

DEMOGRAPHIA



MARSEILLE: DEFINED BY GEOGRAPHY

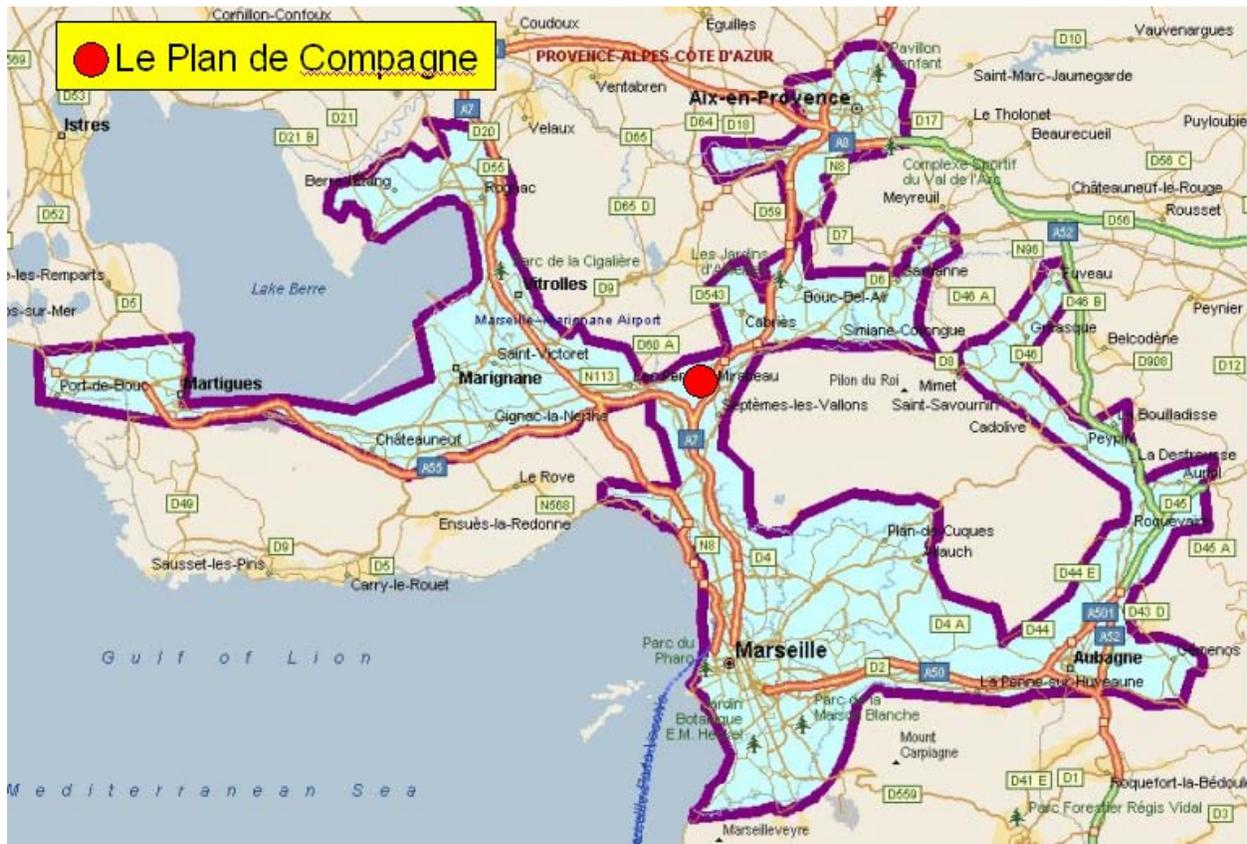
FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	1,500,000	
Urbanized Area* Population	1,350,000	Brisbane, Kansas City, Glasgow, Goiania
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	170	Glasgow, Sapporo, Beijing, New Orleans
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	440	
Population per Square Mile	7,900	Los Angeles, Nagoya,
Population per Square Kilometer	3,100	
*Continuously built up area		

6 May 2004

Driving among the big box stores of La Plan de Compagne in what is the center of the Marseille urbanized area, it is easy to mistake the urban form for the sprawling big box center at the junction of I-90/94 and US-151 in Madison, Wisconsin or those in the suburbs of Atlanta. Here, in an urban area where grocery stores and hypermarkets are closed on Sunday, all manner of big box stores are open for business, from the home improvement to the sporting goods big boxes.

