

TRAVEL MONACO

# An artist's tryst with Lady Luck

The playground of the rich and famous claims it was the making of painter Francis Bacon, writes **Jane Cornwell**

**Francis Bacon** loved to gamble. More than anything else – apart from making art, of course – he loved to gamble at the casino in Monte Carlo, the most famous in the world. “You could go in at 10 in the morning and not come out ‘til about four the following morning,” declared the Irish-born roué, who apparently did this a lot when living in Monaco, that tiny, showy principality on an ancestral rock in the French Riviera. Francophile and bon vivant, painter of screaming popes and robust gay sex scenes, Bacon was already a hugely famous artist when he died in Madrid in 1992 aged 82, a week before he was due to lunch in Monte Carlo with a friend. But few could have predicted the levels to which his posthumous fame would skyrocket: in November 2013, a painting by Bacon of his friend Lucien Freud became the world’s most expensive artwork sold at auction, fetching a staggering \$US142.4 million (\$190.6 million).

The Tate Gallery in Liverpool is presenting the largest exhibition of Bacon’s work staged in the north of England, and the Getty Centre in Los Angeles, drawing from the Tate in London, is featuring Bacon among six postwar British artists who revolutionised and reinvigorated figurative painting. (Australians got up close to the artist’s controversial oeuvre in 2013 when the Art Gallery of New South Wales hosted a five-decade retrospective.)

Here in Monte Carlo, down on the seafloor, the great glass-domed Grimaldi Forum is hosting *Francis Bacon, Monaco and French Culture*, a major new exhibition that celebrates the years in the late 1940s and early ‘50s when Bacon lived in Monaco and southern France; a period, argue Monégasques, that gave Bacon his oomph, his guts. That made him.

“Bacon was always returning to Monaco for extensive stays with friends, family and lovers,” says Cecilia Auber, our guide at the Francis Bacon Art Foundation, a not-for-profit institute on the ground floor of a small villa in the hilly streets behind the central, long-established Hotel Metropole, rebuilt in 1989 a la belle époque (the “beautiful age” before the First World War) and glimmering at the end of a drive dotted with white statues, as if magicked up out of history.

Bacon first landed in Monaco in 1946, staying at the Hotel de Ré before moving from

villa to villa – bijou residences not dissimilar to that occupied by the foundation, which was inaugurated by Prince Albert II in 2014 on October 28, Bacon’s birthday.

“It was in Monaco that Francis Bacon started painting the human form,” says the chic, straight-backed Auber, stewarding us past the likes of 1929’s *Watercolour*, Bacon’s earliest surviving painting. “It is also where he began painting on the raw, unprimed side of the canvas.”

Just why he did so is fabulously prosaic: having lost all his money at the casino and unable to afford new canvases, he simply turned his used paintings over – and liked the effect. A risk-taker who thrived on extremes (and an asthmatic who appreciated the warm Mediterranean weather), Bacon approached gambling as he did painting: “I want a very ordered image,” he told the art critic David Sylvester in 1966, “but I want it to come about by chance.”

Lady Luck, the goddess of fortune, seems to be everywhere in Monaco, a constitutional

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Cecilia Auber, foundation guide

monarchy and tax-free haven that is home to more millionaires and billionaires per capita than anywhere else in the world; and whose palace is located in downtown Monte Carlo – along with the medieval old town, the creamily extravagant Hotel de Paris and Casino Square, a riot of fountains, gold bling and revving Ferraris.

There she is at the tres exclusive Yacht Club de Monaco, with its landmark clubhouse designed by Sir Norman Foster and marina of sleek superyachts flying the distinctive red-and-white burgee. There, at Thermes Marins, an opulent spa linked by subterranean corridors to the Hotel Hermitage and the aforementioned Hotel de Paris – home to Alain Ducasse’s three-Michelin-starred



restaurant Louis XV, done up in chandeliers, cherubs and gold leaf and boasting a superlative tasting menu delivered with Swiss timing and almost balletic grace.

There she is too, at the Wine Palace, a new venue built on the prow of the Yacht Club and kitted out in oak, bronze and dark red leather, with 2300 wines and spirits in its temperature-controlled cellar, complimentary delivery to yachts both berthed and at sea and good-looking staff with serious vinous knowledge.

Asked to name their most expensive tipple, our sommelier Joshua doesn’t hesitate. “Last month we sold a double magnum of 1986 Pétrus for €20,000 [\$29,500],” he says, though he won’t say to whom. With just 36,000 permanent residents, including Ringo Starr, Shirley Bassey and Novak Djokovic, and

regular A-list visitors such as Rihanna and Leonardo DiCaprio, Monaco (and Lady Luck) insists upon, and receives, discretion.

Bacon, who loved a drink, once mistook a bottle of Pétrus for cooking wine and made a stew that was talked about for weeks says Auber, indicating a black-and-white photograph of the artist, dishevelled after a long lunch in Soho, London, his other spiritual stomping ground.

