

Ana Tzarev doesn't wait for the butler to do the honours, but comes down the steps of La Fleur du Cap, her home on Cap Ferrat, to greet me. It's a privilege in more ways than one: this is the first time the Croatian artist has allowed a publication to see what lies behind the front door of one of the most iconic properties on the Provençal peninsula.

The writer William Somerset Maugham, who had a house there, once described the Cap as "the escape hatch from Monaco for those burdened with taste". Charlie Chaplin used to take the house (called Lo Scoglietto until Tzarev changed the name) for the summer, and it was bought by David Niven, that most elegantly suave of English actors and raconteurs, in the early 1960s. The house briefly appears in Trail of the Pink Panther, one of his last films.

Niven died in 1983, and many of the homes where he mixed with the beau monde have been bought in recent years by Russian oligarchs and billionaire businessmen such as Paul Allen, the cofounder of Microsoft. La Fleur du Cap, however, could never fade from the consciousness like the film stars of yesterday — the dusky pink house is visible for half a mile along Promenade Maurice Rouvier, the coastal path that runs down the eastern side of the peninsula from Beaulieu-sur-Mer.

The butler pours us a glass of champagne in the high-ceilinged, gilded drawing room, where the walls are hung with Tzarev's paintings. Having taken up a brush at the age of 56, two decades ago, she now paints with impressive energy, producing thousands of pieces. These are displayed in her eponymous 1,400 sq ft gallery in Manhattan, New York, which opened in 2008, and in shows around the world — this month,



they can be seen at the Saatchi Gallery, in Chelsea, west London.

"I work all day," she says. "I don't communicate with anybody. I don't accept invitations to parties. I don't go out at all."

The pictures — of subjects as wide-ranging as Russian folk tales and kabuki theatre — have eye-watering price tags, with oil paintings starting at \$100,000. As to who buys, and in what quantity, the director of the Ana Tzarev Gallery, Simone DiLaura, says clients are European, Asian and American, but is tight-lipped about names and numbers: "We don't disclose information on sales." The works have yet to come up for auction on the open market.

Tzarev's artistic ambitions have been helped by seemingly inexhaustible reservoirs of financial backup and cheerful self-belief: "I feel spiritual. That gives me licence to be courageous and do what my spirit tells me."

Yet life was not always so privileged. Born Marija Guina in Trogir in 1937 (Ana Tzarev is her mother's maiden name), she grew up under the deprivations of Marshal Tito's communist regime. At the age of 19, she caught the eye of a New Zealander, Robert Chandler, who was

touring Europe with a friend; some weeks later, he returned to Yugoslavia to take her to his native country as his bride. The couple are still married, and Robert, now 89, stays at his desk as his wife talks about her work and the story of finding the house. He maintains the benign air of a man who has heard his beloved's anecdotes, polished to a sheen that would do Niven proud, many times before.

The couple have lived at La Fleur du Cap — built in 1880 — for only 12 years, but the property has long been in Tzarev's heart. Back in the late 1960s, she spotted a picture of Niven at the pink-painted property in a New Zealand women's magazine, and pinned it behind the sink so she could dream of it while she did the washing-up and tended to her three sons. Built into the coastal rock, it had Italianate arches and steps going down to a natural harbour. "This is my house — I recognise it," she would say as she scrubbed the pans.

Thirty years later, things were rather different, and doing the washing-up was a thing of the past. The couple had sold Chandler House, their chain of department stores in New Zealand, and moved to Monaco, along with two of their sons, Richard and Christopher, by then multimillionaire businessmen.

Christopher rang his mother one day: "I have a property to show you that you would be interested in." She replied, as only a woman with access to a large fortune can do in an area with the highest property prices in the world: "I'm not interested in anywhere where you can't see the sea. My soul is in the water."

Christopher brought her to the pink house of her dreams, where she could indeed see the sea: it laps around most of the property under the pines that shade the rocks below. (The house is

Ropperfoto / Getty/Paectes



# La vie en rose

Caroline Donald has a rare glimpse inside the pink villa on the Côte d'Azur where David Niven once lived and meets its artist owner



Rami Benali / Hemis.fr



Tzarev, top, lives in Cap Ferrat from May to October, when she paints all day. Her works are inspired by the flowers in her manicured garden

one of only 50 or so on the Cap with a coastal location.)

