

Marseille sold as the place to be

By Mary Fitzgerald Fri 28 Aug 2026

When I first started visiting Marseille more than 20 years ago, few could have predicted that France's second city would become one of the most popular destinations in the most-visited country in the world. Tarnished by stereotypes and home to some of Europe's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the port city seemed down on its luck, unloved and, in the eyes of many, somewhere to avoid. Tourists stopping at the city's Saint-Charles station would clutch their bags while waiting for their connecting train to rural Provence, or the beaches of the Côte d'Azur.

Two decades on, poverty and drug gang violence still affect parts of Marseille, but this rough diamond has been reinvented as a modish holiday destination. Booking.com has revealed it has surpassed Paris and Nice as the most searched-for destination for French users of the site. Breathless foreign media coverage has driven the number of overseas visitors. From seaside petanque to vocoder rap and pizza served on aluminium plates, influencers revel in the aesthetic of the urban riviera and promote the city's most Instagram-friendly corners. Tourist numbers are expected to reach almost 7 million this year.

This has proved a boon for Marseille in many ways: more than 20,000 jobs are linked to the local tourism sector, which generates €1.4bn (£1.2bn) annually. But it has also prompted a heated debate over the challenges of overtourism. This summer has felt like something of a tipping point. In June, the inhabitants of Les Goudes, a fishing hamlet on the city's periphery that has become an Instagram magnet, took to the streets in protest. One resident said they were so overwhelmed by visitor numbers that they felt as if they were under house arrest.

When swimming was banned at the heaving Plage des Catalans earlier this month due to bacterial contamination, many local people blamed overcrowding. Residents of other heavily frequented neighbourhoods are organising against unprecedented levels of noise and litter, along with higher prices. Anti-Airbnb sentiment, often expressed in graffiti, has been building for several years; the platform began flourishing here partly due to a shortage of hotel rooms. Meanwhile, campaigns against cruise ships have gained popular support.

It's common to hear Marseillais say they don't want their city to become another Barcelona or Lisbon; the problem here has been the breakneck speed of the transformation. When I made the city my home almost a decade ago, tourism remained relatively low key. It was in summer 2020 – when masses of French visitors descended on Marseille after months of pandemic lockdown – that the city first discovered overtourism. The subsequent deluge of tourists is accompanied by a wave of gentrification that has driven up property prices and stirred local resentment.