The foundation’s collection includes more than 2300 items ranging from photos provided by Sydney-based artist Eddie Batache, a long-time friend, and triptychs featuring Bacon’s ill-fated lover, George Dyer, to a Paris bathroom door signed by French surrealists including André Masson and Pierre Soulages and completely covered with



Clockwise from left: art historian Reinhard Hassert and Francis Bacon (right) in the Monte Carlo Casino Gardens in 1981; Alain Ducasse’s Louis XV restaurant; Yacht Club de Monaco; the Monte Carlo Casino; a triptych in the elegant gallery of the Francis Bacon Art Foundation. PHOTOS: COURTESY FRANCIS BACON MIB ART FOUNDATION

drawings of penises. “It is,” says Auber sagely, “an homage to the phallus.”

But despite the eye-popping door and the emotionally charged paintings (some of which feature in the Grimaldi Forum show), the overall vibe of the foundation is understated and elegant. Curtains, tassels and low-hanging bulbs are drawn from Bacon iconography; interior walls are shades of grey, in keeping with his late-1940s palette.

What Bacon – who lived simply and messily, throwing out much of his work – would have made of this neat, intense homage is anyone’s guess.

“Great art always returns you to the vulnerability of the human situation,” declares a wall decal – as indeed, Bacon might have added, does great gambling.

For just as Lady Luck swans metaphorically about the Grand Casino, a rococo vision with onion-shaped domes inaugurated in 1863 by Prince Charles III (who was in need of a money-spinner), so too does her nemesis. A tour of the building’s interior – marble pillars, gilded mirrors, 10-tonne chandeliers – is accompanied by tales of those, now deceased, who played big and lost. The likes of Fyodor Dostoyevsky went in OK and came out KO-ed.

Today, in the main gambling room, private gambling room and super-private gambling room – a veritable Russian doll of moneyed



privilege – the high rolling continues.

“Monaco is a sunny place for shady people,” said writer Somerset Maugham, who was among the 700 people at the 1956 wedding of American film star Grace Kelly to Prince Rainier (the now-legendary 1981 family portrait by Ralph Cowan, kitsch yet – with Kelly standing apart and aloof – eerily prescient, can be viewed as part of the palace tour).

The sun and the shadiness were relished by Bacon, who loved nothing more than to take the Train Bleu, the sleeper from Paris, which pulled in right beside the casino – and offered, en route, strangers to meet.

These days, visitors to the casino tend to fly in via helicopter from Nice, or hop off a cruise ship or superyacht moored at the marina at

Port Hercules, the natural deep-water bay at the foot of the landmark Rock of Monaco. Sensibly, perhaps, Monégasques are forbidden from gambling in the casino, sparing them from the addiction that gripped Bacon who, early on and desperate for cash, had hoped to sell his work there.

“I always feel with a little clever manipulation the casino would buy our pictures,” he wrote to friends in 1946.

It didn’t, and instead the rooms are lavishly decorated with sculptures and paintings of sensuous, Lady Luck-like women, watching over winners and losers all day and all night long. **✪**

*The writer travelled as a guest of the Monaco Government Tourist Bureau.*

TRAVELLER

**David Strassman**  
master puppeteer  
and comedian

**First, business or economy** Business class because it’s more economical than first class, though with accrued mileage an upgrade to first is sometimes possible.

**Most frequented destination** Los Angeles, it’s my home town. Then Sydney or Melbourne.

**Favourite airport** Seattle International. It’s filled with excellent restaurants and shops, and has a massive picture window looking out to the snow-capped Olympic Mountains.

**If I ran my own airline I would...** make economy a much better experience on international long-haul flights. I’d figure a cost-effective way to put in bigger seats with better recline and more room. I think there should be more classes of service: economy, nicer economy, really comfortable economy, premium economy and premium premium economy.

**Where would you go with a million air miles?** A round-the-world trip visiting all the continents.

**Worst place you’ve been lost** I’ve never been lost. If I were to get lost, I don’t think I’d like it to be in the Middle East.

**Best trip ever** When I met my partner in Hawaii. She flew from Sydney, I flew from Los Angeles, and we rented a romantic cottage on the north coast of Oahu, with warm trade winds and facing the setting sun.

**Most memorable overseas dining?** This is not overseas, but Haggerstone Island in Far North Queensland has the best cuisine ever. Fishing for your food during the day results in meals complete with everything from painted crayfish, coral trout and red emperor to fresh island oysters, all prepared with island-grown spices and vegetables in a kitchen with an open-pit fireplace, and no bottle of wine under \$60.

**In the suitcase** Clothes, shoes and toiletries. My puppets are sent ahead by a shipping company.

**First thing you do on arrival in a new city** Depending on the time of day and how jetlagged I am, I go straight to my hotel, make myself a cup of tea or coffee, unpack, have a shower and then find the most time-appropriate meal.

**How do you make the most of a spare afternoon in a strange city?** A stickybeak around the local neighbourhood fulfils my desire to explore. When I arrive in Australia, I’ll meet up with friends for a cuppa or a meal in a favourite restaurant.

**Cure for jetlag** I try to change my sleeping habits the day before I leave to acclimate to the destination time zone. As soon as I get on the plane, I change my watch to the time at my destination, which helps me plan when I sleep on long-haul flights. When I arrive, I get into the sun. I also stay up as late as I can. And when I wake up in the middle of the night, I don’t fight it. I’ll read or do something until I’m sleepy again.

