



# *French* DIVE

LIVING MORE  
WITH LESS  
IN THE SOUTH  
OF FRANCE

ERIC FREEZE

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*Living More with Less in the South of France*

ERIC FREEZE

S L A N T



FRENCH DIVE

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Slant

An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

[www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com)

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-7252-6615-5

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-7252-6614-8

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-7252-6616-2

*Cataloguing-in-Publication data:*

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Names: Freeze, Eric.

Title: French dive : living more with less in the south of France. / Eric Freeze.

Description: Eugene, OR: Slant, 2020.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-7252-6615-5 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-7252-6614-8  
(paperback) | ISBN 978-1-7252-6616-2 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Nice (France) -- Description and travel. | France -- Nice. |  
France -- Social life and customs. | Travelers' writings, Canadian -- France. |  
Spear fishing.

Classification: PR9199.4.F7375 F71 2020 (print) | PR9199.4.F7375 (ebook)

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Manufactured in the U.S.A.

JULY 27, 2020

For Freeze FC



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Part I

**TAKEOFF**

Once on the board, do not form the habit of hesitation.

—GERALD BARNES, *SWIMMING AND DIVING* (1922)



## Chapter 1

# Arrival

FOUR KIDS, AGES ONE TO SEVEN, two years apart—lines on a height chart like marks on a graph—arrived with Rixa and me at Indianapolis International Airport. We extracted ourselves from our friend’s minivan, each child carrying one of four thrift store backpacks: army-green canvas, black with white stenciled basketballs, a red Speedo pack, partly waterproof. The last a clamshell brown with pink accents, the size of a hand purse. Our one-year-old Ivy toddled like an awkward Ninja Turtle. She would be in my hiking backpack for most of the trip but still it seemed important for her to have her own bag. Inside each bag were four sets of socks, four pairs of underwear, four individual toys for the two-day trip to Nice.

In the check-in line, we learned of a delay. Tornado warning. Potential flash flooding nearby. The gate agent said, “You’re all on a flight for tomorrow.” Our ride was already halfway back to Crawfordsville so we booked a hotel. What was one extra day when we’d be there a year? We checked our bags and now the individual backpacks seemed pure genius for our foresight.

The next morning, we had clear skies to Chicago, then on to Frankfurt. An immigration officer scrutinized our American and Canadian passports, our year-long French visas. I will be on sabbatical, I said. He nodded.

What I didn’t say: we bought an apartment. We were potential immigrants. This year was our testing ground, to see if we could renovate a tiny apartment and live in it with our family of six. I didn’t tell him that our

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apartment was the most expensive thing we had ever purchased, that in order to get a mortgage we had provided a document to the bank stating my full salary and not the half-salary we'd actually be living on. I didn't tell him that up until the day before our departure, the bank still hadn't finalized the processing of our loan. The notary wanted to delay the closing till the middle of August, leaving us homeless for a couple weeks. I didn't tell him about the emails between our bank, the notary, our real estate agent, and our mortgage broker that whizzed back and forth. Would it be possible for us to move in before closing? Unlikely, since we would have squatter's rights and could remain in the apartment for years without paying a cent. Would the notary accept a scanned PDF of the completed loan? No, the French government required the originals with your signatures and handwriting, *s'il vous plait*. And lots of complicated stamps.

I didn't tell him how then magically it was done; overnight express mail and emails reconvened closing and our coffers emptied into a French bank account. A scanned document declared us owners of a 700-square-foot apartment across from the Palais Lascaris in Old Nice. Our optimism regarding this singular feat eclipsed our financial fears. Where would the money come from? We didn't know and he didn't ask.

In Nice, the tempo slowed. The airstrip was like landing on the water. Palms swayed. It was the second of August, and the heat sapped energy from the crowds. We rolled our bags out to the curb, one by one. A Mercedes van pulled up. A man shook my hand. We were thinking of taking the bus, I said. "With all these bags? Non, non, monsieur." The pneumatic hatch shushed when it opened and the taxi driver piled our bags inside. Our kids clicked their seatbelts. No car seats or boosters marred the black leather. Till now, my children had rarely heard another adult besides Rixa and me speak French. It was an intimate language, the language of bedtime stories and family meals. To have this burly man with his knitted black t-shirt, his hipster jeans and leather shoes, suddenly *parlez-vous-ing* felt invasive. How did this guy know the same language as Papa? We closed the doors. Air blew through the vents.

