

The changing face of Monaco



Hôtel de Paris is Monaco's oldest five-star hotel, dating back to 1864

The global pandemic has failed to dampen the charm of this most iconic of countries. **Darren Calpin** paid a pre-Covid visit, and can't wait to return, designer facemask in tow...

MONACO IS ONE of those places that, on the face of it, never really seems to change. Indeed, if you glance at the tiny city-state's famed skyline and compare it to how it appeared 40 years ago, chances are you'll notice very few differences. Scratch the surface though and you'll see recent changes have indeed been afoot – some of them significant and all of them entirely considerate to the principality's illustrious heritage and timeless ambience.

A STYLISH NIP AND TUCK

Surprisingly, a visit to the Hôtel de

Paris, Monaco's oldest and most prestigious five-star hotel, affords arguably the best opportunity to see the march of time at work.

Built in 1864 to accommodate visitors to the Casino de Monte Carlo just yards away, this grand old dame is as much a part of the principality's DNA as the Savoy is to London's genetic make-up. Even revered institutions need a nip and tuck from time to time however, and the Hôtel de Paris is no exception. Earlier this year, the hotel revealed the results of a four-year, £225 million

modernisation project that aims as, as the hotel's general manager Ivan Artolli puts it: "To preserve what makes the Hôtel de Paris special, and then add – always with good taste."

The result? Well, the refreshed



Darren has his designer facemask on order, ready for his next visit

wedding cake exterior looks more gorgeous than ever, and the iconic glass dome and fabled bronze equestrian statue (which guests rub for good luck on their way to the casino) are redolent, dazzling all who enter the exquisite Belle Époque lobby. The peerless Louis XV-Alain Ducasse restaurant has been entirely refurbished, while legendary jazz joint Le Bar Américain benefits from a new terrace affording premier views of the sea, square and – when it's in town – the Monaco Grand Prix.

Brand new innovations include two guest wings that have been rebuilt from the ground up, an airy, Raffles-style interior garden courtyard replete with palm trees and marbled colonnades, and an on-site shopping precinct housing luxury boutiques including Graff, Harry Winston, Omega and Stardust.

The heritage accommodations have been modernised too, with the opulent Diamond Suites now offering luxe contemporary bathrooms and state-of-the-art tech to complement the ever-stunning coastal views and luxe personalised services. A brace of super-luxe, ultra-modern bi-level suites – The Princess Grace Suite

and The Prince Rainier III Suite – top things off rather literally on the hotel's rooftop with their own personal terraces and pools.

DESIGNER DEVELOPMENT

Step out of the discrete side entrance of the Hôtel de Paris and you're immediately greeted by another innovative and sizeable change to the Monaco landscape.

Completed earlier this year and covering some 60,000m², One Monte-Carlo is effectively a whole new district, replacing the aged yet much-loved Beaux Arts Sporting d'Hiver (Winter Sporting) building, and the area surrounding it, with pedestrianised, high-end shopping lanes, luxury apartments, cultural venues and a post-modern conference centre.

Designed by none other than Sir Richard Rogers, this luxurious yet environmentally-friendly development is now considered the crown jewel within the principality, with seven curved glass residential buildings offering sweeping views of the sea, casino and mountains, and an airy external space which will eventually host vertical gardens.



Measuring less than a square mile, Monaco is, after Vatican City, the second smallest country in the world

Along with being extremely eco-conscious (a persistent concern among the local Monégasque population), One Monte-Carlo has deliberately maintained the height of surrounding buildings to make sure it fits in harmoniously with the existing skyline.

To achieve this and yet still manage to squeeze in the luxury boutiques, art galleries, gourmet restaurants and top-level residential, office and conference facilities, Rogers and his team chose to build down rather than up, locating the spacious conference centre underground rather than at ground level. However, the inclusion of several multi-storey atriums ensures the vaulted lobby of this expansive and contemporary conference centre enjoys enough natural daylight to make visitors feel like they're still at street level.

CREATIVE USE OF (NOT MUCH) SPACE

Rogers' savvy design brings to the fore an issue which has kept the Grimaldis and the city fathers awake for many years: space, or to be more precise, the distinct lack of it. Measuring less than a square mile (2km/500 acres), Monaco is, after Vatican City, the second smallest »



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country in the world. To put that in context, you could fit this entire city-state into New York's Central Park and still have room left over to squeeze in a few of Roman Abramovich's mega-yachts. Now imagine 38,000-plus people all trying to live and work in Central Park at the same time...

To be fair, Monaco has done a pretty good job of creating more space. Indeed, successful land reclamation and tunneling projects – many commissioned by the “builder prince”, Rainier III – have seen the overall size of the principality grow by an estimated 20% since 1861. An additional land reclamation project, the £1.5 billion Offshore Urban Extension Project at

Portier Cove, is due to add 15 more acres to the principality by 2026.

It's true to say Monaco is also pretty adept at making the most of the space it already has. A good example of this can be seen in the way many of Monaco's leading hotels, entertainment outlets, cultural venues and conference centres work together to share resources and facilities.

The reason this arrangement works so well here is down to the fact so many of Monaco's leading casinos, hotels, restaurants, bars, night clubs, spas, beach clubs, and golf clubs are owned by the Société des Bains de Mer (SBM), a publicly traded company founded way back in 1863 to help fund and build the Casino de Monte Carlo.

The Casino is still owned by SBM, one of 52 properties within its enviable portfolio of accommodation, dining, entertainment, and gambling venues that also includes One Monte-Carlo, Hôtel de Paris, Opéra de Monte-Carlo, Hôtel Hermitage, Thermes Marins Monte-Carlo and Café de Paris.

WORKING AS ONE

Operating all of these top-level venues under one umbrella ensures that, rather than competing against one another, the principality's leading venues are able to work as one to provide visitors unfettered access to Monaco's plentiful yet sometimes spread out resources.

Suffice to say, this set-up works particularly well in the context of accommodating large travel groups and hosting considerable business tourism events like conferences and seminars. Being able to stay in a prestigious heritage hotel, enjoy a dip in a lagoon pool at a more contemporary hotel, cool off at a separate private beach club, conference at a designated MICE venue, dine in a selection of top-end restaurants and relax at an off-site spa gives tour organisers and visiting groups the flexibility to experience peerless levels of excellence that few independent hotels or resorts, regardless of their size, could ever hope to match. And let's face it, that's something that will probably never change in Monaco. **CTW**



