

TRAVEL

ABOVE AND BEYOND

THE HÔTEL DE PARIS MONTE-CARLO HAS BEEN TOUTED AS AMONG THE WORLD'S BEST. NOW THAT IT'S OPEN AGAIN AFTER A FOUR-YEAR, \$300 MILLION RENOVATION, DOES IT LIVE UP TO THE HYPE? JANE CORNWELL FINDS OUT.





Infinity pools,
rose gardens
and 180-degree
Mediterranean
views: the vista
from the Princess
Grace and
Prince Rainier III
penthouse suites.



There are fairy tales, and then there is Monaco — a principality so bijou and magical, so sunlit and sculpted, that it seems to inhabit a parallel universe where whims only exist to be met.

The enchantment begins the moment I board the helicopter that will whisk me across an azure Mediterranean from Nice airport to the heliport in Monte Carlo, the neighbourhood in which I'll be living the dream. I am the only passenger. I sit next to the pilot, feeling enigmatic.

The closer we get to the high-rise, stacked skyline of this independent city-state wedged between Italy and France, the more the belle époque splendour of Monaco unfurls. There is the Place du Casino, the central hub of a principality with an area of just 2.02 square kilometres and a population of 38,700 (one in three being millionaires). There are the turrets and domes of the Casino and the Opéra Garnier. There, gardens landscaped in the 19th century, festooned with fountains and blazing with tropical flora, themed for an eternal spring.

And there, in all its baroque jewel-box glory, is the Hôtel de Paris Monte-Carlo, the

“ THE STAFF TREAT YOU AS IF YOU'VE JUST ARRIVED HOME AFTER FAR TOO LONG AWAY.

flagship establishment that has welcomed a veritable who's who of guests ever since it opened its doors in 1863: Princess Grace, Rita Hayworth, Jackie Onassis, Maria Callas, Julia Roberts, Robert de Niro, Lady Gaga.

The windows behind its balconied terraces wink in the sun, as if the grande dame is only too aware of how good it is looking after a four-year, \$300 million overhaul. “A hotel better than anything ever created before,” was the vision of wealthy 19th-century French developer François Blanc, tasked by Prince Charles III of Monaco's (then debt-ridden) House of Grimaldi with building a fantasy land on a rocky plateau, dotted with

olive and lemon groves. The Hôtel de Paris has long maintained its five-star standards. The question is — can it surpass itself?

A waiting limousine whisks me along narrow streets that wind past a deep-water port filled with boats, yachts and lean, mean superyachts; streets that each May transform into the circuit for the Monaco F1 Grand Prix.

At my back, high on a promontory called the Rock, is the old town and sprawling Prince's Palace, the official residence of Prince Albert II and home to the Grimaldis, on and off, since 1297. The palace has been done up over the centuries but you can't stay there (though you can visit its state rooms from April to October).

No matter — where I'm going has three restaurants, one with a trio of Michelin stars. It has a wine cellar stocked with 400,000 bottles, and a tunnel leading to the best wellness spa in town. It has staff who treat you as if you've just arrived home after far too long away.

“Welcome, madam,” say the doormen, concierges, receptionists and anyone wearing the beautifully tailored uniforms issued by Société des Bains de Mer — the publicly traded company that owns the Casino de Monte-Carlo,

Clockwise from top left Two lavish new penthouses are named after Prince Rainier III and Princess Grace; Le Grill is one of the hotel's trio of Michelin-starred restaurants; the Prince Rainier III penthouse features the prince's objets d'art; lunch at Le Grill; the lobby is flooded with natural light; soufflé is a house specialty of Le Grill.





Left Balconies were added to all 207 rooms of the refurbished Hôtel de Paris Monte-Carlo.

the Opéra de Monte-Carlo and several hotels, including the Hôtel de Paris de Monte-Carlo. The vibe in the vaulted lobby is friendly and calm. “We are so happy you are here,” they say.

A chandelier hangs from a stained-glass cupola. Scents waft from enormous flower arrangements and couture-clad ladies taking tea. The famed equestrian statue of Louis XIV is there on its plinth, the right knee of the horse shiny from the hands that have rubbed it for luck before entering the Casino, a mere sashay past the sports cars parked in Casino Square.

Architects Richard Martinet (from Paris) and Gabriel Viora (from Monaco) have renovated in stages, so the hotel never had to close, and the loyal patrons who’d been coming here for years were never disappointed. Two of the hotel’s four wings were demolished and rebuilt. Balconies were

added to all 207 rooms (45 per cent of them are now suites), along with state-of-the-art technology, including silent airconditioning and curtains that part at the touch of button.

Two lavish new signature penthouses, named respectively for Princess Grace and Prince Rainier III, offer 180-degree Mediterranean vistas from their terraces adorned with rose gardens and infinity pools, and feature paintings, collages and objets d’art that belonged to the dynasty members to which they pay tribute. Prince Albert II advised on interiors but perhaps not on the price tag: a sleepover in the larger Rainier villa will set you back about £30,000 (\$58,000) a night.

The flood of natural light in the lobby is largely thanks to Le Patio, a new inner courtyard dotted with palm trees and flanked on one side by fine jewellery boutiques and

an antique bar cart serving Louis Roederer champagne. An open walkway connects guests to new luxury shopping precinct One Monte-Carlo, where Dior and Chanel jostle with Saint Laurent and Aussie-born couturists Ralph & Russo – so much to try on, so little time – but I’m off to see my suite, which is reached by a swift and silent lift.

It’s splendid: white marble floors, streamlined wooden furniture, a king-size bed made up with ethical cotton. The colour scheme is beige and cream with bronze and gold detail. The bathrooms are marble, the toiletries by Guerlain. There’s a Murano chandelier, an art deco rug and a plate of pastel macaroons beckoning from a table, which I eat as I sit on my terrace, watching tourists taking selfies and Monégasques walking tiny dogs dressed in tiny coats.

I stop to smell a bowl of white roses in the hallway before venturing back to the lobby for a glass of Bollinger Spécial Cuvée in the wood-and-leather surrounds of Bar Américain, where a Brazilian jazz quartet is playing. I cross the lobby for a look at Le Louis XV, the triple-Michelin-starred lair of superchef Alain Ducasse, its interior reminiscent of Versailles at its 17th-century zenith. I’m not dining there but at the hotel’s new one-starred Ducasse restaurant, Ômer, which offers a culinary journey across the Mediterranean in a curved space recalling the inside of a sumptuous boat.

The next morning I resolve to work off the calories in the hotel’s new rooftop gym but, carried away by the vista, I decide to go walking instead. Monaco is one of the few countries in the world you can explore entirely on foot. But first I have a massage booked at Thermes-Marine spa; my masseuse is a charming Italian named Davide, whose dreadlocks and different coloured eyes – like David Bowie – hint at his other life as a painter and musician.

Lunch is by the marina at the spa’s L’Hirondelle, where I munch raw vegetables with dips and watch yachts glide out to sea. Tonight I’ll dine on the top floor of the hotel, at Le Grill, gazing up at the painted constellations on the ceiling (which opens in hot weather) and down at my Grand Marnier soufflé, a house speciality since 1898. It’s rich and fluffy, served by waiters whose graceful moves stem from the ballet training they received before the hotel’s relaunch.

The Hôtel de Paris hasn’t just outdone itself: its magic-wand level of pampering is testament to the idea that dreams can come true. For a few days I too was a princess, a movie star.

As I check out I smile at people checking in. “You just wait,” I think to myself.

The writer was a guest of Hôtel de Paris Monte-Carlo. Prices start from €536 (\$880) per room per night during low season.