For some, however, Le Plan de Compagne isn't even in the Marseille urbanized area. The International Union of Public Transport (UITP) considers the urbanized area to be the small urbanized portion of the core city, which accounts for little more than one-half of the population and even less than that of the land area. This is akin to suggesting that the earth is composed only of its hot iron core and that what surrounds it does not exist at all. That is, of course, how all too many urban planners view the modern city.

Le Plan de Compagne --- this core of big box stores and modern automobile oriented commercial development --- could well claim, by both its geographical position and its plethora of shopping opportunities, to be the core of Marseilles.



Marseille Urbanized Area

At the other end of the spectrum is the definition of the French census bureau, INSEE, which considers the Marseilles-Aix en Provence urbanized area to cover approximately 500 square miles, with a population density of 2,600 per square mile --- barely more dense than the average US urbanized area. That definition makes Marseille look much less urbanized than it is. Blame the geography. INSEE's urban areas include non-urban portions of municipalities and some of the Marseille municipalities have more non-urban and urban land.

Marseille is an urbanized area more defined by its geography than most --- even more so that Barcelona, where hills and valleys make a sprawling urban area even more sprawling. Large landforms, hills and even mountains, somewhat resembling land forms of the US southwest sit in the middle of Marseille at elevations rising to more than 2,000 feet from the sea level of the waterfront.

But the broader INSEE definition, unlike UITP's conception, does include all of the urbanization. The central city is home to the development loved so much by US urban planners --- construction largely two centuries or more out of fashion, and of a type that hasn't been constructed in Europe since before World War II (except to reconstruct war damage, such as in Warsaw), To the north are large hills and a narrow corridor leading to La Plan de Compagne, which is nearly in the geographic center of the urbanized area. From Le Plan de Compagne, one corridor leads on to the international airport area and an oil refinery. Another corridor of urbanization stretches north to Aix en Provence and northeast to Gardanne. Still another corridor leads west to Chateaufneuf, Martigues and Port-de-Bruc. From the historic core a wider corridor leads to Aubagne. Here development that might have continued toward Toulon is blocked by yet another massif and forced northward toward the Nice autoroute. From corridor turns northwest toward Aix en Provence to virtually surround the impressive massif that consumes so much of Marseille itself.

Along the road to Aubagne are sprawling commercial and distribution facilities. But the larger such area for such development is adjacent to Marignane International Airport, where nearly two square miles of such facilities will be found. This kind of commercial decentralization along with the big box stores have brought substantially lower prices throughout the high income world to lower and middle income households. They are, in and of themselves, a sufficient reason that the high-density residential development so favored by new urbanists and compact city advocates can do little to make urban areas less automobile oriented. In the final analysis, people have to get to work and shop, and decentralization, whether residential or commercial, tends to favor the automobile (at least among those who value time).

And that is most of the people in Marseille. UITP data indicates that more than 10 percent of travel in its urbanized area is on public transport. It seems likely that throughout the actual urbanized area the figure is likely to be more like five percent, from two to three times what would be expected in an urban area of similar size in the United States.

So what is urbanized Marseille? It surely is much more than the UITP's little core of 50 or so square miles and 800,000 people. And, at least in land area, it is less than the 500 square miles of urbanization and southwestern wilds that INSEE designates. INSEE's 1.35 million people appear to live in approximately 170 square miles of urbanization, which makes Marseille 7,900 per square mile, 20 percent less dense than Paris and 15 percent more dense than Los Angeles.

Marseille may be the ultimate port city. An elevated freeway stretches along the harbor, beside a mile or so of large old warehouses similar to the backdrop of Camden Yards in Baltimore. South of the working port is the old port (Vieux Port), which has been turned into a festival market seemingly at least as festive as Baltimore's inner harbor. Docked in the port are the usual container ships, ferries and even cruise ships.

The Marseille suburbs resemble the suburbs of any other French urban area, which of course resemble in their spatial arrangement the suburb found in America, Canada or Australia. Here, like so virtually all other large European urban areas, automobile oriented suburbs engulf the old walking and public transport city, which remains for good reason the haunt of the tourists. That it remains also the haunt of the urban planners proves that they see very little of the whole.



PICTURES

Western suburbs
Western suburbs
Le Plan de Compagne
Le Plan de Compagne

Marseille harbor
Elevated autoroute along harbor
Western suburbs
Marseille harbor

By Wendell Cox

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