

A Moving Experience: Monte-Carlo on foot, drinking caffè



by C.Flisi

“*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose,*” goes the saying. The more things change, the more they remain the same. That is halfway true of Monaco, where I had lived throughout the 1990s but had not revisited for almost a decade.

The weather on the Côte d’Azur was perfect for the entire week of my visit, just as I remembered. We were in early March but the beach at Larvotto was well-populated, including brave souls who splashed in the water. The outdoor cafés buzzed with well-dressed, well-coiffed people, sipping demitasses during the day and stemmed glasses of vin in the evening. Many dogs, equally well-dressed and well-coiffed, seemed to be receiving a little more attention by the owners (or professional dog-walkers; I couldn’t be sure) to cleaning up the *crotte de chien* emitted by their pets. Back when I lived here, no one paid attention, except the unfortunate souls who slipped on the crottes. Today there are many free bag dispensers throughout the Principality,

which has helped reduce both dirty pavements and perilous accidents.

On this visit, I was able to observe the state of Monaco's sidewalks at close range because I walked everywhere. This is partly the result of the country's size (literally one square mile) so anyone who is minimally fit can walk its entirety with ease. Caveat: you have to be able to navigate steep ups and downs because the place is hilly. There has always been a network of elevators to help people with mobility handicaps, and today there are more elevators than when I lived here, but they don't go *everywhere*, so a modicum of fitness is advisable.

The other reason I walked all week is that moving around by car has become impossible. Monaco's official population when I lived there was 30,000; it is now 40,000, an increase of one-third. In the 1990s about 20,000 people entered the Principality daily to work; today an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 people work in that packed square mile. It's a lot of cars and a lot of humans.

To accommodate them, Monaco has elaborated its already complex labyrinth of underground tunnels and passages. I used to know these and could maneuver them with confidence, but no more. The entire system has become a rat's maze of tubes challenging all but the most experienced habitués. What's more, the tunnels are tight and narrow, and cars—including the one I had rented—are larger than ever. (Not ridiculous US-sized, thank goodness—I couldn't have made my way out of the Nice Airport if that had been the case). I was terrified to move around. In fact, the first day I drove, I had to back out of streets in reverse because my car would not pass or turn. I had to find an alternative parking space for my rental vehicle because the one assigned by the hotel was too small.

Admittedly, I was not staying at the Hôtel de Paris, whose guests don't have to worry about such things. The valet takes care of them. If the car is worthy of exposure, the valet parks it grandly in front of the hotel and the Casino de Monte-Carlo on the Place du Casino. If it is a lesser vehicle, it goes . . . somewhere and appears upon request.

Although there are more cars and people than in my day, there are fewer banks. Banks were expanding in the 1990s, thanks in part to the technology boom in nearby Sophia Antipolis (the "Telecom Valley" of France). Today many banks are contracting, and those that remain are

getting rid of their American clients. To be a Yankee is to be *persona non grata* in their eyes.

Still, the formalities remain. If you have to meet with a Monagasque banker, you are invariably ushered into a small paneled room with a heavy door and no windows. A young woman appears, dressed as if a sales assistant for Armani, in dark tailored suit with a stylish blouse unbuttoned just so, discreet jewelry, spike heels, hair slicked back and lacquered into place. She asks if you would like café or l'eau. If the latter, plat or petillant? She serves the caffè in delicate china cups on a tray as lacquered as her hair. She adds a petit chocolat, perhaps to sweeten the bitter strength of French coffee, or perhaps to sweeten the unpleasant news the banker is about to share.

That ritual hasn't changed in 30 years. Nor has the ongoing mystery about the coffee being served. Why does it always taste better across the border in Italy, only 10 or so miles away? All the years I lived in France and dined in Monaco, at modest beach cafès and starred Michelin establishments, the coffee was NEVER as good as it was in the simplest pizzeria in Italy.

Monaco's most striking change was the plethora of cranes and scaffolds, concrete mixers, and construction sites everywhere. Construction is a constant in the Principality and there was plenty going on when I lived there, but today the building frenzy is on steroids. Many well-established apartment buildings that used to face the sea—and whose residents paid handsomely for that view—now face concrete blocks that are higher and closer to the sealine. Since Monaco boasts the most expensive real estate in the world, the occupants of those older buildings must be fuming. I mean, how would you feel if you were paying a million dollars for 17 square meters (by comparison, a million in New York buys 33 and London 34 square meters) and your panorama was no longer the Mediterranean but a block of cement?

In a way, nothing has changed. Monaco has always been about money, and today real estate drives Monaco business. Money talks. Everyone walks. The sun shines. Shops sell wines. Cars (with difficulty) park. Dogs bark. The banks have no heart. US clients depart. The weather is *parfait*. And I go away.

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