



Monaco Petit Prix

Once upon a time Monaco was a vision of distant fascination, a fairytale kingdom by the sea, run by a benevolent prince, frequented by European aristocracy and Hollywood royalty.

In the days of bell-bottoms, its image became more glam than glamour: racing drivers, models, Champagne-fuelled dinners, moustaches and slot machine riches.

As the noughties rounded, Monaco's veil slipped again. The world it revealed was an edgy corporate blend of private banks, sponsorship deals, sales conferences and super-yacht penis envy. A climax arrived in 2008, when the Monaco-based Safra family unloaded their palatial Villa Leopoldo, former Riviera home of Italy's Agnelli clan, for a mammoth half a billion Euros. In an era-defining twist, the Russian purchaser struggled to finance the property and was forced to walk away from his €39m deposit. (I know, we all shed a few tears that night.)

But winds of change from the recent financial crisis have seemingly set the Principality on a new course, with the ruling Grimaldi family placing bets on new cultural offerings and family-friendly activities. A raft of cool restaurants and bars offering €15 set lunches and half-price happy hour cocktails offer a sleek new alternative to old money ostentation.

Determined to put the Principality's new face to the test, I hit the town. My aim? To play the millionaire with as little cash as decency allows.



11am

The biggest bargain on the Côte d'Azur is the no. 100 bus from Nice Centre. It departs every 15 minutes, cruising along a corniche of film-set standards. It takes in the seascapes of Villefranche, runs atop Cap Ferrat – the richest spit of land in Europe – then ducks past Bono's house in Èze-sur-Mer, depositing awestruck visitors in Monaco 40 minutes later.

So far, so cheap. I wander up to the rock of Monte Carlo, the Principality's premier free attraction and also its original settlement. A statue of Francesco Grimaldi in the palace square celebrates a display of Monagasque cunning seven centuries ago. Disguised as a monk, Francesco blagged his way into the fortress only to open the gates to his cousin Rainier and a posse of soldiers. Monaco has been ruled by the Grimaldis ever since.

At 11.55am, bells sound for the changing of the palace guard. The flourish of arms, drums and shining brass buttons is fantastic, pompous and enjoyed by all.

12pm

The most tranquil area of Monaco is due south of the palace square, where exotic gardens are draped over the Mediterranean, offering amazing panoramas and a haven for picnicking families. I loop through here, and then wander down to the harbour, where the playthings of Europe and Arabia's elite lie at anchor.

Although these yachts costs tens of millions each (regular visitors include Roman Abramovich's Pelorus and the former Onassis family charge Christina O), sneaking a peek at their splendour is free. Hiring even the tidiest yacht here for a day would cost the same as a new Mini, so I hop across the harbour on the Bateabus, a solar-powered ferry. A new addition to Monaco's transport network, it putters through this billionaire's bay for just €1 per ride.

1pm

A free elevator links the harbour with Casino Square. It's certainly chichi, with the swish Hotel de Paris lining one whole side, but people watching opportunities abound. I wander in to the Café de Paris Casino (unlike the 'proper' Casino de Monte-Carlo across the road, there's no jacket or entrance fee required), where American teenagers play Sex in the City slots and minor Arabian royals flutter €500 notes on the electronic roulette.

Following Monaco's F1 circuit, I wander down avenue des Spéluges to the seafront and Fairmont Hotel tunnel.

2pm

Just past the Japanese Gardens – another attraction on a Monaco cheapskate's tour – a row of A-lister paw prints have been set in cement along the seafront promenade. I resist the temptation to tread on Diego Maradona's (old habits die hard) and continue to the Grimaldi Forum. This great glass structure hosts the cream of Monaco's glittering social calendar as well as Café Llorca, top chef Alain Llorca's hip bistro-bar that opened in late 2010.

Take a stunning new restaurant from a celebrity chef and sit it inside a millionaires' playground and you might have to spend €100 per head. Post-crisis, however, Monaco's new austerity is blissfully apparent. Plat du jour lunches of salade niçoise and grilled local mullet hover around €15, all dished up with panoramic Mediterranean views.

3pm

Over the road is another new cultural opening. The Villa Sauber (entrance €6) is an ornate former villa that forms one half of the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco (the other half is the Villa Paloma across town, which lies next to another great freebie, the Jardin Exotique). It exhibits contemporary art exhibitions in charmingly OTT surrounds: more shabby-chic than painfully hip.

4pm

The seaside path continues to the very edge of the Principality at Plage Larvotto. It's one of few sandy beaches on the Côte d'Azur (they import it, sweetie). It also makes for a smug "I'm on the beach in Monaco" Facebook update.

6pm

Refreshed and having spent a grand total of €23, I'm eager to part with some cash. But it's trickier than it seems. Great offers are everywhere: trendy Bistroquet by the casino has €5.50 cocktails and free canapés, while famed harbourside restaurant Rascasse has €3 pints of beer and free finger food.

I settle on Ni Bar a block back from the harbour. With its disco ball, glass tables and designer urinals it smacks of Monaco, yet well-mixed Martinis come in at €6 for two.

On the bus back to Nice I tally up my spending. My daylong tab – culture, casino, cocktails and lunch included – comes in at a delightfully cheap €30. Shouldn't someone tell Abramovich?

Best free events in Monaco

The Principality piles its near limitless resources into scores of fabulous free events. There's literally always something happening, from vintage motor shows to open-air photography exhibitions. The following events are regulars on Monaco's cultural calendar and won't disappoint.

January

Monte Carlo Rally – watch Subarus and Skodas race from high in the hills to the royal palace

February

Monte Carlo Historic Rally – Alfa Romeo Spiders and Ford Cortinas compete on the streets of Monaco

June

Monte Carlo International Sculpture Festival – oversize installations dot the Casino gardens all month long

August

International Fireworks Festival – watch millions go up in smoke in a pyrotechnic frenzy, held on various evenings throughout summer

September

Monaco Go-Kart Cup – thrills and spills in miniature by the harbour swimming pool

December

Christmas village – Santa tends to the truly wealthy too, going out with a bang with Monaco's New Years Eve fireworks display.



Monaco's best Euro-for-Euro lunches

Citroën 2CV

Tuck into €10 pizzas and *escalope Milanese* at Italian cheapy

Le Stella Polaris on the harbour front.

3 avenue President Kennedy,
+377.93.30.88.63

Fiat 500

A 200m panoramic terrace and ocean backdrop is topped off with €12 plat du jour lunches by superchef Alain Llorca, at Monaco's brand new

Café Llorca.

10 avenue Princesse Grace
+377.99.99.29.29

Alfa Romeo Giulietta

Two-course set lunches with wine for €15 include broad bean salads, pasta pomodoro and roast beef at chic new eatery

Adagio

1 rue Biovès
+377.99.98.15.56

Mazda MX-5

Try Michelin-starred chef Joël Robuchon's Japan-inspired €32 Happy Bento box with wine at

Yoshi, in the Hôtel Metropole.

4 avenue de la Madone
+377.93.15.13.13

Bentley Continental

Business menus with wine cost €39 at the sleek, modern dining salon

Vistamar,

inside the elegant Hôtel Hermitage Square Beaumarchais

+377.98.06.98.98

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