

PUFFING AND PUTTING

■ Vintage Vespa fan
Jean-Jacques Gilliard
dresses to ride

Forget va-va-voom, it's putt-putt-putt on the streets of Marseille, thanks to the city's decades-long love affair with the Vespa. **Seb Carayol** takes a ride. Photos by **Katie Callan**



IN MARSEILLE

Sitting in warm sunshine at a street-side café in France's second-largest city, sipping a *café au lait* and reading the latest on local football heroes Olympique de Marseille, life is good. Then, I'm awakened from my reverie by a distinctive waspish sound growing slowly louder. I look up and see a phalanx of helmeted riders on brightly coloured scooters coming round the corner in a wedge formation. From local clubs to boy racers and aging collectors, you're never far from a Vespa rider on Marseille's streets. The familiar putt-putt resonates 24/7 and has been part of the local folklore for 60 years, and I'm here to find out why.

Robert Charrier, 80, a local resident and founding member of the Vespa Club de France (established in Marseille in 1951), says: "We're not so far from the Italian Riviera in Marseille, so it wasn't too surprising that Vespas took off here. Our Vespa club is the second oldest in France, but we in Marseille had an edge over other cities and that was the Vespadrome. That's what really made the city and its people go crazy for the bikes." ➤



LEAN ON ME

■ Antoine from VFSC poses beside his beloved black Vespa

The Vespadrome was a racetrack specifically for Vespa riders and, while it's no longer around, it remains part of the city's scooter heritage and is still talked about today. Built in 1952 by local Vespa dealer Jean Cabello on a lot outside his shop, it was originally for customers to try out their new wheels. Cabello used it as a marketing tool to jump-start the sales of a machine that was still an oddity at that time even in one of the most Italian-influenced cities in France.

Word of the Vespadrome spread quickly, and soon it went from being a simple try-out track to a fully functioning venue – blowing Cabello's expectations. His Vespadrome became legendary, attracting Vespa riders from all over France to compete.

Charrier, who still rides a mint-condition

“The great thing with the Vespa scene is that everybody is in it for different reasons. In Marseille, each scooter is as different as its driver. We're a diverse bunch”

GS160 Vespa First Series, was one of those competitors and won a number of these races. Marseille from the early 1950s onwards became France's unofficial Vespa capital.

Almost six decades later, though the Vespadrome and Cabello himself are long gone, the passion for Vespas continues. Over the past decade, scooter shops that double as hangouts have been popping up all over town, signalling a real revival. The most popular spots are recently established La Strada di Vespa and the VFSC. The former is an immaculately maintained garage-cum-shop set on a steep street in the Saint-Charles neighbourhood, where customers know each other and always end up sitting down for a coffee or Vespa-oriented conversation.

The latter is a garage-cum-club and the headquarters of the Vespa Fan Scooter





Club, in the Endoume quarter. The VFSC is more radical than La Strada di Vespa, for the hardcore of Vespa fans. As Antoine, the in-house mechanic with a shaved head, rolled-up pants and burgundy Dr. Martens, explains: "It originally stood for an Italian swear word, which I won't repeat but you can guess."

The club itself is 80 members strong, but anyone and everyone is welcome when it comes to asking advice, buying spare parts, or just hanging out on one of the yellow couches inside the clubhouse. Perhaps having a drink or watching a movie – biker cult classic *Quadrophenia* is often on.

"We have a more rock 'n' roll, blue-collar approach," says Antoine. "The great thing with the Vespa scene is that everybody is in it for different reasons. In Marseille, each



scooter is as different as its driver. We're a diverse bunch."

That diversity is visible on the weekly rides organised by Vespa clubs, which are an excellent way to see the city. On the sunny Saturday morning when I join in on a hired vintage Vespa (the word means "wasp" in Italian), our ride is organised by the originals, the Vespa Club de Marseille. Our 30-strong Vespa pack tours through the town towards beautiful Cassis, shredding through the windy, pine-tree scented roads of La Gineste, a scenic limestone formation between the two towns. It's an incredible thrill to be part of a gang riding around and I feel as if I'm a character out of Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*.

There are no real tensions between the different Vespa groups here in Marseille, no ➤



KEEP IT WHEEL

- 📌 The clubs get on the road, heading to Cassis
- 📌 The Vespadrome in its racing heyday
- 📌 Right, that's it, you've passed your test son!



