

METROPOLIS

St Tropez rocks to the rich kids' beat

Marisa D'Vari watches the very wealthy at play in the former French fishing village turned modern-day Gomorrah



Gucci-clad Arab sheiks in their 20s whirl frenetically to the disco beat at Les Caves du Roi disco, their bodyguards in headphones scurrying after them as they mix with sleek French models and rich kids from Manhattan.

At La Voile Rouge, a beachside restaurant popular with the yachting set, men of wealth purchase dozens of cases of the best champagne to accompany a grilled fish luncheon - not to drink, but to be slashed open by sword and sprayed at one another in a ceremony of conspicuous consumption known as the *Sabrer*.

Photographers from celebrity-strewn gossip magazines catch the celebrants in a strobe light frenzy as the bikini-clad wives of billionaires hop on to lunch tables, kick aside the grilled prawns, and dance with hedonistic delight as hundreds of thousands of dollars of champagne fizzle down their sun-bronzed bodies.

Welcome to St Tropez, 1999, the former fishing village in the south of France turned modern-day Gomorrah, where the worlds of sex, money, and power collide to make a great show.

It is the place to be seen and make the scene, especially if you are a French billionaire with a deal to celebrate, a supermodel, or one of the tantalising call girls who count the millions spent on the *Sabrer* ceremonies each week and set their own prices accordingly.

The more subtle St Tropez of Brigitte Bardot still exists at the beachside Club 55, where the owner Patrice de Colmont ran barefoot as a child through tables filled with film stars and international society.

Unlike at La Voile, champagne is not on the menu and topless girls don't arrange themselves artfully on sunbeds near the tables of rich, influential men.

Despite the fleet of yachts glittering in the nearby sea and the table talk of mega-deals, Club 55's quaint ambience calls to mind the simpler pleasures of St Tropez.

Royal playboys, financial gurus, and a trendy international crowd stay at the Mediterranean-themed Hotel Byblos, elegant, lively, and a few steps from the very popular Les Caves du Roi disco.

Le Byblos is also home to a surprisingly strong contingent of American children from rich families who established a connection with the wealthy European crowd in their student days at Georgetown or Boston universities.

A heady mix of internet entrepreneurs and investment bankers, these twenty-somethings travel in packs and party at a succession of clubs that stay open long past dawn.

If there is such a thing as a global village, it is sure to be found in St Tropez. The same people who were holidaying there during the first few weeks of August move

on to Paris for the couture shows, to Beverly Hills for the Academy Awards, and to sip a glass of wine at a sidewalk café on Manhattan's Madison Avenue in the autumn.

They take with them memories of St Tropez's fantasy-themed Les Caves du Roidisco, where American rock music blared, girls in tight minidresses gyrated and the VIP area bouncer did his best to keep order as 1,000 mini-dramas played themselves out at the tables around him.

They can still hear the DJ playing the words "Welcome to St Tropez!" over the summer's hit song, and the whoops from the crowd; simply being there was cause for celebration.