



PREVIOUS PAGES: A view onto the majestic upper terrace; the pale, salmon-colored Italianate facade. **OPPOSITE:** A grand reception room features a vast chandelier. **ABOVE:** A large stone fireplace is inscribed with the initials M. L. for the Marnier-Lapostolle family.

In 1830, the Villa Les Oiseaux was built upon Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat's oldest and largest estate of olive groves, vineyards, and orchards. Twenty years later, David-Désiré Pollonnais, the mayor of the local town of Villefranche-sur-Mer, bought it and commissioned the popular Niçois architect Sébastien-Marcel Biasini (1841–1913) to remodel the villa in a fashionable late Italian Renaissance style. Yet it was in 1904 that its most infamous owner, King Leopold II of Belgium (1835–1909), purchased it with the fortune he acquired from his exploitative “private colony,” the Congo Free State (1885–1908), under which ivory, rubber, and minerals were stolen through violent forced labor. The King renamed it Les Cèdres and instructed Anglo-Niçois architect Aaron Messiah to expand the 14-bedroom residence with an additional level, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and a stable for 30 horses. The interior was furnished with an extravagant belle époque decor of silk wallpapers, chandeliers, gilt-framed portraits and a wood-paneled library for 3000 books. The formal gardens were designed by Jules Vacherot and Harold Peto, fresh from landscaping the Champ de Mars

and the Champs-Élysées in Paris. And the greedy king didn't stop there; he procured even more land surrounding Les Cèdres for more villas. Among them, Le Casin, a golden cage for his young mistress, Blanche Zélia Joséphine Delacroix, connected to his own villa via an underground passageway. Villa Saint-Segond sits on 17 acres (7 hectares) and La Leopolda on 44 acres (18 hectares). When the increasingly unpopular Leopold died in 1909, the land was sold by the Belgian state; in 2020, statues of the former king across Belgium were defaced with red paint and pulled down. In the early 1920s, Les Cèdres was bought by the Marnier Lapostolle family, the creators of Grand Marnier, a blend of French cognac and bitter orange liqueur, first invented in the 1880s. They grew bitter oranges in the orchards, the children floated on the Amazonian lily pads, and Slim Aarons photographed a languid family pool party at the estate in 1973. After changing hands multiple times, Les Cèdres continues to crown Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, the “peninsula of billionaires,” and Avenue Léopold II still winds its way through Villefranche-sur-Mer.