

HIGHLIGHT

Hotel corridors are always ignored, but not here. Every stroll is a treat of mosaic floors, porcelain vases and fresh flowers. Lacquered local ladies sometimes walk their pooches in the fabulous corridor.



LOWLIGHT

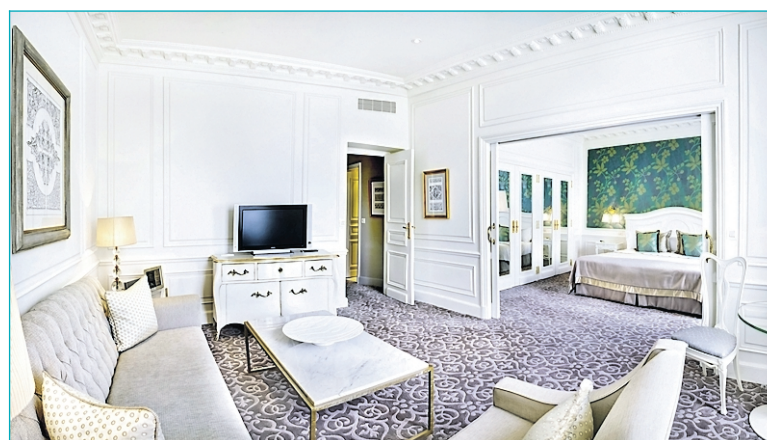
Although the buffet breakfast is served on a wonderful mezzanine level below Eiffel's vast stained-glass dome, it's poorly presented and a rather disappointing affair. Even the morning service is somewhat indifferent.

THE HOTEL

Review

Hotel Hermitage Monte-Carlo, Monaco

By Brian Johnston



THE PLACE

Frankly, if you're going to visit sun-drenched, spotless, extravagant, high-stakes, high-life Monaco then you might as well go all out – even if just for a fanciful day or two – and lodge at Hotel Hermitage Monte-Carlo. A century ago it was the ultimate in Belle Epoque glamour, and this Leading Hotel of the World and historic monument remains utterly gorgeous, from its creamy exterior and the Gustave Eiffel-designed glass dome of its Winter Garden to its pink-and-gold ballroom. For a top-end hotel, it also gets unexpected marks for being family friendly, with a lively kids' club and special programs and treats for children.

THE LOCATION

The hotel is right inside the "golden square" of Monte Carlo's chicest shops, cafes and opera house, and Monte Carlo is where you want to be in Monaco. Place du Casino, the ne plus ultra of the French Riviera, is so close you could teeter there in two minutes, even in your Manolo Blahniks. Just beneath the windows is main, yacht-jammed Port Hercule harbour.

THE SPACE

The Hotel Hermitage has all the assets you'd expect of a top hotel and one thumping, drop-dead glamorous extra, reached along an underground passageway: a four-storey wellness area straight from a James Bond movie. The Thermes Marins, all in white marble and glass, explode with light and have bewitching views over Monaco and the Mediterranean.

The saltwater swimming pool has a glorious shell-like roof; the terrace hot tub flaunts outlooks to gratify a billionaire. You could wallow here all day, fortified by a healthy (but tasty) lunch at L'Hirondelle restaurant. Some of the treatments – electrolifts or cryotherapy at minus 110 degrees – seem inspired by Frankenstein, but if you're timid you can flop from caviar scrub to deep-tissue massage to seaweed wrap. Or just get your hair cut.

THE ROOM

Entry-level rooms at the Hermitage are small and face courtyard or city. If ever you're going to pay extra for a sea-facing room with terrace, do it here and reward yourself with a perch right

above Monaco's harbour, with views across the world's most exclusive port to the royal palace. My immaculate "Exclusive Room" is this type, bright and slightly Louis XV, stately without being stuffy, with pretty wallpaper, fresh roses, high ceiling and a great bathroom with separate shower and bath.

THE FOOD

The hotel's executive chef Benoit Witz worked for French culinary legends Paul Bocuse and Alain Ducasse and now heads up Michelin-starred restaurant Le Vistamar. It's a delightfully unfussy food experience, from the pale, pared-down decor to the deceptively simple, mostly seafood menu. You'll seldom enjoy a better piece of fish nor (from the terrace) a more glamorous view. Adjacent Crystal Bar offers light snacks and grand cru wines by the glass. Le Limun is the spot for afternoon tea and single-plate meals.

STEPPING OUT

Pretty much all the sights worth seeing in tiddly Monaco are within walking distance, and a 12-minute walk to trains can have you zipping

up and down the Riviera. A free shuttle takes you to the prestigious Monte-Carlo Beach Club if you care for a suntan or cocktails under an umbrella pine with perky, pouty people.

THE VERDICT

If you don't like this hotel, you're impossible to please. From its perfect location to its opulence, and from its unobtrusive service to fine dining at Le Vistamar, this is the closest you'll get to heaven without actually being dead.

ESSENTIALS

Square Beaumarchais, Monte Carlo, Monaco. Rooms from \$535 a night. Phone +377 9806 4000. See hotelhermitagemontecarlo.com

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



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