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Mediterranean Marvel

*European principality's
specialty is splendor*

By Rose Davidson

Nestled away in France's southern tip, bordering the stunning beauty of the Côte d'Azur, is a country with land measuring less than one square mile.

But what the principality of Monaco lacks in size, it makes up for with its intriguing history and sheer modern luxury.

The country, home to roughly 35,000 citizens, gives off a clean, urban vibe with upbeat energy to match. The primary language is French, but with a steady stream of tourists coming in year-round, English is spoken and understood in nearly every public place.

In the summer of 2004, I ventured on a student trip to Europe. Between overnight stays in France and Italy, the group passed through Monaco for a day-long excursion. I was enchanted by the sophisticated charm the country possessed, and thus was

disappointed when my short time there came to an end. But while on a Mediterranean cruise in the summer of 2010, I had the chance to visit Monaco again, and I was able to explore the streets I had long waited to wander.

While every inch of Monaco offers an alluring beauty that deserves to be seen, there are a few destinations that should top any traveler's list.

Grandiose Gambling

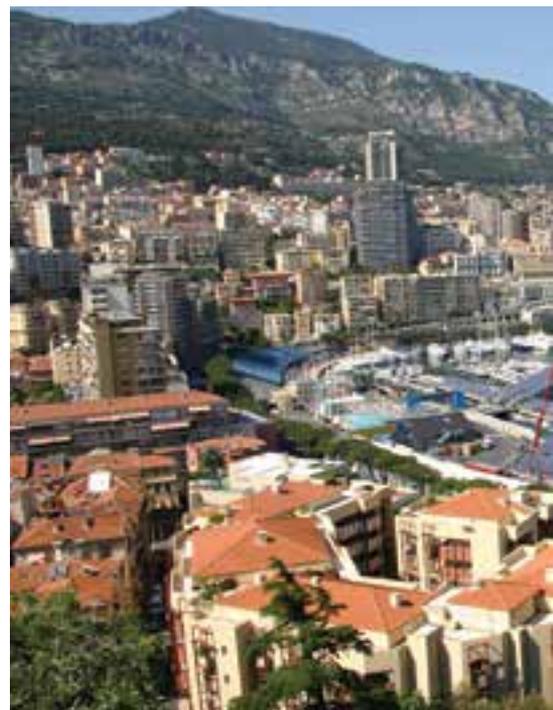
When Monaco is mentioned in conversation, the mind is likely to wander to the highly acclaimed Monte-Carlo Casino. Known for its captivating scenery, which has made frequent appearances in James Bond films – including *GoldenEye*, *Never Say Never Again* and, of course, *Casino Royale* – the establishment has gained international notoriety for its utterly lavish amenities.

Built in 1863, the casino is a legendary gambling locale for risk-takers along the French Riviera and worldwide. The atmosphere encourages exorbitant bets with décor featuring stained glass windows and intricately gilded architectural detailing. Collectively, the casino exudes a style reminiscent of the Roaring Twenties, but offers modern forms of gambling, including table games and slot machines.

The casino has also been known to attract patrons during world-class events

such as the Monaco Grand Prix, a motor race for Formula One competitors that takes place in the month of May. Arguably one of the most prestigious motor races in the world, the course takes drivers along the narrow, winding streets of the country's hilly landscape.

To fit with the casino's upscale ambiance, guests are required to wear formal attire.



Monte-Carlo Casino



Upon entering the casino, one must present a passport. This is partly to ensure that no one under the age of 18 is admitted, but it is also to keep out unwanted guests – oddly enough, Monaco's own citizens are forbidden from gambling in the casino.

Posh Palace

Strategically placed atop the “Rock” of Monaco, as if to oversee all the activity taking place in the prosperous country, is the Prince's Palace. The Genoese built the fortress in 1215, but the Grimaldi family seized the structure in 1297 and has ruled from the location ever since. The palace received a facelift when Prince Rainier III, husband of American actress Grace Kelly, restored many aspects of the palace in the latter half of the 20th Century.

The Prince's Palace is now home to Prince Albert II, the current reigning monarch for the governing body of Monaco. The regal residence is open to visitors

from April to October of each year, when they can browse the state apartments and see some of the opulent accommodations set aside for the royal family.

Included in a tour of the palace are multiple rooms with varying styles. One such room, the Throne Room, displays the Grimaldi coat of arms and, of course, the throne, enveloped under a canopy of



Monaco Harbour and the Monaco Grand Prix Race Track's pit lane



red velvet silk and topped with Monaco's royal crown. Here, official ceremonies and state receptions are commonly held on the room's floor, which is inlaid with authentic Carrera marble.

Although the palace can only be viewed during certain months, the Changing of

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Above: The Prince's Palace

Right: Crowds gather for the Changing of the Guards.

the Guards ceremony takes place year-round. Beginning promptly each day at 11:55 a.m., those lined up by the entrance to the Palace Square can see this long-standing tradition being carried out dutifully by the highly trained watchmen.

Fanciful Fish

Built into the rocky coastline of Monaco's eastern edge, the Oceanographic Museum is literally where the land meets



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the sea. But while the structure alone is impressive, it's what waits inside that is truly magical.

The basement of this museum is not used for storing artifacts or outdated gift shop merchandise. Instead, it has been transformed into an aquatic wonderland. The walls are lined with tanks containing exotic marine animals, including seahorses, jellyfish and a variety

of intriguing crustaceans. Dim lighting provides a calming atmosphere for viewing these sea creatures, which total more than 6,000 creatures of more than 600 different species.

While there are 90 tanks to house all of these specimens, many reside in the museum's most recent addition – the Shark Lagoon. Measuring nearly 16,000 cubic feet, the exhibit boasts an extensive coral



Oceanographic Museum

reef filled with captivating colors. And by constructing such a realistic reef habitat, the institute offers a rare glimpse into one of the world's most beautiful, yet fleeting ecosystems.

But the Oceanographic Museum is far more than just an aquarium. It is dedicated to the marine sciences, and with that comes a mission to educate visitors on environmental factors impacting the world's oceans. In order to do so, the institute works diligently to research and reproduce coral species to avoid the need for further acquisitions from the wild.

Other forms of education are present at the museum as well. Perhaps the greatest example of this is the collection of samples and specimens assembled by Monaco's late Prince Albert I, which he discovered during his time studying marine biology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Also boosting the institute's reputation is its former director Jacques Cousteau, a world-renowned scientist, conservationist and filmmaker. **CS**

Rose Davidson is a contributing writer. Feedback welcome at gbishop@cityscenemediagroup.com.

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