



TRAVEL

## Glamour goes green

The most surprising attraction in the extravagant city-state of Monaco is hidden away from the glitz.

BY *Brian Johnston*

**P**AST the ticket window of the Jardin Exotique, across a little crazy-paved courtyard and around a purple and red flowerbed, I reach a terrace where my jaded traveller's jaw

drops – yes, literally – for the first time in Monaco. Certainly, there have been reasons for it to twitch (the casino's opulence, the cost of a Michelin-starred meal, a sweaty princess

The plunging view from the Jardin Exotique to the Prince's Palace in Monaco and beyond.

emerging from my hotel gym), but this is utterly unexpected.

The hillside falls away as if I've just taken off in a plane, revealing Port Hercule crowded with billionaires' yachts and the rock-perched palace. As for the plants, they look as if they've been invented by Dr Seuss: dinner-plate cacti, drooping furry flowers, plants as pronged as medieval instruments of torture. In an enclave of smug, flashy opulence, the Jardin Exotique is prickly, elemental and unpolished, crumbling into cliffs and baking in the sun. Abandon your Louboutins, all ye who enter here. This is Monaco's most un-Monégasque attraction.

Work began on the grounds in 1913 under amateur naturalist Prince Albert I on a very hot, dry site. It's unusual for having very well-established, tall plants presented in a naturalistic way. The oldest are Mexican and South African, dating back to a collection begun in 1895. If you've never seen mature succulents, this is your chance. Some of the flamboyant euphorbias are 10 metres tall, and there's an impressive alley of thin, tubular South American cereus cacti. Some of the cacti you'd grow in pots at home are as large as trees.

In all there are some 600 varieties of succulent arranged by geographic zone, from spiky yuccas to great globular grusonii and aloes, the latter with their candelabras of fire-orange flowers. Swathes of bougainvillea and rockery flowers add splashes of colour.

The biggest distraction though – better even than the magnificent plant collection – is the plunging view over this glamorous city. Every bend offers a different perspective over Monaco and along the Riviera. In the after-

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noon, with the sun at your back, you can squint across France into Italy. This is one very Instagram-able garden view.

The eastern garden has steep cliffs, but the entire vertiginous collection is enough to send anyone without a head for heights into panic. Pathways zigzag downwards, steps tumble, rocky chasms are spanned by faux-wood bridges (they're actually concrete). It echoes the layout of Monaco itself, a confusing arrangement of petite, shoe-horned districts stitched together by bridges and tunnels. Thrusting, sculptural cacti seem to echo the apartment blocks far below on the waterfront. Push one of those succulents over and the whole of high-rise, squeezed-in Monaco might just domino into the sea.

Just as you think you've reached the bottom of the garden, you're in for another surprise. A crack in the cliff face leads into large caverns where 300 more steps will take you into the bowels of Monaco and almost down to sea level. The caves were discovered in 1916, three years after ground was broken on the gardens.

The eruption of stalactites, stalagmites and other rock formations is as over-the-top as the gilding in Monte Carlo's casino. The bones of reindeer and bears have been uncovered in the caves, as well as evidence of prehistoric humans. A small anthropology museum at the exit displays the finds, including primitive cutting tools and fertility statues, round-hipped and rustic, from a different Monaco entirely. ■

*Brian Johnston travelled as a guest of Visit Monaco, Hôtel Hermitage Monte-Carlo and Silversea.*

## Monaco meanderings

**GO GREEN:** Monaco has numerous other compact but beautiful gardens, including the shady Jardins de la Petite Afrique near the casino, the cliff top Jardin St Martin – not for the dizzy – and the Princess Grace Rose Garden, which features more than 300 rose varieties. VISITMONACO.COM

**FISHY BUSINESS:** Rearing like an Edwardian folly on a cliff top, the Oceanographic Museum is another surprise treat, from its fantastic cabinet of curiosities and a 1776 submarine to 90 aquarium tanks containing sharks, fluorescent corals and luminous jellyfish. OCEANO.MC

**CHIC STAY:** Hôtel Hermitage Monte-Carlo is a great European heritage hotel, with an opulent belle époque décor and impeccable service. It has a superlative spa (Thermes Marins) and a Michelin-star seafood restaurant, Le Vistamar. Bag a harbour-facing room for the ultimate outlook. HOTELHERMITAGEMONTECARLO.COM

**STAR TURN:** To live the Monaco high life, head to the Joël Robuchon Monte-Carlo restaurant at the Hotel Metropole, where you can romp



Above: Joël Robuchon's restaurant at the Hotel Metropole. Left: the Oceanographic Museum.

through a multi-course meal of flowery salads, lobster ravioli and foie gras-stuffed quail from a top French chef. Leave room for pickings off the outrageous cheese cart. METROPOLE.COM

**SMALL WONDER:** Monaco is a sovereign state, the world's second smallest after the Vatican, with an area just a tad over two square kilometres and the world's densest population. Some 50,000 workers migrate into the city daily from France and Italy. Monégasque citizens aren't permitted to gamble in its famous casino.

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