The Hanbury Gardens at La Mortola in Italy: a perfect setting for succulents

In 1867, Sir Thomas Hanbury acquired a property in the Italian Riviera village of La Mortola, close to the present-day border with France. That was the first step in the development of the estate gardens into what became known as the Hanbury Gardens, or ‘La Mortola’. Sir Hanbury had more than a passing interest in succulents, including aloes, agaves, mesembres, daisies, and cacti, and within a few years the Garden became famous as a center for the study of succulents of all shapes, sizes and affinities. In the early 1880s, not long after Sir Thomas acquired the property at La Mortola, the irresistible charm of the French Riviera, or Côte D’Azur as it is also called, lying a few kilometers to the west of the Italian-French border, was beginning to gain popularity among celebrities, drawing among others Queen Victoria and her eccentric cousin, King Leopold II of Belgium, who made a fortune from his exploits in the Belgian Congo, to visit the sun-drenched coastline. Since then the southern coast of France and bordering Italy has become known as a glamorous, sunny playground of celebrities and politicians—in fact anyone who have the fiscal means to enjoy a fine life in the near-omnipresent Mediterranean sun.

This is one of a dozen succulent Gardens from around the world that Gideon Smith and Estrela Figueiredo discuss and illustrate in their latest book collaboration, Succulent paradise. Twelve great gardens of the world (ISBN 978-1-43170-090-5), which is published by Struik Lifestyle, an imprint of Random House Struik.

A little over 100 years ago the Frenchman Stefan Liégand coined the term “Côte d’Azur” for sections of coastal southern Europe (Greggio 2001, 2002). In this past century the term has become synonymous with affluence and, generally speaking, with what is widely regarded as everything that is good in life. Having once experienced the wonders of the Côte d’Azur, or French Riviera as it is known in English, one feels that it is imperative to return. This wonderful part of the world, with its vibrant, sunny-summer Mediterranean-type climate—hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters—leaves a lasting impression on any visitor. And enjoying it for a second time is even better.

Indeed, the second time around the Côte d’Azur is even more beautiful than the memories burned into one’s mind. Not the least because the occasional heat wave on the French Riviera makes for a wonderful summer experience, especially when visiting from a wintry Southern Hemisphere winter landscape, or the cold, drab climes of Scandinavia.

It is difficult to imagine, but it certainly appears that the Mediterranean Sea is bluer, the sky clearer, the climate milder, and the cultivated and naturalised succulent plants have never before looked so incredibly at home than on the Riviera. Nowhere does one feel so close to nature than on the Côte d’Azur. Here it is easy to be captivated by the region’s plants, folklore, traditions and hospitality. The Côte d’Azur, with all its charms, can never be a ‘been there, done that’