plaque we pass on our Architecture walking tour, is commemorated in the very last landmark before we

reach Villefranche. The Riviera's history pursues us even here.

We can continue to the heart of the city by following the port of La Darse — which houses the shipyards and the National Centre for Scientific Research — and then along the Citadel Saint-Elme, a vestige of the 16th century.

Points of Interest Along the Route

Location	Distance from start	Description
Coco Beach (Jardin Félix Rainaud)	0 km	Trailhead; local swimming spot; sheltered rocky inlet
Plage de la Plateforme	~1.5 km	Hidden cove; best swimming on the route; access only on foot
Château de l'Anglais (visible above)	~1.2 km	Neo-Mughal Belle Époque villa; part of Nice's exotic revival tradition
Palais Maeterlinck	~2.5 km	Former residence of Belgian Nobel laureate Maurice Maeterlinck; now a luxury hotel
Pointe des Sans-Culottes blockhouse	~3.5 km	Restored WWII German fortification; first views of Villefranche bay
Panorama over Villefranche bay	~4 km	The walk's finest viewpoint; Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat peninsula ahead
Paganini Tower (Tour Paganini)	~5 km	Sole surviving vestige of old Lazaret quarantine station; Paganini legend
Port de la Darse	~5.3 km	End of coastal path; harbourside entry to Villefranche-sur-Mer
Chapelle Saint-Pierre	500 m from La Darse	Harbour chapel decorated entirely by Jean Cocteau in 1957
Citadelle Saint-Elme	600 m from La Darse	16th-century citadel; museums; rampart walk; views over bay



The Chapelle Saint-Pierre at the end of the walk in Villefranche is one of the finest small interior spaces on the entire Riviera. Jean Cocteau — filmmaker, poet, and visual artist — decorated its interior with frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Saint Peter and homages to the local fishing community in 1957. It is open for visits; admission is a few euros and takes perhaps 20 minutes. After the physical exertion of the coastal path, the dim, frescoed interior of the chapel provides one of the more unexpected and quietly moving cultural experiences in the region.

Practical Preparation

Footwear

This is the single most important variable. Road shoes, trainers, or flat-soled sandals are not adequate for the rocky sections and stairways. We recommend trail shoes or walking shoes with a firm grip sole. Flip-flops are dangerous on this path and should be left at home.

Water and Food

There are no refreshment points between Coco Beach and the arrival in Villefranche. We carry a minimum of 1 litre per person; in summer 1.5 litres. The path is south-facing and exposed to full sun from mid-morning in summer. A small snack — fruit, a bar, anything light — makes the mid-route break at Plage de la Plateforme more pleasant.

Timing

Season	Recommended departure	Notes
July–August	Before 08h00	Path is fully exposed; midday heat is debilitating; the path is also at its most crowded
May–June	Before 09h30	Ideal conditions; sea is still cool for swimming; light is superb
September–October	Any time before 15h00	The best walking months; golden autumn light; fewer people
November–April	Any time in daylight	Excellent walking; sea air is bracing; check weather for rain or mistral

Weather Warnings



We do not walk the Sentier du Littoral after heavy rain or during the mistral wind. The path's rocky sections and stairs become genuinely dangerous when wet — the limestone and sandstone surfaces are extremely slippery when damp. The mistral produces wave surges that can reach the lower sections of the path without warning, even in otherwise calm conditions. If in doubt, check the weather forecast and the sea state before setting out. [4)]

Accessibility

The Sentier du Littoral is not accessible for wheelchairs or pushchairs. We recommend against taking a pushchair due to the numerous staircases along the route. Several sections require stepping over rocks and using hands briefly for balance. The path is suitable for most adults in reasonable physical condition and for children aged approximately 8 and above who are comfortable on uneven terrain.

