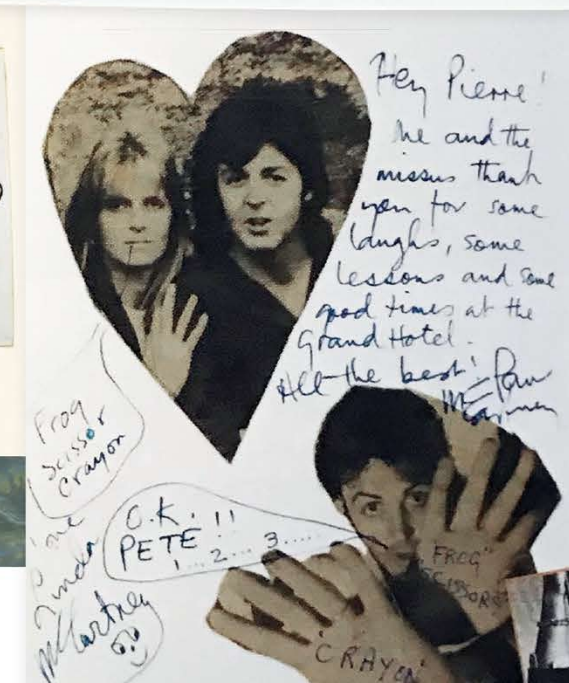
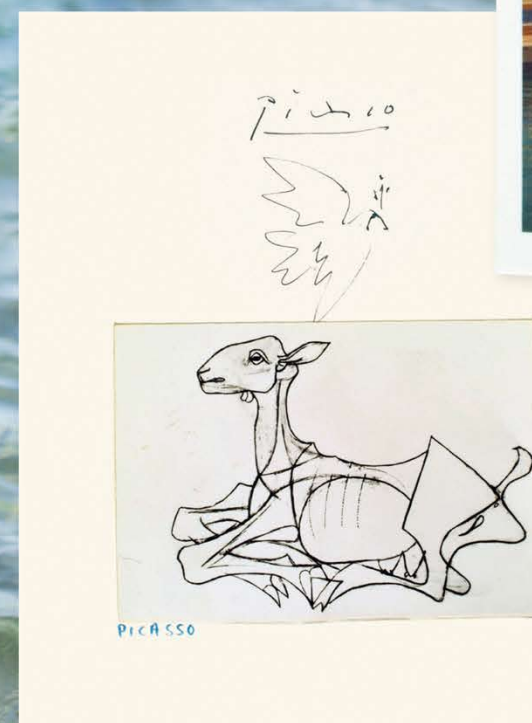


# A BIGGER SPLASH

For 70 years, Pierre Gruneberg taught everyone from film stars to fashionistas to swim at the Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat. Now 90, he tells **Kate Salter** the secret of a long and happy life (hint: summering in the South of France and wintering in Courchevel *really* help)



Photographs: Helen Cathcart/Baker, courtesy of Pierre Gruneberg



## GOING SWIMMINGLY

Left: Gruneberg enters the Med at Cap Ferrat. Pages from the *livre d'or*, from top: Dominican diplomat Porfirio Rubirosa dives in at deep end in 1956; Paul McCartney was persuaded by Gruneberg to swim in the open sea; Picasso sketched a dove in the book (the goat is a 1946 print)



## DESTINATION AQUAMAN



"I SAT ON A LITTLE  
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The first time that Pierre Gruneberg walked down the steps leading from the Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat, and was greeted by the sight of a swimming pool whose edges seemed to melt into the Mediterranean sea below, he thought he had found paradise. It was 1949 and the 18-year-old had hitchhiked from Paris to the French Riviera to find work as a swimming instructor. "I thought, 'This is the best place in the world, I want to work here,'" he says. And for the next 70 years, that's exactly what he did. His years teaching at one of the world's most beautiful swimming pools has brought him into contact with everyone from Pablo Picasso to Charlie Chaplin. He has taught Oscar winners, rock stars and Nobel Peace Prize-winning writers. In his words: "I sat on a little green chair, I didn't move, and all the personalities in the world passed by."

