

Marseille is no longer a joke,

at least not in Paris where the great Mediterranean metropolis was, for decades, little more than a subject of ribaldry. That is an achievement of sorts: smirks don't greet the mere mention of France's oldest city, founded 600 BC, a port which, for 30 years after Algeria acquired its independence in 1962, seemed to wear mourning. It takes time to recover from tragedies. Today Marseille is no longer reflecting on past glories. It is starting to look to the future.

A generation ago, the very foundations of Marseille's wealth appeared to have slipped away. There were good reasons for this. As Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos went their own way, as France's influence in Syria and Lebanon declined, as North African countries won their independence, the port, on which the city's wealth had traditionally rested, lost its role as gateway to the Orient.

The Chamber of Commerce of Marseille had been a key player in convincing the July Monarchy, after 1830, to extend the conquest of Algiers – completed on July 30 1830 by King Charles X whose troops lost control of Paris as they were ousting the Bey of Algiers – to conquer the whole of North Africa's second largest country. Algeria's independence, when it came, was especially traumatic as this vast territory had been, for a century, three French départements: every passage of goods and people, be they military personnel, civil servants or ordinary citizens, was through Marseille. The golden age of Marseille lasted from the Second Empire of Napoleon the Third to the mid-twentieth century. Then it came to an abrupt end.

The city had to cope with housing 150,000 *pieds noirs*, the former European settlers whose anger and resentment at the harsh way they felt they had been treated by the "métropolitains" made them difficult customers indeed. But Marseille received less than its

fair share of state help and was too proud to ask Paris for more. The city then became the gateway for tens of thousands of North African immigrants. In the meantime, traditional industries like soap manufacturing and sugar refining collapsed, followed in the 1970s by shipbuilding. Even then the state did little to help, reasoning no doubt that it had invested enough in steel mills and refineries in nearby Fos.

By the late 1980s, as the dockers continued to refuse handling containers, the port came near to closure. Lyon industrialists, who had played a key role in convincing the government to invest heavily in Fos a few years before, were refusing to truck goods for shipment through Marseille so unreliable had the process become – not to mention the sheer amount of quayside theft. They chose instead to export via northern French ports. Henri Roux Alezais, scion of a well-established Marseilles family whose grandfather founded the university faculty of medicine in the 1930s, worked tirelessly through those difficult years to put the city he loves back on the international economic map. Today he is vice president of the CMA-CGM shipping group. Before that he ran the port – a job which nearly disappeared – and presided over the Chamber of Commerce: he vividly remembers the tens of hours of negotiation to save the port.

By the mid-1990s matters started looking up. As recently as 1992, cruise ships docked at the port brought just 7,000 visitors, a figure which rose to 200,000 in 2000 (each spending an average FF700 a day on shore). When tourism recovers its nerves this figure should continue to rise as foreigners discover an old melting pot, a city where Italian, Greek, Armenian, Asian and Arab communities have long lived in greater harmony than in many wealthier French conurbations. The Côte d'Azur, just down the coast, is one of the world's prime tourist destinations, attracting 17 million visitors every year. Marseille does not yet even pick up the crumbs, but sheer diversity will work in its favour.

Marseille is unlike any other French city: the middle class deserted the bourgeois centre 30 years ago and are only just coming back. The demise of the great merchant and shipping families is often quoted as a reason for the city's decline but that role is exaggerated: it is but one of many factors. The proportion of people who are unemployed or on the minimum wage remains very high. The city proper remains poor. Two thirds of its turnover comes from the public sector and jobs in the local civil service which smack of cronyism.

Yet the visitor feels safer here than in many richer towns of France. He will note the amount of building activity going on, much of it funded by the state. Marseille also boasts a vibrant cultural life. Foreigners may flock to the music and opera festival of nearby Aix-en-Provence but la Fiesta des Suds – which brings together musicians from all over the world for three weeks every October – and many other events offer riches a-plenty. An active cultural life points to future economic growth.

The completion in June 2001 of the TGV rail link which puts Paris within three hours of the Mediterranean, means not simply the promise of more tourists and the less welcome rise in property prices, as professionals from Lyon and Paris snap up weekend retreats. It is a symbol of recognition by an arrogant capital that it must help the southern sister it did little to support in its hour of need a generation ago. The change in lifestyles is, however, an important ingredient, as described by the sociologist Jean Viard: the north (and Lyon) used to think of itself as “producing” wealth while the south was deemed good at “spending” it. Such clichés no longer carry much weight. Marseille began to exist for many people outside the region, and in the world at large, when it staged matches for the football World Cup in 1998.

Marseille has also understood that it must work with Lyon and other cities of the Provence hinterland on which it has traditionally turned its back – as well as look abroad. Lyon, the affluent capital of the Rhône-Alpes region, has three times as many important company headquarters as Marseille. The southern port has come to appreciate that it must tie in with nearby growth points like Montpellier. Europe is increasingly built around such groupings – Catalonia, Baden Wurttemberg, Milan-Turin-Genoa.

Traditionally industries based on the port did not tie in with the economic activities of Provence. That is changing in unexpected ways. The fresh appetite for provençal and more broadly, Mediterranean food, the rediscovery by Americans and Northern Europeans of the high value of olive oil, offer ample opportunity to develop specialised, quality foods. Vineyards are being replanted and the region now boasts some remarkable new wines.

