

Gambling in style

Visiting the Casino de Monte Carlo is like stepping into another world, discover PAULA SLIER and LUKE PARTINGTON.



Sean Connery did it in inimitable style (as always) with an absolutely gorgeous Jill St John in a silver-grey Aston Martin DB4. A BMW Z3 roadster was the obvious choice for Pierce Brosnan and Isabella Scorupco, while many filmgoers might recall seeing Roger Moore and Barbara Bach doing it in a Lotus Esprit turbo. Tom Cruise barely made it in his Porsche Boxster and, to top it all, Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly chose an open-roofed Rolls Royce Silver Shadow. I, on the other hand, experienced it alone in an over-sized black Mercedes Benz S600 with plush red leather upholstery and walnut panelling. It was awesome, even though the illuminated 'TAXI' sign on the roof was a bit of a giveaway.

Driving up to the best-known landmark on the Côte d'Azur, the Casino de Monte Carlo in the tiny Principality of Monaco, is magical and having an impeccably dressed concierge open the Mercedes' door with white gloves and a sultry French greeting is, to say the least, priceless.

Thinking back, it was a somewhat surreal experience with fact blending into fiction. Faded technicolour images of the debonair



ABOVE: CONTRARY TO POPULAR MYTH, THE BANK AT MONTE CARLO CASINO HAS NEVER BEEN BROKEN.

James Bond 007 dressed in a white tuxedo with a red carnation in his lapel (obviously), drawing three aces and a pair of kings, were woven into distant memories of the legendary Princess Grace in a satin ball gown and tiara, being escorted by her handsome Prince Rainier.

When entering the casino through the tall wood and glass doors, one's eyes are immediately drawn upward. The beautifully crafted ornate ceiling is adorned with delicate paintings and gilt comices and supported by tall deep maroon marble pillars. Unlike other casinos, here the opulence is not out of place, the gilt is real gold, the marble solid and, need I say, the diamonds and fur genuine.

It's breathtaking and perfectly in keeping with the way it makes you want to feel. From the large oval skylight that is the centrepiece of the ceiling to the gilt-edged mirrors and polished marble surfaces, everything is ornate, almost to the point of excess. Crystal candelabras, stonettes and frescos are everywhere, and even though the word kitsch might lurk at the back of your mind, it's immediately banished from all thoughts.

The Casino de Monte Carlo is anything but kitsch. Actually, it's quite difficult to pinpoint exactly what it is that makes it so unique, save to say that for over a century and a half it has lured royalty and the mega-wealthy: moguls and mobsters, supermodels and superstars, and of course me. It's not the size – I'm sure the whole of the Principality of Monaco, including the palace and two harbours, could easily fit into Sun City and still leave space for the 18th hole. It's not the glitz either; I found the strip in Las Vegas far glitzier, with as many stretch limousines and supermodels as it has high-class hookers. No, Monte Carlo's sparkle lies in the sense of occasion that this casino exudes; its long history of princes and palaces, parties lost and won, and a dynasty that started with a man dressed up as a monk.

In a clever deal with the Vatican, the first Grimaldis arrived in Monaco disguised as monks in 1297 and, with God on their side and weapons concealed beneath their robes, they slaughtered all and annexed 'The Rock' (as it was known then) in the name of the Pope. After only just surviving the French Revolution, Monaco became a haven for super-wealthy renegades who came in droves to hide, invest and, hopefully, not gamble their fortunes away.

Since its inception in 1863, the Casino de Monte Carlo has been operated by the private company Société des Bains de Mer (Society of Sea Bathers) and, contrary to popular myth, it has never had its bank broken. Each table in the casino has its own limit (bank), so it may be possible to break one or two tables, but not the house as a whole.

In the summer of 1891, Englishman Charles Wells became the legend of the man that broke the bank at Monte Carlo. Over a period of three days, Wells broke the table limits repeatedly. With an amazing run of luck, he turned 10 000 gold francs into a million and, in an instant, attained cult hero status. When he returned later that year and started winning again, the casino management hired private detectives to watch him for signs of collusion with the

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croupiers – and found nothing. For Wells, however, the story had an unfortunate ending. On his third visit to Monaco, his luck turned and, after squandering all his winnings and more, he lived out the rest of his life in poverty, eventually dying a pauper. The number combinations that were the source of Wells' good fortune remain a mystery to this day, although there are many theories. But to the relief of the casino, no-one has yet been able to repeat his performance.

Nowadays, the casino relies on visitors from all over the world (somehow, the word tourist doesn't really apply), so different rooms have been created. The American Room, where the roulette wheels have both a double and a single zero, has staff that speaks English and gamblers play according to American rules. The oval sky-light, dated 1886, allows daylight to filter into the room while the eight chandeliers of Bohemian crystal provide for soft evening illumination.

But this is Monte Carlo and not Vegas, so for me it was off to the European Rooms. The Salles Touzet (named after the room's designer) and the Salon Privé are European in style and elegance is the password. But I found it was the Salon Super-Privé that held the greatest allure. It is a small, ultra-exclusive room that is

available only by appointment. Peering through the slightly ajar door offers a small glimpse into what Casino de Monte Carlo is really about. The roulette wheel spins silently, the last chips are carefully placed and the ivory ball skips several times before finally coming to rest. Here, massive fortunes are won and lost on the spin of a wheel, a choice of odds or evens, or even a preference of red over black.

Through the soft warm light shining down on the green surface of the roulette table, I could swear I saw James Bond, but quickly realised it couldn't have been. The man with the golden gun was a fictional character in the mind of Ian Fleming. But then again it could possibly have been Roger Moore; after all, he does live in Monaco.

But more than likely it was just the moment, an image of what my mind wanted me to see, intensified by the compelling first bars of John Barry's Bond theme now clearly audible in my head. But as I walked away, I'm sure I heard the sounds of a gravelly voice echo through the halls: 'The name's Bond, James Bond.' I stopped in my tracks, almost turning to look back. But then I smiled and banked the memory, deciding to leave the Casino de Monte Carlo infinitely richer for the experience.

Fact File

The city state of Monaco (8th most densely populated country in the world and serves as a tax haven for the world's wealthiest.

The best time to visit is from June to mid-September.

Must-sees:

- The Monte Carlo Country Club which claims to be the most beautiful in Europe.
- A tour of the Prince's Palace, built on the site of a fortress built by the Genoese in 1215, takes one on a journey through history and sumptuous galleries, salons and the impressive Throne Room.
- The Oceanographic Museum and Aquarium houses a remarkable collection of marine fauna gathered by Prince Albert I, models of his laboratory ships and crafts made from the sea's natural products.
- The Japanese Garden is a work of art, uniting stones, water and vegetation.
- The Exotic Garden specialises in succulent plants daringly landscaped on the rockface.
- The Princess Grace Rose Garden is a quiet spot fragrant with the scent of about 4 000 rose bushes.



ABOVE: A SLEEK BENTLEY ADDS TO THE AIR OF GLAMOUR AT MONTE CARLO.