Vespa fans' manual

VESPA CLUB DE MARSEILLE

Monthly meetings at Bar l'Olympic (see below) and rides open to every Vespa style. For a complete schedule of local events, visit their website, vcdm.free.fr

LA STRADA DI VESPA

Shop, sales, repair – this site in the Saint-Charles area is a must for any Vespa nut. 19 Rue Saint Savournin, tel: +33 (0)9 5182 0936, email: LSDVservizio@free.fr

VFSC

Situated in the Endoume area. Drop into the clubhouse, meet fellow Vespa enthusiasts, get repairs done and order parts. 38 Rue Chateaubriand, tel: +33 (0)9 8183 6934, email: vfsc.marseille@gmx.fr

BAR L'OLYMPIC

Park your machine outside, pop inside for a drink, and soak up the scooter heritage. 2 Place de la Préfecture, tel: +33 (0)4 9133 2628.

VESPA CLASSIC CLUB

This Provence club is only open to pre-1977 scooters! Find out more on Facebook at "Vespa Classic Club Provence". Email: contact@vintagescooter.com



Most of the weekend rides begin at the Place de la Préfecture around 9am, and it's quite a sight to see the funky vehicles lined up ready to roll


PLACE TO BE
 Riders park up their scooters in the square outside Bar l'Olympic before a trip out of town

Mods versus Rockers – a friendly rivalry at most. Which is why Antoine and some of his fellow VFSC members are along for the ride. The beauty of the *amour du Vespa* is that it unites people who may not have ever spoken otherwise. Today, Antoine on his matt black “small frame” scooter is riding alongside Jean-Jacques Gilliard, an elderly pipe-smoking gentleman from the old-school dressed in a full-on vintage Vespa mechanic’s outfit.

Most of the weekend rides begin at the Place de la Préfecture around 9am, and it’s quite a sight to see the funky vehicles lined up ready to roll. The reason for this specific departure point is that in the corner of the square lies one of the lesser-known hangouts of the Marseille scooter scene: Bar l’Olympic. It may be tiny but numerous posters on this classic bistrot’s walls display a true commitment for the Italian wasp.

“We found out that the bar was the headquarters of the Vespa Club de France when my grandfather was running it,” owner Thierry Romans tells me over his zinc counter. “So we allowed the Vespa Club de Marseille to make it their meeting place too.”

It’s one of those places where any vintage scooter owner would stop for a drink. And a laugh, too, as Thierry, with his thick Marseille accent, is quite the storyteller. People even call the bar when they need spare parts.

Half a mile away from l’Olympic, two other die-hard Vespa fans can’t go on today’s ride. Eugénie Rehabi-Grandadam and her boyfriend Germain Hild are too busy. Since they opened La Strada di Vespa last year, they have been working solidly every single day. There’s a reason why their success was immediate. Set in a former printing plant, with its large storefront displaying a dozen machines in various states 



of restoration, La Strada is just too inviting, and the couple operating it just too good at their trade.

For the tall 27-year-old brunette, her love for the Vespa came from her aficionado dad, who took her riding on his scooter from the time she was a child. “We would even go grocery shopping on his Vespa,” Eugénie laughs. After being sent to secretary school, she could never shrug off her passion for all things mechanical, so quit and then earned a diploma to repair boat engines. In 2006 she became an intern at a scooter garage in Marseille, where her future sweetheart Germain was working at the time. It was love at first sight and this is how La Strada di Vespa was born.

In just one year, it has become the hottest place for people in the scene to park their bikes at. And the boutique doesn’t look like your typical garage – on the sidewalk in front of the shop sits a flowerpot fabricated from a discarded Vespa frame. Inside, bathing in plenty of natural light, the place retains the

retro charm of a traditional Marseille shop. The couple work right in the main room where customers can chit-chat with them as repairs are being made. For Eugénie, scooters are more than just engines and wheels. “My Vespa is my daughter,” she says, referring to her gorgeous purple scooter. “I spent nine months fixing her to get out on the road!”

Their enthusiasm is infectious and it’s no wonder that friends, customers and occasional curious passersby all end up in the shop, staying for a while to admire the machines. Yet Germain puts La Strada di Vespa’s success down to something else too. “Everybody is into vintage these days, and people are sick of the disposable Chinese scooters. They want the real deal, and that’s what we do here,” he says.

From the days of the Vespadrome to today’s revived scene, there’s no doubt: Marseille itself has always been the real deal for Vespa lovers. As long as there will be sun and cool Mediterranean streets to tear through, the familiar putt-putt will live on. ♡

i

Fast facts

GETTING THERE:

Marseille airport is located 25km from the city centre. Buses leave every 20–30 minutes, with departure points situated between Terminal 1 and MP2. Journeys into the city take about 30 minutes and cost €8.50. The train station at the airport provides connections to numerous French cities. Hertz (www.hertz.com) is Ryanair’s exclusive car rental partner, with special rates for passengers.

ROARING TRADE

La Strada di Vespa owners Eugénie Rehabi-Grandadam and Germain Hild share a passion for these retro bikes