"Where to?"

"Old Nice," I said. "We just bought an apartment."

"You bought an apartment in Old Nice?" Silence. He pulled out into traffic: the famed Promenade des Anglais, the walkway of the English. Now

## ARRIVAL

the taxi driver played tour guide. We passed the Lenval hospital where years earlier Angelina Jolie gave birth to twins. “Imagine running into Brad Pitt at the bakery,” he said. We passed the Negresco, where Isadora Duncan died, her scarf caught in the wheels of her car. Affectations can be dangerous.

Soon we turned up along the Place Masséna, skirting Old Nice. The driver tapped his hands on the steering wheel, more and more irritated the closer we got. “Old Nice, Old Nice. You know, couldn’t pay me to live in Old Nice. Why would you ever buy there? You can’t get in and out, the place is packed with tourists all day. I never can find parking.”

Till now, everyone we knew had approved of our decision. His disdain took me aback. I explained: it was a different way of living. We wouldn’t have a car. We would walk everywhere. The kids’ school was right around the corner. A small grocery store was across the street. We would live more with less. All the exasperating logistics of buying our apartment and the precariousness of our finances were still forefront in my mind. It wasn’t like we hadn’t given this a lot of thought.

“A grocery in the Old Town? Maybe if you won the lottery you could afford it.”

“There are two discount groceries within walking distance, cheap as you can find anywhere.”

“And the noise. Have you thought about that? Just a few years ago, the place was dangerous—knife fights, prostitution. Not at all the kind of place for a family.”

“But now there’s the *coulée verte*, all the playgrounds, the *miroir d’eau*. Families go there all the time.”

“You do what you want but you’re going to regret it. Why didn’t you buy in the Port neighborhood? That’s the only truly Niçois neighborhood anymore. The only place where you can get real *socca*.”

“We looked at the Port but it was further from the amenities we liked.”

“Four kids in Old Nice.” He held a hand to his head like a migraine was coming on.

He dropped us off at the Place Centrale. No way he was driving his Mercedes any further. Every car in Old Nice had a ding on its bumper, scrapes down the sides. “I have to back us up or I’ll never get out of here,” he said. The Place Centrale connected a grocery store, Lou Pilha Leva, a popular *socca* place, two other restaurants, and a realtor’s office. It was 9 p.m.

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and every bench and table and café was full. He inched his way through the crowds. Parked. Clicked his hazard lights on and flung open the doors. Our children clambered over the seats. The taxi driver piled our maximum ten allotted bags on the street. Passersby dodged them like they were dog poop.

“Good luck,” he said. “Four kids in Old Nice. You guys have got to be crazy.”

No worries. We were here. Our realtor Bart was supposed to meet us with the keys. The kids were whining, hungry after two days of sleep deprivation and airplane food. We trucked our bags in segments to the awning of a clothing store advertising blue-tinted beach dresses on sale. An Italian couple offered to help: where were we going? Thanks for asking but we didn’t really know. We were nearer to our apartment than we thought, having deferred to the taxi driver’s knowledge of Old Nice more than our own. Our kids munched on rolled-up portions of socca: the pancake-like Niçois street snack made out of chickpeas. We perched on our suitcases. Across the street diners sat on café chairs or wooden benches.

A Frenchman with a close-cropped beard power-walked his way through the crowds. Bart had the bearing and dexterity of a soccer player; at any moment he could cut down an alley or sprint after a fallen coin. We shook hands and he *bised* Rixa and patted our son Dio on the head. “The apartment’s just up the street. Turn at the cannon ball.” We slid Ivy into the baby backpack. Bart grabbed two of our suitcases. Our three-year-old Inga rolled a clacking carry-on across stone tiles. Bart pointed to the cannon ball. “Catherine Ségurane,” he said. “Most powerful woman in Nice. Beat the Turks in the late 1500s. The cannon ball is from the siege.” Three iron prongs attached it to the corner of the Rue Droite: the straight street that ironically wasn’t straight. Soon we passed the Palais Lascaris, the aristocratic residence that now housed a museum of musical instruments. Now we stopped in front of a gray door: 18 Rue Droite. We were home.