At 90, Gruneberg is an endorsement for what a life of exercise, sunshine and unwavering optimism can do. Although he retired from teaching at the hotel last year, every day he still leaves his little flat in the picturesque village of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, where he lives with his wife, and strolls along the peninsula's small streets and paths to give swimming lessons in Cap Ferrat's private villas. "My greatest pleasure is to work and still keep teaching," he says.

This winter was the first time in more than 70 years Gruneberg had not been able to spend the ski season in Courchevel, where he still works as a ski guide every year from December to April. "I wasn't able to ski so I replaced it by swimming each day," he says. "I'm almost the only one who swims here each day in the winter, even when it's raining, and I never wear a wetsuit."

In a career that began in the golden age of the Côte d'Azur, Gruneberg is a link to a bygone era. When he arrived in Cap Ferrat, the Olympic-sized saltwater pool at the Grand-Hôtel's chic Club Dauphin was one of its kind, and the hotel's guests were mostly European. Gruneberg says part of the reason he got the job was because he could speak English, French and German, although it must have helped that he looked like a young Burt Lancaster and carried off a pair of Speedos just as well (in fact, he was given the job after promising the hotel's director he was there to work, not flirt). "Our swimming pool became the centre of life in the area," he says. "It was totally different then. I gave water-skiing lessons in the pool, scuba diving lessons, there was volley-ball."

Built in 1908, the hotel is a white Belle Époque mansion on a tip of land betwixt Nice and Monte Carlo. Between the wars it was a favourite stopover for European royalty and a fun-loving *nouveau-riche* set (F Scott Fitzgerald lived nearby at Cap d'Antibes and set his novel *Tender is the Night* in Cap Ferrat). By the 1950s, the French Riviera was hosting film stars alongside artists. As well as teaching the children of Charlie Chaplin and David Niven to swim, Gruneberg met Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau, who came to the pool with the daughter of an aristocratic socialite who entertained Coco Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent and Christian Dior at her house nearby. Picasso gave him a sketch of a dove, Cocteau drew a fish, both of which are in Gruneberg's *livre d'or* – his scrapbook of mementos.

But many famous names came to be taught by Gruneberg because of his ability to get even the most fearful or aquatically challenged in the water. Gruneberg ☺

### THE SHAPE OF WATER

The iconic pool at Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat. Top: Gruneberg shares pages from his *livre d'or*, including a picture of him with Tina Turner and Oprah Winfrey



has been called “the greatest swimming instructor in the world” thanks to his patented ‘salad bowl’ method, or aquatic breath control which involves mastering your underwater breathing before you even set foot in pool. “The main problem for swimmers is not the stroke, which everybody teaches right away, it is the breathing,” he says.

Gruneberg gets his students to perfect their underwater breathing using a transparent salad bowl filled with water. Once the breathing is mastered, Gruneberg says the rest is easy. It is a technique that has never failed his pupils, including a man too afraid of water to sit in the bath with his baby son, and a woman so frightened of getting her face wet she couldn’t have a shower. There are now plans afoot to launch a foundation teaching the method.

Even the rich and powerful fall in line under Gruneberg’s tuition. Fashion designer Domenico Dolce was “probably one of my most difficult pupils,” Gruneberg says. “It took me a long time just to get him to put his whole face in the salad bowl. But, after a difficult start, he ended up jumping into the pool with joy.” Jimmy Iovine, the head of Apple Music, was one of his “miracle students”. Iovine hadn’t set foot in swimming pool in more than 50 years, but in no time he was happily lying on the bottom of the pool with Gruneberg’s foot on his back, a manoeuvre Gruneberg calls ‘the happy submarine’. He has coaxed Robin Williams, Paul McCartney and Ralph Lauren into the open sea. Williams was frightened of sharks, McCartney was concerned about jellyfish, while Lauren was able to perfect his underwater ‘bubbling’. He also met his first wife, the actress Silvia Monfort (who died in 1991) and his second wife, the singer Doreen Chanter, when he taught them to swim.

