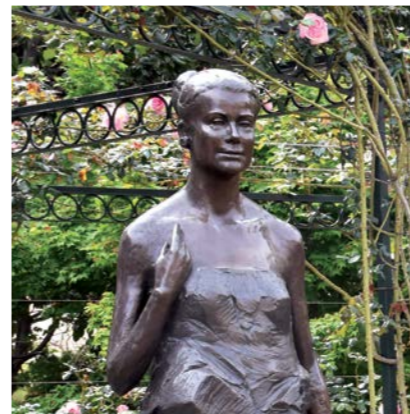


Mini Break

The Principality of Monaco proves perfect for a mini break, discovers LOUISE REYNOLDS.

Visitors are still drawn to Monaco by the story of the American girl who became a European princess



Wedged between France and Italy on the glamorous Riviera, the tiny Principality of Monaco is renowned as the playground of royalty, movie stars, Russian oligarchs and tax-shy sports stars.

For the next two days, Monaco is also the destination of a well-earned girls-only trip I'm sharing with my old friend and travelling accomplice. We're going to take in as many of the best things to see and do in the principality as we can, and do it all on foot. Luckily for us Monaco isn't very big. In fact, at just two square kilometres, Monaco is the second smallest sovereign state in the world, with a population of 38,000. But size isn't everything. This compactness makes Monaco a perfect mini-break destination.

Day one is 'royal' day. The fairytale romance and marriage of then sovereign Prince Rainier and American actress Grace Kelly drew the world's attention to Monaco in the 1950s and cemented its status as one of the capitals of glamour. Visitors are still drawn to Monaco by the story of the American girl who became a European princess. So today we check out some of the places most closely associated with Rainier and Grace.

A tour of the Palais Princier (*palais.mc*) – the official residence of their son and current sovereign Albert II and his family – is the obvious place to begin. The palace sits atop the area of Monaco known simply as 'the rock'. But like most things, it sounds better in French: Le Rocher.

The State Apartments are open to the public from approximately April to October each year. None other than His Serene Highness Albert II narrates the audio tour that guides us through his home. Prince Albert describes the Louis XIV-inspired decor – a wonderful array of marble, glass, silk brocade, elaborate tapestries, frescoes and family portraits – and shares anecdotes about the history of the palace and his family, who have ruled Monaco for 700 years. We emerge from the hour-long tour with perfect timing to enjoy the changing of the palace guard.

A short distance away we visit the impressive St Nicholas Cathedral. The wedding of Rainier and Grace took place here in 1956. It is now where they both rest alongside a number of Monaco's former rulers. When Princess Grace died in 1982 following a car accident, heartbroken Rainier saw to it that her grave was always adorned with fresh flowers. He died in 2005. Today, flowers top both their graves as a steady stream of visitors pay their respects to one of the 20th century's most glamorous couples. >>

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Page 24: View from Le Rocher • page 25, top to bottom: statue of Prince Rainier III by Kees Verkade at the Rampe Majeur • *Princess on the Rock* by Kees Verkade at the Princess Grace Rose Garden • St Nicholas Cathedral

Leaving the cathedral, we descend from Le Rocher through the pleasant Jardin Exotique (*jardin-exotique.mc*) to the Terraces de Fontvieille, where we discover Prince Rainier's incredible collection of vintage and luxury cars (*mtcc.mc*), now open to the public. It is a stunning collection of more than 100 cars covering the history of motoring. Highlights include a 1924 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost, Formula One racing cars and the blue Sunbeam Alpine that Grace Kelly drove with Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief*. If I could have my pick, I would drive away in the sexy strawberry red 1956 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL. One of only 18 ever made in this colour, it is super rare and super cool.

Alas, we can't take that lovely Merc with us so we continue our royal tour on foot. First we take a break from the heat of the day with an ice-cream at a McDonald's that must have the best view of any Maccas on the planet, overlooking Port de Fontvieille.

We end our day with a visit to the Princess Grace Rose Garden (Avenue des Guelfes), where a statue of Princess Grace by Kees Verkade is surrounded by 4,000 roses. We're a bit too early in the season for many to be in bloom.

