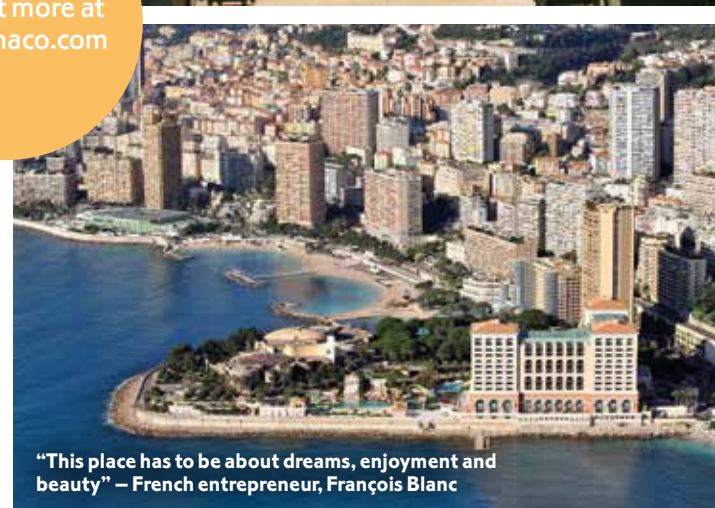


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"This place has to be about dreams, enjoyment and beauty" – French entrepreneur, François Blanc

# Be a high flier...

A weekend in the wealthiest and most glamorous place on Earth gives **Darren Calpin** a taste of the high life

**B**ANKING SHARPLY TO the left, our sleek MonacAir helicopter is flying so low over the Med I can clearly see the perma-tanned features of the beautiful people atop their super-yachts below. It's taken us just six minutes to zip along the coast from Nice Cote d'Azur Airport, the gleaming mid-morning sunshine making the flat calm sea beneath us look like a giant infinity pool.

The pilot straightens up and there before us, front and centre, is the wealthiest and most glamorous place on Earth – Monaco. As we hover gingerly above the oceanside heliport

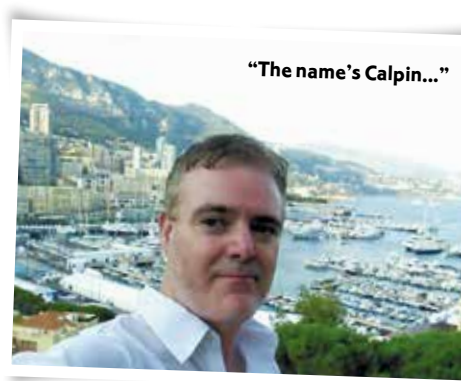
in the swanky Fontvieille business district, I raise an eyebrow and afford myself a wry smile. This is what it must feel like to be James Bond.

Monaco's unrivalled position as the world's most exclusive enclave of glitzy affluence is firmly associated with the enterprising Grimaldis, an ancient Genoese family who made this somewhat remote spot their home in 1297.

However, it is actually a French entrepreneur, François Blanc, who should get much of the credit for turning this tiny

principality – barely a square mile in size – into such a gilded destination. Tasked with the considerable mission of helping the cash-strapped Grimaldis generate much-needed revenue, Blanc established the now iconic Casino de Monte Carlo and Hôtel de Paris during the 1860s, declaring: "This place has to be about dreams, enjoyment and beauty."

In double-quick time, both establishments became hugely popular with gambling-mad Parisians looking to enjoy la belle vie. The taxes raised enabled the Grimaldis, as well as Blanc's



"The name's Calpin..."

organising company, Société des Bains de Mer, to develop Monaco's infrastructure to a level even they couldn't have imagined. Modern Monaco was born, and the genie was very much let out of its bottle.

## GOLDEN AGE OF THE BELLE ÉPOQUE

Though the world has of course changed markedly since the 1860s, it's fair to say Monaco retains something of a timeless air about it. The splendidly ornate lobby of my digs – the five-star Hermitage Hotel, no less – confirms this. Strolling amid the marble pillars and gilded interiors of this palatial yet elegantly restrained sibling of the nearby Hôtel de Paris, it's easy to feel like you've somehow managed to find a portal back to the golden age of the Belle Époque.

For sure, exploring this vast and yet surprisingly intimate property, which is owned by the still-thriving Société des Bains de Mer (SBM), is a genuinely visceral treat. The lavishly grand surroundings of the stunning Belle

Époque ballroom and the splendid Winter Garden lobby – a rotund stained-glass atrium designed by none other than Gustave Eiffel – are particularly adept at delivering the Midnight in Paris effect in spades.