Returning to Nice

We always return by train. The simplicity of this option — walk to Villefranche station (10 minutes from the harbour), board a regional TER service, and be back at Nice-Ville in 10 minutes — removes any temptation to rush the walk or skip the stop in Villefranche. We can return to Nice on foot by the same path — particularly beautiful at sunset; by TER train from Villefranche-sur-Mer station to Nice-Ville or Nice Riquier; or by bus lines 15 or 600.

Return option	Journey time	Frequency	Notes
TER train (Villefranche → Nice-Ville)	10 min	Approx. every 30 min	Most convenient; station 10 min walk from La Darse
Bus 15 (Villefranche → Nice)	25–35 min	Regular service	Stops along the Basse Corniche; scenic option
Bus 600 (Villefranche → Nice)	25–35 min	Regular service	Similar to Bus 15
Return on foot	1.5–2 hours	—	Recommended at sunset; the same views in reverse are equally beautiful

Extending the Walk: Beyond Villefranche

For those with more time and energy, the Sentier du Littoral network continues beyond Villefranche in both directions, offering two natural extensions to the basic route.

East to Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat

From Villefranche harbour, a signed path continues east and south around the Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat peninsula — a 10 km loop around one of the most exclusive and botanically rich headlands on the Riviera. The longest stretch extends along the western headland, passing the exclusive Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat, a Four Seasons hotel, and the lighthouse with panoramic views over Villefranche-sur-Mer bay and Nice's Bay of Angels. The path continues past numerous inviting coves perfect for snorkelling before reaching Passable Beach. Bus 15 returns to Nice from Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat village.

West via Mont Boron

For a more demanding circuit back to Nice, experienced walkers can ascend from the coastal path to the Parc du Mont Boron — a protected forest park above the cliff — and return via the Fort du Mont Boron (1887) and the Fort du Mont Alban (1557–1560) before descending to Nice. The Mont Boron park offers splendid views and panoramas over the city of Nice but also over the bay of Villefranche-sur-Mer. It shelters the battery of Mont Boron, built in 1886–1887 and intended for the protection of both the Baie des Anges and the bay of Villefranche-sur-Mer. This circuit adds approximately 3–4 km and 150 m of elevation to the basic route.

Quick Reference

Tear off or save for the walk.

Our door to trailhead: 25–30 minutes on foot (south to Promenade, east along seafront, through Port Lympia)

Trailhead coordinates: 43.688394, 7.294411 (Jardin Félix Rainaud / Coco Beach)

Key section distances:

- Port Lympia → Coco Beach: 800 m (flat quay)
- Coco Beach → Cap de Nice (Plage de la Plateforme detour): ~1.5 km (coastal path)
- Road bypass (Boulevard Maeterlinck): 800 m
- Pointe des Sans-Culottes → Villefranche La Darse: ~2 km (best section)
- **Total: 5.3–6 km**

Do not walk after: Heavy rain, mistral, or forecast rough seas

Must carry: Trail shoes (non-negotiable), 1L water minimum per person, sun protection April–October

Swimming stop: Plage de la Plateforme (~1.5 km; add 20 min)

Cultural stop in Villefranche: Chapelle Saint-Pierre (Cocteau frescoes; small admission fee; 20 min)

Return train: Villefranche-sur-Mer station → Nice-Ville, 10 min, approximately every 30 min

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Last reviewed: March 2026. Route conditions on the Sentier du Littoral can change following storm damage or maintenance work. Always check current status with the Nice Tourism Office (explorenicecotedazur.com) before setting out, particularly in the winter months.

This entry is a companion to Walking in Nice, where Route 5 provides the overview, and to The Architecture of Nice, where the Mont Boron villas and Fort du Mont Alban are discussed. See also Music and Composers for the story of the Paganini Tower passed at the walk's end.

1) Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur Tourism, *Sentier du Littoral Nice*, provence-alpes-cotedazur.com, January 2025. https://provence-alpes-cotedazur.com/en/things-to-do/routes-and-walks/sentier-du-littoral-nice-nice-en-3480174/

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