

*South of France,  
South of Florence,  
(AZ that is)*

As the new year rolls along on waves of economic uncertainty, travel plans may be different than one might have hoped for a few months ago. A traveling gardener dreaming of travel to European gardens may be despairing of seeing old world architecture, lush gardens and experiencing the cultural surprises such a trip offers. A few years ago I had the opportunity to rent an apartment in the South of France in a small town called

Beaulieu-Se-Mur, located between Monte Carlo and Nice, France. This location is a gardeners dream as one fabulous public garden after another surrounds the area. In Monte Carlo, there is the Princess Grace Rose Garden, in Menton, - Jardin du Val Rameh, In St-Jean-Cap-Ferat the Villa Ephrussi-de-Rothschild estate and gardens.



The Baroness Rothschild was the granddaughter of the founder of the Rothschild financial empire. Her gardens fill 17 acres and include a Florentine garden, a Temple of Love copied from Versailles, a Spanish garden, Stone garden and Japanese garden. The surprise to me was the familiarity of the plant palate to our own Southwest. The French Riviera has mild winters, low rainfall, a month of so of strong winds and high temperatures. I found blazing bougainvillea, jasmine, agaves, olive trees, citrus, varieties of ice plants and hibiscus and roses filling this beautiful space.

I expected sunflowers and lavender in France but had to seek out those views in the countryside. Exploring the neighborhoods in the small coastal towns I found gardens remarkably like our gardens here. Pots of

geraniums scattered about, though one red geranium in a small terra cotta pot rose 8' high and tied to the drain pipe for support was covered with blooms. I have not had that longevity with any of my geraniums!

Walking is a part of the lifestyle of France and simply strolling the neighborhood streets I found brick designs in colors and patterns, which made the most of every small courtyard. Cathedrals, Romanesque arches, and mosaics were everywhere. The cultural pace of life in the south of France encouraged me to sit in a small bistro, sip my coffee and enjoy the view right in front of me. If you can go, do!

If not, don't despair simply plan a drive to the South of Florence, AZ! Just 8 miles south of Florence off highway 87 is the St Anthony's Greek Monastery. Everything described above (except the French bistro) is available here! Florence, AZ, so often known for the State Prison surely will become known for this incredible place.

In 1995, 6 Greek Orthodox Monks traveled to AZ to establish this monastic community for men. On a 300 acre section of land there are now 8 chapels, 50 acres of thriving gardens, olive & citrus groves, and vegetable beds.

Below are six photos, view of France and view of the Monastery, can you determine if it is France or Florence?





All the photos on the left are from France and on the right are from south of Florence.

In just 13 years a meditative oasis has risen from bare desert. The lush gardens are mixed among the footpaths of intricate brick and flagstone work. The 3 artesian wells on the property provide water for the plans and fountains. The 8 chapels honoring saints of the faith are filled with masterful paintings of religious icons, glittering candelabra imported from Greece, ornate wood carvings imported from Europe.

Romanesque arches, stain glass windows and elaborate stone work are all around the site. In the summer of 2008 a new chapel on a hill east of the monastery was completed and dedicated. This white chapel with pillars and curves topped with a bold blue roof is reminiscent of a Greek villa.

In preparing to visit the monastery I stood in my closet trying to prepare for a visit to another culture. Women visitors must follow a specific dress code of head covering, long sleeves, long skirt & no bare legs. The conforming clothing reminded me every step of the way how unique a space this was. Here too, I wanted to slow down and sit quietly by a fountain enjoying



the rustling palm fronds and comfort of the shade enjoying the view in any direction.

While one feels a certain excitement in planning a trip to “the south of France” you truly can here in AZ, have a European experience of old world architecture, lush gardens and cultural surprise just “south of Florence” and it won’t take you long to get there!