Though the Hermitage's artfully maintained heritage is undoubtedly its trump card, this 129-year-old treasure is by no means stuck in the past. Considerate renovation projects have ensured the old gal offers the ultra-modern amenities its discerning guests demand, including a state-of-the-art thermal spa complex and a Michelin-starred restaurant (La Vistamar), both of which proffer dreamy views of the famous yacht-filled harbour and the showpiece F1 Grand Prix.

Complimentary perks, such as a free shuttle service to a private beach club with myriad watersports, are two-a-penny as well. Oh, and you also get free admission/discounted rates to SBM's many other hotels and venues, such as Casino de Monte Carlo, Hôtel de Paris, Café de Paris and Hotel Monte Carlo Bay, just for good measure.

## MONACO'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS DISTRICT

I exit the Hermitage's crisp, cool lobby and head out into the modest afternoon heat, striding casually past the glinting Lamborghinis, Bentleys and Aston Martins parked neatly beside shady Beaumarchais Square.

A two-minute stroll along nearby Avenue des Beaux Arts, a neat and modern pedestrianised thoroughfare lined with high-end boutique stores, gets me to Casino Square, the landmark heart of Monaco's most prestigious district, Monte Carlo.

Dominated by the exquisite, Garnier-designed, Beaux Arts-style casino overlooking the sea on its south side, and flanked by the incomparable Hôtel de Paris and Café de Paris east and west, this pretty square looks and feels like a film set, with a steady stream of selfie-taking tourists and revving supercars politely taking it in turns to see and be seen.

It's said that close to a third of Monaco's diminutive 38,400 population are millionaires, and while many of them may well live in >>



# Great escapes

über-exclusive Fontvieille, this is evidently where they come to enjoy the trappings of their success.

## A 1920S VIBE

I'm hot. A drink is in order and so, like Charlie Chaplin, Winston Churchill and Roger Moore before me, I head into the immense foyer of the recently renovated Hôtel de Paris and seek out the cool, jazz-infused environs of the legendary Bar Américain.

Savouring the evocative 1920s vibe and admiring fab black and white wall-mounted photos of Frank Sinatra, David Niven and Errol Flynn, I start to feel like the coolest and luckiest man in the world. And thus, after sauntering out onto the bar's new terrace to survey the square and sea from a somewhat loftier vantage point, I push through the heavy glass lobby doors (where guests' diamond rings have left decades' worth of tiny scratches behind the handles), swagger across to the Monte Carlo Casino, and ascend the steps feeling like Sean Connery in his prime.

While mere mortals have to fork out a hefty 17 euros to enter the casino's grandest gaming

halls, my evident Goldfinger-inspired elan, along with my Hermitage room key/SBM charge card, ensures I am ushered swiftly toward the venerated Salle Europe without charge.

Sadly, the steely-eyed doorman doesn't utter "We've been expecting you, Mr...?" as I rock up at the plush velvet stanchion, one hand tucked suavely into my trouser pocket.

Aside from the rather incongruous video slot machines, the vast, vaulted gaming rooms, gilded with marble and gold, are breathtaking; a lavishly rarified sanctum of heavy velvet drapes and pristine felt gaming tables flecked with majestic sculptures and dazzling Bohemian chandeliers.

An ever-present background noise of tinkling roulette balls, calling croupiers and cascading casino chips completes the fantasy effect. I can see now why Ian Fleming used this venue as inspiration for Casino Royale, the very first James Bond novel. Regrettably megalomaniac super-villains and

beguiling femmes-fatales seem few and far between this evening. Exiting the grand, marble-paved atrium an hour later with a grand profit of zero

also puts something of a dent in my secret agent fantasies.

## MISTAKEN IDENTITY

It's dark now as I pitch up at the legendary Café de Paris (yet another SBM venue) and order dinner. The atmosphere, like the clientele, is casual and relaxed, with chatty groups, loved-up couples and single wannabee spies all enjoying the luxury of watching the Casino Square spectacle from the comfort of this historic brasserie's large open terrace.

Midway through tucking into possibly the best grilled fillet steak I've ever tasted, I lean back and take in my surroundings as a moment in time: the clinking wine glasses, the warm evening air, the lapping sea, the chuckling diners, and the purring supercars. While the Belle Époque may be long gone, a visit to this decadent yet surprisingly inclusive enclave is undoubtedly enough to give anyone an enticing taste of the good life.

Just then, I notice how much the bald-headed waiter by the bar looks like Donald Pleasance's Blofeld. In my best French, I ask him if he owns a hollowed-out volcano and/or white cat, and within moments he brings me the dessert menu. C'est la vie... **CTW**

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