

Fast track to Monte Carlo

ROOM AT THE INN

JOHN BORTHWICK

Curious to see what a lazy half-billion dollars looks like? Stroll around the corner from Monaco's Hotel Columbus Monte-Carlo to the Fontvieille yacht harbour where a fleet of Croesus-worthy bath toys, some almost the size of Sydney ferries, sits idle for much of the year. Unlike many of their owners, at least I am definitely in Monaco on this sunny afternoon, with the added bonus of staying at its terrific Hotel Columbus.

The hotel's informal motto of "where the winners stay" is literally true, thanks to its impeccable Formula One credentials. In 2001, Scottish ace driver David Coulthard and his business partners bought the Columbus, thoroughly returned it and sent it back out on the track. His fellow drivers flocked to sign in. Modestly billed as a 3.5-star hotel (in many other destinations it would be five-star), the unpretentious Columbus soon became home during Monaco's annual Grand Prix to legendary motor racing names such as Webber, Ecclestone, Villeneuve, Raikkonen, Alonso, Button and Vettel. While easily able to afford the opulent hotel palaces for which Monaco is famous, many drivers preferred the Columbus's camaraderie, informal elegance and away-from-the-hoopla location.

Hotel Columbus Monte-Carlo has 181 guestrooms and suites, most with a balcony or terrace. Step off the street (through a deceptively plain entrance) and you're met by a palette of calming greys, whites and muted blues. There's a choice of four categories of accommodation, the majority of which are one-bedroom "deluxe" with twin beds or a double.

The calm feel continues within these guestrooms, abetted by retro photographic art. (Art is a signature feature here, with quality, contemporary pieces on rotation throughout the public areas.) The deluxe category has plenty of wardrobe space, good lighting, flat-screen TV, blackout curtains and soundproofed walls. The bathroom is bright and functional, but memorable mostly for its over-fangled, "all-in-one" shower tap.

Looking past wall-sized glass doors or from a guestroom balcony, there are views of Fontvieille harbour (and its fabulous water toys), the towering, fabled Rock (home of the ruling Grimaldi dynasty), the Princess Grace Rose Garden and the Mediterranean's blazing blues. Buffet breakfast on the terrace overlooking the memorial rose garden is a great heart-starter; equally so



Pool deck at Hotel Columbus Monte-Carlo, above; guestroom, far left; Oceanographic Museum, left

GETTY IMAGES

CHECKLIST

Hotel Columbus Monte-Carlo, 23 Avenue des Papalins, Monaco; columbushotels.com.

TARIFF: Room-only rates from about \$212 (VAT included); check for packages and seasonal deals. Grand Prix season (May 25-28 this year) will be predictably pricey.

GETTING THERE: Monaco has a railway station (part of the French national system) but the closest airport is at Nice, about 15km west. From there you can reach Monaco by a seven-minute helicopter flight or 40-minute bus trip; visitmonaco.com.

CHECKING IN: Visitors who want quality accommodation without breaking the bank. David Coulthard no longer owns the hotel

but it's still popular with the Formula One crowd.

BEDTIME READING: Graham Greene's novella, *Loser Takes All* (1955) is set in Monaco, as is Wendy Leigh's *True Grace: The Life and Times of an American Princess*. Ian Fleming's first James Bond novel, *Casino Royale* (1953), set in the fictional resort of Royale-Les-Eaux, drew inspiration from Monte-Carlo's celebrated casino.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: The ground-floor entrance is level and wheelchair-friendly; lifts to all floors and eight adapted suites.

STEPPING OUT: Visit The Rock, the 800-year-old fortress that is home to the

Grimaldi palace, the cathedral and Oceanographic Museum. Try alfresco seafood at Les Perles de Monte Carlo, on Fontvieille breakwater. Spend a jaw-dropping hour at the Prince of Monaco's Vintage Car Collection. And visit the belle époque Casino; entry to the lobby is free, and €10 (\$15) gets you into gaming areas.

BRICKBATS: Hard to find one other than the IQ-challenging shower gizmo.

BOUQUETS: Bright and friendly staff, on the ball and multilingual. Excellent location.

ALSO TRY: Novotel Paris Les Halles; Central Hotel Freiburg, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany.

is a tray delivered for breakfast on your balcony. Some time later, you may head to the hotel pool or gym to make amends.

Catch the hotel shuttle or stroll an easy 10 minutes into central Monaco, to visit La Condamine Market and Port Hercules, or head up to The Rock with its palace, museum and superb Oceanographic Museum. While the

Columbus name-checks Monte-Carlo, it is actually located in the relatively new area of Fontvieille. Monte Carlo proper is about 1km away, "up the hill", upon which its famous Casino perches like a goose that nightly lays a golden egg for Monaco's coffers.

John Borthwick was a guest of Monaco Tourism.

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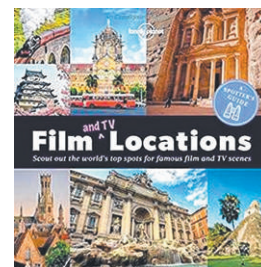
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A LITTLE FLIGHT READING

FILM AND TV LOCATIONS: A SPOTTER'S GUIDE
Laurence Phelan
(Lonely Planet, \$14.99)



This is the guide book of my dreams, but of the City of Dreams, Los Angeles, there is little. It's all about the world's top spots for memorable film and TV scenes, not the studios where the hard yakka is done. Close to Hollywood, however, you'll want to stargaze at Griffith Observatory where James Dean goes on a school trip in *Rebel Without a Cause* and, in homage, Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone dance their hearts out in *La La Land*.

Further north in California, search out The Potter Schoolhouse in Bodega, where those

avian horrors in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* perched on a children's climbing frame. Why doesn't everyone just head out of town? Hitch a ride with Thelma & Louise perhaps, although hop out before their final destination, which is not the Grand Canyon, but Dead Horse Point State Park in Utah.

These 100 or so listings (an index would be helpful) cover the globe and beyond — travel to Wadi Rum in Jordan if you're in the mood for Mars (as in *The Martian*, *Red Planet* and *Last Days on Mars*); key scenes in *Lawrence of Arabia* were filmed here too. Enjoying series three of *Broadchurch*? You'll find those stark cliffs in West Bay, Dorset. And for real movie nuts, a visit to Odessa Steps in Odessa, Ukraine, is a must. Here, the guide claims, "much of the grammar of action cinema was invented" in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Think jackboots marching down stairs, an army firing on the people and a runaway pram.

GRAHAMERBACHER