Bart flipped through his keys. “Use the tiny key here,” he said. “The fancy one is for the apartment. You should really go to the *syndic* to get a magnetic key.”

The hallway and stairs were dingier than I remembered. A line of concrete about a foot wide extended all the way to the back wall, covering up a waste pipe. The yellow plaster walls were cracked and peeling. I carried two 50-lb suitcases and Ivy in the baby backpack. When we got to the fourth floor, I was winded. Bart opened the apartment and we all filed in. The kids

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careened around the empty living room in circles. Bart and I dropped bags and trudged back down the stairs for more.

The last bags up, Bart and I downed glasses of water. Rixa stood with her arms folded, looking up at the fourteen-foot ceilings and examining the white walls like she was in either the Sistine chapel or a maximum-security prison.

“It’s smaller than I thought it would be,” she said.

Till now, I was the only one who had physically seen the apartment. I had brought back video footage and a SIM card full of pictures but the only one who’d been here was me. The foyer led into a living room/kitchen bisected by a half-wall partition. To the left was a bedroom with a sink and a shower. A tiny hallway separated the front and back halves of the apartment. The back bedroom had lower ceilings. A wooden range hood from when it used to be a kitchen dangled over a bare mattress. Above the bedroom and cave-like back bathroom was an attic and storage space that qualified as another bedroom. But the bedrooms still had beds and dressers and linens from the apartment’s time as a student rental. We could finally put our exhausted children to bed.

Outside the front window, a guitarist sang Johnny Cash’s “Ring of Fire.” The children were already upstairs in the attic, laying claim to their sleeping arrangements. Dio and Zari would fit nicely on the double mattress, Inga would be in the back bedroom and Ivy would sleep with Rixa and me in the front. It was only 700-square feet but everyone fit.

Bart said goodbye and wished us luck. We had business that could wait till next week. Get settled. Enjoy your new home.

Rixa started to put Ivy down and Inga was already zonked. Our two oldest were still energetic and I proposed taking them for a walk to give Rixa and Ivy some peace. “Make it quick,” she said. She wanted to get to sleep too. Soon we were bounding down the stairs and out the front door.

It was past eleven and the streets were full. The Place Rosetti was lit up with crowds of tourists waiting for ice cream at Fennocchio’s. When I visited in March the façade of the Cathédrale St. Réparate was under renovation but now it was finished and the yellows and greens were day-glow bright.

Where the Rue Benoit Bunico met the Rue de la Préfecture, a street performer stretched a string with two batons. A bubble emerged. Zari and Dio stared and giggled. The man handed the batons to Zari and the string drooped like a smiling mouth. He showed her how to open it, to pull the

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batons through the air till a gigantic bubble built and then separated. We walked through the arcades. Soon we were on the Promenade des Anglais. The boardwalk was a necklace of light.

We climbed down the stone steps onto the rocky beach. Waves raked the pebbles. Circles of college kids passed around bottles of wine. *It's the ocean!* my children said and I didn't correct them. They picked up rocks the size of their fists and tossed them into the water. I wanted to tell them to remember this day, this first meeting of the sea, but I knew that the memory would blur with so many others over the next year.

We would come to this spot, following almost exactly our same route, carrying beach toys and snorkels and bottles of sunscreen and mats to lie out in the sun. The sea would change from a milky fluorescent blue to the gray of an overcast sky. Storms would bring water from the mountains and churn the water tan or brown. *You're going to regret it. Four kids in old Nice.*

As tourists emptied the beach of their sunburned bodies, we'd gradually become more visible, the residents who shouldn't be residents, the Nordic-looking family with their blond braids and smiling faces. Neighbors would register surprise—you're still here? We thought you were tourists! Our children would start school, wearing their secondhand clothes and talking French in the accent that they had inherited from me. We were academics in the humanities and this was the first time that we had moved somewhere deliberately, uprooted our family from everything familiar to come to this place with its narrow pedestrian streets and proximity to the mountains and sea. We couldn't know what would come: the challenges in school, the home renovations, the friends and visitors who would change the trajectory of our lives. But today? Today my kids laughed and squealed at each tiny wave lapping near their feet. This was the beginning. Each rock they tossed was like a wish or a promise, falling to the bottom of the sea.