They were met by Niven's widow, Hjordis. She showed them the fabulous views, painted by Winston Churchill, who used to visit on Sunday afternoons when staying nearby; the 19th-century rotunda, used as a set in the early days of film; and the study overlooking the sea, where Chaplin would write. Despite all this, Tzarev wasn't convinced. "They wanted an absolute fortune," she recalls. (It was advertised in The Times in 1996 for £10m.) "I said to Christopher that there was no way, not for that old wreck and ruin, and he said, 'Well, it is your house. You wanted it.'"

Three years later, the dutiful son took her back to the house, now even more run-down than before, but priced more realistically. (She won't say how much.) "Christopher said to me, 'You loved the place so much before. What if we do it up for you — will you consider it?'" What mother could resist?

They needed three years to bring the now four-bedroom house and garden to their present immaculate condition, with new foundations, walls and windows, air conditioning and central heating. "It took a lot of money and effort," Tzarev says. "I wanted it to function as a modern house in a traditional sense."

Yet it is the garden she loves most: "I felt that it had been in my spirit for decades." Tzarev doesn't bother with winter flowers — come October, she and Robert migrate to their home in Phuket, Thailand, until the following May. "Everything I plant has to be in bloom when I am here," she says. "I am not interested in winter." Accordingly, the pots and borders are filled with flowers — old-fashioned roses, oleander, bougainvillea,

poppies, clematis and geraniums, largely in shades of pink and red. "I wanted to bring in a natural flow of water, light and shade, the colour of the seasons in the flowers," she says, although this is nature taken firmly in hand. The plants sit in a framework of a manicured lawn, dotted with palms, cypresses and olive trees, tweaked and tansured to perfection. It's all a far cry from her first gardens, created in Trogir — they were planted in rusty old Red Cross milk-powder tins.

A gleaming white stone path leads down to the rose-covered rotunda. Beside this is a large air-conditioned studio, where Tzarev keeps a stack of canvases and paints. The garden is her inspiration, and many of the plants, including the huge hybrid hibiscuses that she grows in pots, will end up on canvas, depicted close up and larger than life, with bold colours and sweeping brushstrokes.

Tzarev has taken space at the Saatchi Gallery to show off her flower paintings. The exhibition also includes a 10ft-high fibreglass sculpture of a poppy, painted in metallic red. "I live and breathe flowers, and I thought, 'Why not do the biggest flower in the world?'" She commissioned the work from a boat yard in Thailand and shipped it over in pieces to London. "Everybody told me it was not possible," says Tzarev. The challenge was on, and she proved them wrong. □

Exposed, an exhibition of flower paintings by Ana Tzarev, is at the Saatchi Gallery, London SW3, until June 16

SUNDAY TIMES DIGITAL  
ST Explore Tzarev's studio and gardens in our slideshow: thesundaytimes.co.uk/overseasproperty

## COLOUR YOUR LIFE

Three more Riviera pads that could inspire a painting



### Cap Ferrat £12.7m

Fully renovated five years ago, this six-bedroom, seven-bathroom property overlooks Villefranche Bay and the old town. It has one large open-plan reception that opens onto a terrace, as well as a sauna, a swimming pool, a wine cellar, a private study with a courtyard, a pantry, a laundry room and a separate staff flat. 020 7870 7181, winkworth.co.uk



### Cap Ferrat £11.6m

On the eastern side of the peninsula, near the Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat, this four-bedroom villa with bay views has a modern kitchen, a dining room, a laundry room and three bathrooms. The sitting room and one of the bedrooms lead onto terraces. Outside, there's a heated pool and parking for six cars. 020 7629 8171, knightfrank.com



### Villefranche £5.2m

This seven-bedroom home offers views across the bays of Villefranche and Nice. The Provençal-style property has five bathrooms, three receptions, a cellar, a swimming pool, a garage, a separate office and a large garden. The nearest airport is Nice, an hour's drive away. 020 7870 7181, winkworth.com

In the 1960s, she saw a picture of the house in a women's magazine. She hung it behind the sink and dreamt of it while she did the washing-up

La Fleur du Cap was home to David Niven and his wife, Hjordis, pictured with their daughter Kristina in 1964

