



Monte Carlo resort

A visit to the glittering Principality of Monaco

By Mike Cohen
The Suburban

MONTE CARLO, MONACO: When we decided to spend a few days in Nice, friends told us to take the train one night and experience dazzling Monte Carlo in Monaco.

The principality of Monaco (<http://www.visitmonaco.com>) has a colorful and fascinating history filled with barbarians, kings and even a movie star. It is a story of castles, epic battles and untold riches. In 1997, Monaco celebrated the 700 year reign of the Grimaldi dynasty. It all began on January 8, 1297 when the Guelf François Grimaldi dressed as a Franciscan monk, seized the fortress protecting the famous rock of Monaco and the port of Hercules. Surmounting the trials and tribulations of history and throughout the dark periods of foreign domination, the Principality has managed to affirm its identity and preserve its independence throughout the centuries due to the wise guidance of its Princes.

The Grimaldi dynasty has bequeathed Lords and then Princes to the Principality, illustrious in their many domains, who wrote the most enticing pages in the history of Monaco. To cite but a few: Rainier I, General Admiral of France; Honore II, the first Prince of Monaco at the origins of the most important treaties with France; Louis I, Ambassador to the Holy See under Louis XIV; Antoine I, grand patron of the arts; Charles III, founder of Monte-Carlo; Albert I, renowned as the father of oceanography; Louis II, the soldier Prince; and Rainier III, the builder Prince.

Since 2005, H.S.H. Prince Albert II – already known as the green Prince for his interest in the environment – has been leading the Principality into the 21st century with the support of His sisters H.R.H. The Princess of Hanover and H.S.H. Princess Stephanie. In 2011 Prince Albert married Charlene Wittstock.

Monaco enjoys a privileged location at the heart of Mediterranean Europe. The Principality is nestled between the

Alps and the Mediterranean Sea, bounded by the French Riviera to the west and the Italian Riviera to the east. This is the second smallest country in the world, after Vatican City -three miles long by one-half miles wide (about the size of New York's Central Park). While Monaco is the name of the country, Monte-Carlo is a district within Monaco.

Monaco is a constitutional monarchy ruled by Prince Albert II. One commune - Monaco - is divided into four areas: Monaco-Ville, the old fortified city on the Rock which includes the Prince's Palace, Cathedral and Oceanographic Museum; the Condamine, or port quarter; Monte-Carlo, the business and recreation district; and Fontvieille, a man-made waterfront area for recreation and light industry.

Any person of foreign nationality who wishes to enter Monégasque territory and stay there for a period not exceeding three months must have the document (passport, travel or identity document) required for entry

into French territory.

Monaco's climate is ideal throughout the year. It enjoys mild winters, with 48 degrees minimum, and pleasantly warm summers with July and August temperatures hovering around 78 degrees. On average, the Principality enjoys over 300 days of sunshine a year.

French is the Principality's first language, but some natives speak the ancient Monegasque. English and Italian are also widely spoken.

Monaco has a population of just over 32,000. The Automobile Club of Monaco organizes a Grand Prix race each year. There are more than 3,000 seats available for sale on the circuit.

The size of Monaco allows speedy and easy commutes between the various districts of the Principality. Walking in the Principality is facilitated by public lifts and escalators that operate 24 hours a day, every day, to help overcome different altitude levels. Public transportation includes a bus shuttle service that includes five different routes. Departures are every

10 minutes from 7 am to 9 pm.

The highlight of our evening in Monte Carlo was a remarkable dinner at the Salle Empire (<http://www.montecarlosbm.com/restaurants-in-monaco/gourmet/salle-empire>) at the gorgeous Hôtel de Paris (hoteldeparismontecarlo.com). We took the train from Nice to Monte Carlo and enjoyed a pleasant 10 minute walk through town to this most breathtaking facility where we were seated on a gorgeous terrace overlooking the entrance to the grand casino. This was “people watching” at its best. A musical trio serenaded us with soft songs and a group of servers provided us with sensational service, starting things off with champagne, soft lemon rolls and their signature potato chips.

It is in the Salle Empire that haute gastronomy is served during private dinners catering for up to 350 guests, and concerts and shows are organized for invited audiences. Spectacular celebrations also take place in this setting, unique in Europe. It is part of the Alain Ducasse enterprise. We had already tasted his culinary excellence earlier on in the trip at Le Jules Verne Restaurant at the Eiffel Tower.

Home to chic galas, refined dinners and the Principality's most sophisticated soirées, the Salle Empire - a classified historical monument — underwent careful and meticulous restoration in 2004. Eight hundred thousand gold leaves (the equivalent of a gold bar) for its ceiling, five French windows opening out to the terrace overlooking the Place du Casino (a distinctive feature which astonishes guests), swathes of silk and precious trimmings... nothing has been forgotten to glorify its style and its beauty.

We experienced an extraordinary nine course meal which lasted nearly two and a half hours. Every item on the menu was explained in great detail and if something did not meet our dietary requirements a substitute was easily arranged. First was an interesting and nutritious drink, a concentrated healthy extract of bio vegetables. This was followed by raw and cooked vegetables from the hotel's own garden, with tangy juice. We then enjoyed some amazing eggplant ravioli with fresh goat's cheese and thyme lemon. Next was a cookpot of Brittany lobster, with coral juice. The main course was a roasted lack of lamb from prealps rubbed with summer savory and summer vegetable. It was beautifully prepared.

There were no less than three separate desserts: home-made delicacies and chocolates from the

Hôtel de Paris; red fruit, strawberry juice and vanilla ice cream; and a traditional chocolate soufflé. The servers made a hole in the middle and poured hot chocolate sauce inside. We each got a side plate of whipped cream. This was so light and beyond delicious. The final serving was a moka coffee.

The Hôtel de Paris falls under the auspices of the Group Monte-Carlo SBM (www.sbm.mc), which oversees four casinos, four luxury and top quality hotels (Hôtel de Paris, Hôtel Hermitage, Monte Carlo Beach and Monte-Carlo Bay Hotel & Resort), 30 restaurants and bars, the Thermes Marins de Monte-Carlo (one of Europe's finest spa and thalassotherapy centres), the mythic city hall “Salle des Etoiles” and La Rascasse and Sea Lounge.

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On the Place du Casino, opposite the entrance to the Hôtel de Paris, the car valets appear to perform a ballet as they park the prestigious automobiles. The tone is set. Up a few steps, a few strides, and visitors arrive in the great lobby with its majestic ceilings that never fail to stir emotions. The equestrian statue of Louis XIV has a very shiny knee because of an old tradition - gamblers believe that rubbing its knee will bring them good luck.

October 6, 2014 will be one of the outstanding

dates in the 150-year history of the l'Hôtel de Paris with the launch of a vast program of renovation and restructuring that is scheduled to last for four years. The hotel will continue to operate throughout this period on a reduced scale. Nevertheless, in order to enable guests to be welcomed in the best possible conditions, a short two-month phase of preparatory work will be necessary, leading to a total closure from October 6 to mid-December.

The hotel will reopen for the Christmas period until January 18 2015, when the first main phase of work will begin. The complete reopening is scheduled for September 2018. An exhibition presenting images of the renovation program is set in the “Sporting d'Hiver. During all of this time the Salle Empire will serve as the main restaurant.



Salle Empire