



LIVING THE HIGH LIFE

MONTE CARLO IS THE SUMMER PLAYGROUND OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS, BUT EVEN IN THE OFF SEASON, THIS ENCLAVE IN THE PRINCIPALITY OF MONACO HAS APPEAL. GISELLE WHITEAKER RUBS SHOULDERS WITH THE ELITE.



Clockwise from top: The spectacular pool at Hotel Metropole; the Spa Metropole by Givenchy; the Suite Carré d'Or has impressive views.

Fairy lights twinkle in the rather grand Arch de Triomphe-style arched hedge that signals the entrance to the Hotel Metropole in Monte Carlo as my friend Katy and I stroll past the guard, down the paved driveway. The Belle Époque façade of the hotel, which was designed by Hans-Georg Tersling and built in 1889 quietly whispers class, as to be expected at this venue, where rock stars rub shoulders with royalty. As we sip refreshing welcome cocktails in the lobby lounge, we discreetly glance at the well-heeled patrons scattered at tables that lead to the stylish bar. Unable to spot any confirmed celebrities, we finish our aperitifs and nibbles before heading to our suite.

A bottle of Chateau Roubins Cru Classe Rosé welcomes us to our temporary home, a generously-sized, classically styled space with period furniture and a sofa and armchairs bedecked in floral fabric that anywhere else would look chintzy. Here, the room has been carefully designed to hint at femininity and opulence, without being overwhelming. It's eminently comfortable and low-key luxe, much like the guest list, which targets the comfortably wealthy, rather than the bling set.

The spa is another story. It's spectacular. The Spa Metropole by Givenchy was remodelled last year and it's decidedly contemporary, with straight lines and angles in marble and gold. It's complemented by Odyssey, the oasis of wellbeing imagined and designed by style icon Karl Lagerfeld. The pool is flanked by a fresco-style, 65-foot-long installation inspired by *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. It's all rather decadent.

Our first port of call in the morning is breakfast at the two Michelin-starred Restaurant Joël Robuchon. Joël Robuchon, one of France's best-known chefs, has an extraordinary number of Michelin stars under his belt, so we're keen to put his morning fare under ours. The omelette is easily the best I've consumed – light and fluffy, loaded with my selection of mushrooms, ham and cheese, yet not overly rich. Even the café latte is a treat, with a triple layer of milk, espresso and foam, served in an elegant tall glass.

There are few countries that can be walked end-to-end in a day, but Monaco is manageable, at a mere .78 square miles – it is three miles long and a half mile wide, barely bigger than Hyde Park. The Monte Carlo quarter sits on an escarpment and it's an easy stroll down to the harbour, where multi-million-dollar mega-yachts bob in a gentle breeze and the road markings are a reminder of the Monaco Grand Prix. We amble past the lavish boutiques of all of the big names in fashion: Prada, Hermes, Louis Vuitton and Yves Saint Laurent, to name a few, as well as the Casino de Monte Carlo, the gambling venue credited with stimulating Monaco's economy, and the Hôtel de Paris, the setting for the 20th wedding celebration of Prince Rainier III and Princess Grace of Monaco. We're heading for the Old Town, up a steep set of stairs, to watch the changing of the guard at the Prince's Palace, performed with panache. From here there are sweeping vistas of the Mediterranean and the set of alleyways that radiates from the Palace is packed with eateries and souvenir shops. On the far edge of the Old Town, we find the Saint Nicholas Cathedral and slip inside. This is where many of the Grimaldi family are interred, including Grace Kelly and more recently, Rainier III.



The open kitchen at Restaurant Joël Robuchon.



Restaurant Joël Robuchon at breakfast.

As we leave the hallowed hall, the heavens open, so we duck into the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco. Built in 1910, the museum is perched like a palace atop a sheer 280-foot cliff. Deep-diving explorer Jacques Cousteau was a former director and the extensive basement tanks are teeming with marine life that occupies us for several hours. The rooftop is also worth a visit, affording spectacular panoramas, despite the buffeting wind.

Back at the hotel, we dress for dinner, anticipating fine fare at Restaurant Joël Robuchon. Seated at the chef's table in front of the kitchen, we can see the precision with which the team of chefs plate each meal as we sip on glasses of Veuve Clicquot, a stark reminder of why French champagnes are considered the best in the world. Katy delves into her crab, wrapped in a citrus-flavoured avocado roll, while I sample the exquisitely combined flavours of purple artichoke, squid, chorizo and a touch of thyme, cooked in a tagine dish. Our waiter expertly pairs both dishes with French wines of exceptional quality.

Our mains are deceptively simple, executed to perfection. I can't bring myself to chow down on the John Dory with Mediterranean vegetables after admiring the fish in the aquarium, but Katy feels no such compunction. Instead, I try

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The night lights of Monaco.



The heart of Monaco.

the spit roast of the day, chicken, served with Robuchon's notorious mashed potatoes, essentially a vast quantity of butter that turns the potato into a creamy delight.

Then the large dessert trolley is rolled over. It is laden with an impressive array of old-school sweet treats, ranging from rum baba to meringue pie. Followed by coffee and petit fours, we are left to roll from our chairs with satiated smiles on our faces.

We have one more day to live the high life, so we spend the morning post-breakfast languishing in Odyssey, lazily circling the pool and ducking in and out of the selection of steam rooms and saunas. With a few short hours left in which to explore, we visit the Monaco Top Cars Collection, an automobile museum in the Fontvieille district containing Prince Rainier III's private car collection. The exhibition spans 5,000 square metres and brings together over one hundred cars, ranging from a 1903 De Dion Bouton to Rolls Royces, Lincolns, Lamborghinis, and the Lexus used for the royal wedding in 2011, not to mention a number of the racing cars seen at the Monte Carlo Rally and the Formula 1 from the Monaco Grand Prix.

Our departure is somewhat less spectacular. Wheeling our suitcases away from the luxury of the Hotel Metropole, we wind through the small park – the Jardins de la Petite Afrique – to the tourist information centre to board a bus for Nice Airport, just over an hour's drive away. As we rumble down the road, it is only our memories of Monaco that make us feel like millionaires. ■

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INFO

For more information about the Hotel Metropole, see www.metropole.com



Every room exudes elegance at Hotel Metropole.



The Belle Epoque facade of the Hotel Metropole.



The Spa Metropole by Givenchy.



The lobby bar at Hotel Metropole.