Marseille also has a wealth of doctors, medical laboratories and hospitals – both private and state-run. Thousands of North Africans and Italians come here for treatment every year, prolonging their stay to shop or enjoy themselves. Together with the new TGV, this is forcing the city to build the new hotel beds of which it is desperately short (5.4 hotel beds per inhabitant here as against 14.5

in Lyon and 36.5 in Paris). It will take at least six years to add the extra 6,000 beds required but, together with cruises, this should put Marseille on the map as a serious tourist destination. Conferences, which today are also hindered by lack of facilities in appropriate hotels, will no doubt follow.

A number of major urban renewal operations are under way: the area around St Charles station, refurbished to meet the needs of the TGV, includes offices and housing, at a cost of FF318m; the rebuilding of the Joliette quayside will add offices, housing and hotels at a cost of FF546m while at the Friche de la Belle de Mai space converted from the old Seïta tobacco and matches plant already brings together artists, designers, and the performance arts: few believed the venture stood a chance in such a rundown inner-city area.

Symbolically, the motorway which divides the city from its waterfront, will be covered over. In a few years time Marseille will at long last once again look out to the sea rather than turn its back on what was, and remains, the key source of its wealth and character.

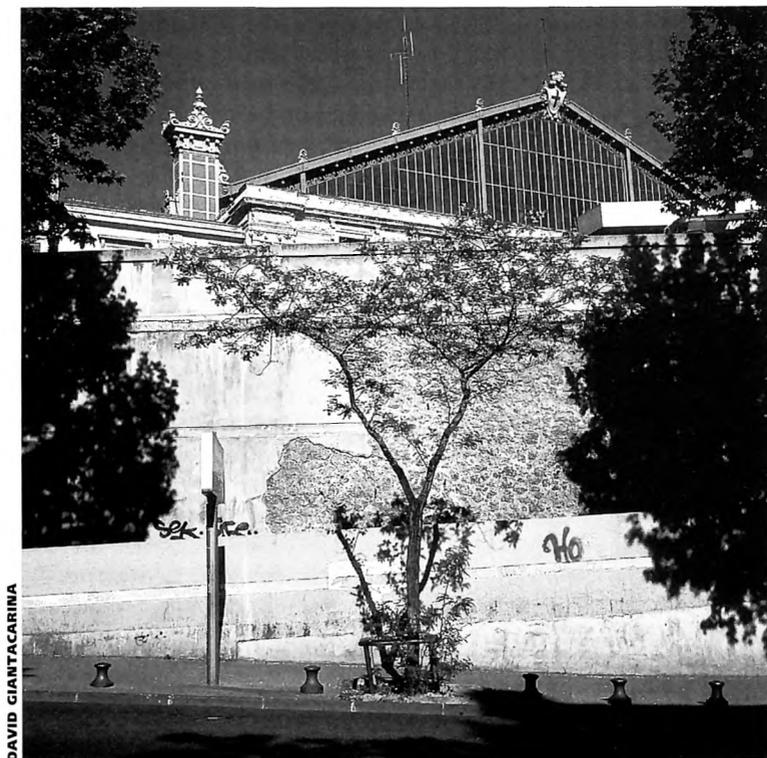
Looking south is also looking to the future: as Algeria emerges from its troubles, as Morocco and Tunisia privatise telecommunications, shipping and other industries, the flow of goods is set to grow. The very nature of such exchanges is changing as the private sector plays an increasing role both south and north of the Mediterranean basin.

As French visas for Algerian citizens dried up in the mid-1990s, the huge informal market of Belsunce collapsed. It had brought considerable wealth to the city but such activity has moved to Istanbul. However much its passing is regretted such activities are not the kind Marseille can stake its future on. Rather, helicopter building (Eurocopter) and telecoms companies seem to offer a good basis for further development. The city also needs to upgrade the quality of its university. It is working jointly with Lyon to present projects for Paris to finance. Meanwhile Aix-en-Provence, which has managed its university and its economic affairs better than Marseille, still feels, as an old county town and an aristocratic city, infinitely superior to its raucous neighbour. Such attitudes make little sense in today's Europe.

Today it looks as if, at long last, Marseille is turning its back on no one, trying to use all its assets and fit into the ways of the modern world. It has a long way to go, economically, but as important local companies such as the Société des eaux de Marseilles work increasingly in North Africa and Africa, as the mayor, Jean-Claude

Gaudin, has begun to visit the capitals of neighbouring countries to help local companies win contracts, there is a feeling that Marseille is climbing out of a hole.

Marseille may not have the status of capital of an autonomous region or the wealth of Barcelona; it may not be Istanbul; but it holds many cards. Its industrial and medical élite are travelling the world, its sons who are musicians and writers are making their niches in the twenty-first century. Yet its politicians could move much faster. Instead of following the movement, they could be leading it. When will a mayor of Marseille greet his visitors in Spanish and Arabic, or quote Machiavelli or Ibn Khaldoun? That is where the future of the city lies.



DAVID GIANTACARINA

FRANCIS GHILÈS was North Africa Correspondent of the *Financial Times* from 1981 to 1994, and has lectured at Sciences-Po Paris on North African economics.