Something that is endearing about Gruneberg is how resolutely underwhelmed he is by celebrity. “I’m not impressed by who you are, I’m impressed by who you *really* are,” he says. “Every man is created equal when he’s wearing nothing but his swimming trunks.” He thinks his method works because he listens to ☺



## PIERRE GRUNEBERG’S FAVOURITE PLACES

### CAP FERRAT

#### *Club Dauphin, Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat*

The restaurant by the famous swimming pool. Try the Mr Pierre Gruneberg’s salad. They named it after me as I always had the same salad for lunch.

[fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com)

#### *Léo Léa*

This is on Port de Plaisance in St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. They have fabulous grilled steak, homemade chips and salad.

[leolea.chikapp.com](http://leolea.chikapp.com)

#### *La Paloma beach*

For swimming, I like either the main beach or Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat village, or la Paloma beach, where the water is so clean and clear.

1 Chemin de Saint-Hospice,  
Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat

### COURCHEVEL

#### *Cheval Blanc*

A nice hotel where you can go for lunch or dinner. Le 1947 is a restaurant with three Michelin stars but there is also a brasserie and a terrace.

[chevalblanc.com](http://chevalblanc.com)

#### *Restaurant Le Bel Air*

Right on the slopes in Courchevel Moriond with a terrace overlooking the mountains. You can go on skis and it has the best omelette and salad in Europe.

[belair-courchevel.com](http://belair-courchevel.com)

#### *Col de la Loze*

The best local piste for skiing in Courchevel. You can ski back down to Courchevel or into Méribel from the top.

### HOT SPOTS

Paloma beach is perfect for swimming. Top: one of Club Dauphin’s famous salads





"EVERY MAN IS  
CREATED EQUAL  
WHEN HE'S WEARING  
NOTHING BUT HIS  
SWIMMING TRUNKS"

people and seems to understand their fears about swimming, or rather drowning. "My greatest pleasure is to undo the fear of people," he says.

Perhaps what has given Gruneberg this capacity for empathy is the fact that he has experienced a great deal of fear himself. He was born in Germany in 1931 and, until he was five, lived in Cologne with his mother, father and older brother. When his brother was awarded a medal for winning a rowing race at school, a group of boys belonging to Hitler Youth were sitting in the front row and began pelting him with stones because he was a Jew. "My mother said, 'We're not staying one more day in this bloody country,'" and she took us to Paris, where we had an uncle. If we had stayed, I wouldn't be speaking to you now."

Gruneberg's father, who was a lawyer, stayed behind but joined them in Paris after Kristallnacht. "He left everything, the house he had just bought, all the furniture, he only brought his little suitcase with some gold coins hidden inside," Gruneberg says. When Paris was occupied by the Nazis, the gold coins were buried under a cherry tree in the garden and the family fled south. Gruneberg's father bought false identity papers for the family and, for the four years of occupation, Pierre lived as 'Pierre Girard'. Amazingly, all four survived, and when they eventually returned to Paris, the gold coins lay undisturbed under the cherry tree and the family was able to buy a small apartment.

After the war, Gruneberg trained as a swimming instructor. In the early 1950s during his military service, he joined the elite section of the French alpine troops, the Chasseurs Alpains. Later, he qualified as a physiotherapist and travelled to the Melbourne Olympics in 1956 with the French Olympic team. He seems to have been everywhere, and done everything, yet is content exactly where he is. "I've travelled all over the world but Cap Ferrat is unique in the world, it is the most beautiful place," he says. "Even now, when I go to the Grand-Hôtel, the scent of the flowers – even the trees – is wonderful."

Gruneberg puts his good health down to the fact that he has never drunk alcohol or smoked, eats no meat and swims every day. His philosophy for a happy life is simple: "I call it the triangle of life: on the top is health, on the left side is loving what you do, on the right, loving somebody who loves you." He may be slowing down, but he has no plans to hang up his salad bowl just yet. A documentary about his life is in the making, and he plans to write an autobiography. This summer, he hopes to be kept busy teaching more clients in Cap Ferrat. "And next winter I will ski a little bit. Maybe I'll even start wearing sun cream. *Et voilà!*" ■

[gruneberg-stark.com](http://gruneberg-stark.com)

POOL MAN

Gruneberg has been a part of the Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat since 1949