**Any other travel tips?** The earlier you arrive at an airport is directly linked to whether or not your bags arrive at your destination with you.

**What technology do you use?** MacBook Pro, iPhone, Bose wireless headphones.

**Best overseas purchase** A hammock made in the Amazon rainforest, bought on a visit to Manaus in Brazil.

**Best travel tale** Not sure it’s the best but this is quite interesting. I was stuck next to a very chatty person who wouldn’t stop talking, no matter how politely I tried to hint that I wasn’t interested. When asked what I did for a living, I said I designed municipal sewage waste facilities and described the treatment process from toilet to sludge – that shut them up.

**Top travel gripe** Pushy tourists, poor restaurant service and crappy hotels.

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TRAVEL FRANCE

# Effervescing with history

A dusty discovery in Bollinger’s rambling cellars pops the cork on its past, writes **Dave McIntyre**



**The Bollinger champagne** house sits on a bluff above the French village of Ay, just east of Epernay. Ay is a sleepy little town that boasts more mileage in its underground cellars than on its cobblestone streets.

You descend 49 uneven steps to enter the cellars, which are modest compared with those of some champagne houses. But it would be easy to get lost down there. The dimly lit, brick-lined tunnels extend for nearly six kilometres,

stacked with thousands of bottles, magnums and jeroboams of champagne.

Wine gets lost down here, too. Six years ago, in a little cranny in a forgotten corner, a Bollinger worker clearing away racks of empty bottles discovered they had been concealing a stash of nearly 600 bottles and magnums, with corks in varying stages of decay.

When Bollinger officials matched the codes painted on the shelves and bottles with the

company’s records, they realised they had treasure, including 54 bottles from the 1830 vintage, the winery’s first, and several vintages from the late 1800s and early 1900s.

“We don’t know when they were put there,” says Jerome Philpon, Bollinger’s president. But the youngest wine was from 1928, leading some to speculate the bottles may have been hidden to protect them from Nazi occupiers during World War II.

Of the 600 bottles, a third of them could not be identified, and many were leaking through their corks. Winery crews carefully restored as many as they could, using a laser device called an aphrometer to measure the pressure remaining in the bottles.

Last month Bollinger unveiled Galerie 1829, named for the year the estate was founded, to showcase those older wines that span the house’s history. Thirteen of the 54 bottles from 1830 could be restored. There are now 11 left.

Other bottles on display represent Bollinger’s best vintages and show the results of an eight-



Lily Bollinger, who managed the house for 30 years. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

year effort to match company records with actual inventory and to restore and preserve damaged bottles.

Aside from making great champagne, Bollinger is best known for its association with the James Bond movie franchise, as the favourite bubbly of Britain’s most famous fictional secret agent. And wine lovers like to recite the famous quote attributed to Lily Bollinger, who managed the house for 30 years in the previous century: “I drink it when I’m happy and when I’m sad. Sometimes I drink it when I’m alone. When I have company I consider it obligatory. I trifle with it if I’m not hungry and drink it when I am. Otherwise, I never touch it, unless I’m thirsty.”

Bollinger is distinctive in other ways as well. In the late 1960s Lily Bollinger initiated the “recently disgorged”, or RD, style of champagne, releasing a 1952 vintage wine that had aged much longer than customary on its lees. And since 1892 the winery has aged its reserve wines, used to create the blend for its non-vintage Special Cuvee, exclusively in magnums, giving Gilles Descotes, the

cellar master now, greater flexibility in blending by village and vintage.

“We use these magnums as the spices for the Special Cuvee,” he says. In March he blended wines to be sold in another three years, using 45 per cent from the 2015 vintage plus 70,000 reserve magnums from seven other vintages going back to 2000. This technique is on display

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Lily Bollinger, on champagne

in La Reserve, a companion exhibit to the Galerie 1829, featuring a champagne-themed mosaic by Italian artist Luigi La Ferla.

These two new galleries in the Bollinger cellars are anachronisms, given that Ay is not exactly a tourist destination and Bollinger is open by appointment only. But a new reception area at surface level will accommodate VIP visitors, and the winery will explore ways to

make its cellar tours more accessible and perhaps put some historic bottles up for auction, Philpon says.

The 1830 was not on offer when I visited Bollinger during the launch for Galerie 1829, but I did get a sense of the winery’s history in a tasting led by Descotes. He announced each vintage by mentioning an important event from that year: Bill Clinton’s election as president (1992), Albert Einstein’s death (1955), Herbert Hoover’s election (1928).

The final wine in our tasting was from 1914. “This was harvested by women and children,” Descotes said, as the men of Ay had been mobilised for the start of World War I. The wine was amazingly fresh, like a fine Sauternes with a slight effervescence.

More than any particular flavour, I tasted the anticipation and dread of a doomed generation, from a time when the Marne was still a river and not yet a battle, when roadside cemeteries did not yet welcome visitors to Champagne from Paris. After outlasting all that, I thought, the wine had an optimistic and uplifting finish. **✪** THE WASHINGTON POST