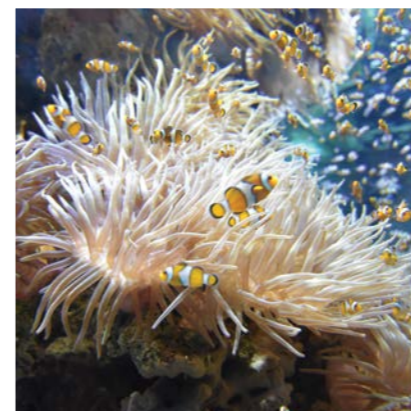
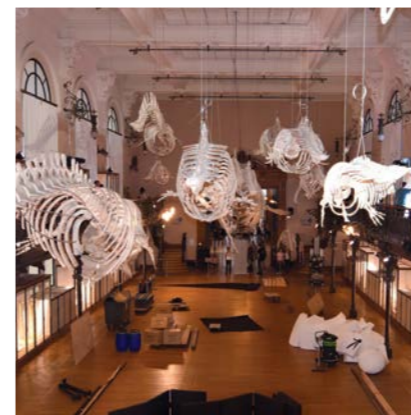
After a full day of walking, we retreat with aching feet to our hotel, the modern and rather swanky Port Palace (*portpalace.net*). The boutique hotel is perfectly positioned right on Port Hercules in the heart of Monte Carlo's action. By booking and paying upfront several months in advance, our stay here has set us back a little over A\$300 per night – a bit of a bargain considering its location and quality. (Just don't come on Grand Prix weekend, when I hear rooms here can go for ten times as much.)

We wake the next morning to discover that much of the road near the hotel has been resurfaced while we slept. Thank goodness for double glazing. Just over a month out from the famed Monaco Grand Prix, work to prepare the temporary grandstands, garages and, evidently, the street circuit itself goes on around the clock.

We've themed our second day 'landmarks and museums'. Where better to start than Monaco's most famous landmark: the Casino de Monte Carlo (*montecarlosbm.com*). When it opened in 1863, the casino helped launch Monaco as the must-be-seen-at destination for the glitterati.

Neither of us being gamblers – and frankly not trusting ourselves not to blow the holiday budget at the roulette table – we opt to visit the casino early before gambling starts at noon. First we need to clear security, which could be a little embarrassing.

I unzip my handbag for a gruff-looking security guard to reveal a teddy bear that travels everywhere with me and is awaiting a suitable Monte Carlo photo op.



The gruff security guard breaks into a broad smile: "Oh, a teddy," he says cheerfully before pointing at his own rather round tummy and dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "Me too. I am also a teddy." He lets us in.

We need to show our passport and pay a €10 entry fee. This proves well worth it as the palatial interior of this Riviera legend has to be seen to be believed. The marble columns, huge Bohemian crystal chandeliers, ceiling frescoes and canvases are jaw-dropping. We must look ridiculous walking around staring with mouths agape.

Emerging from the casino we pause to admire the ostentatious display of luxury cars – Rolls-Royce, Lamborghini, Ferrari and Porsche – parked out front by the uniformed valets of the Hôtel de Paris. We watch with amusement while a valet shoehorns himself into a tiny two-seat Renault Twizy and drives it away – he's not parking that next to the Ferraris.

The palatial interior of this Riviera legend has to be seen to be believed

Continuing our walking exploration, we arrive at the famous Larvotto Beach. Like many Riviera beaches it has pebbles not sand. The pebbles get into my shoes so I take them off and enjoy a refreshing paddle. Fish swim around me in the clear water close to the shore. Further out, a sleek, almost sinister-looking, motor yacht cruises by. It looks like something that should belong to the villain in a Bond movie.

To reach our last destination, the Oceanographic Museum (*oceano.mc*), we walk close to the full length of the country to again reach the top of Le Rocher. The exhibition halls have a charming 'olde worlde' feel about them. One permanent exhibition is dedicated to the seafaring exploits of Prince Albert I (1889–1922) who was quite the adventurer. It's filled with specimens, photographs and documents he collected on his many voyages, and an interesting collection of scientific instruments. The museum's highlight is the fabulous Whale Room where massive skeletons hang from the ceiling. Beneath the museum, Monaco Aquarium, one of the world's oldest, is home to some 6,000 fish and other sea creatures as well as colourful corals.

To wrap up our mini break, we settle in at Port Palace's rooftop bar to enjoy a drink and the view over the beautiful boats lining Port Hercules. As we each sip a glass of wine and reflect on our visit, we agree we could definitely get used to this. ♣

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Page 26: Larvotto Beach • page 27, top to bottom: 1956 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL – part of Prince Rainier III's collection • Casino de Monte Carlo • Whale Room at the Oceanographic Museum • Monaco Aquarium at the Oceanographic Museum

Images in this article © Louise Reynolds



Prince Albert describes the Louis XIV-inspired decor and shares anecdotes about the history of the palace and his family