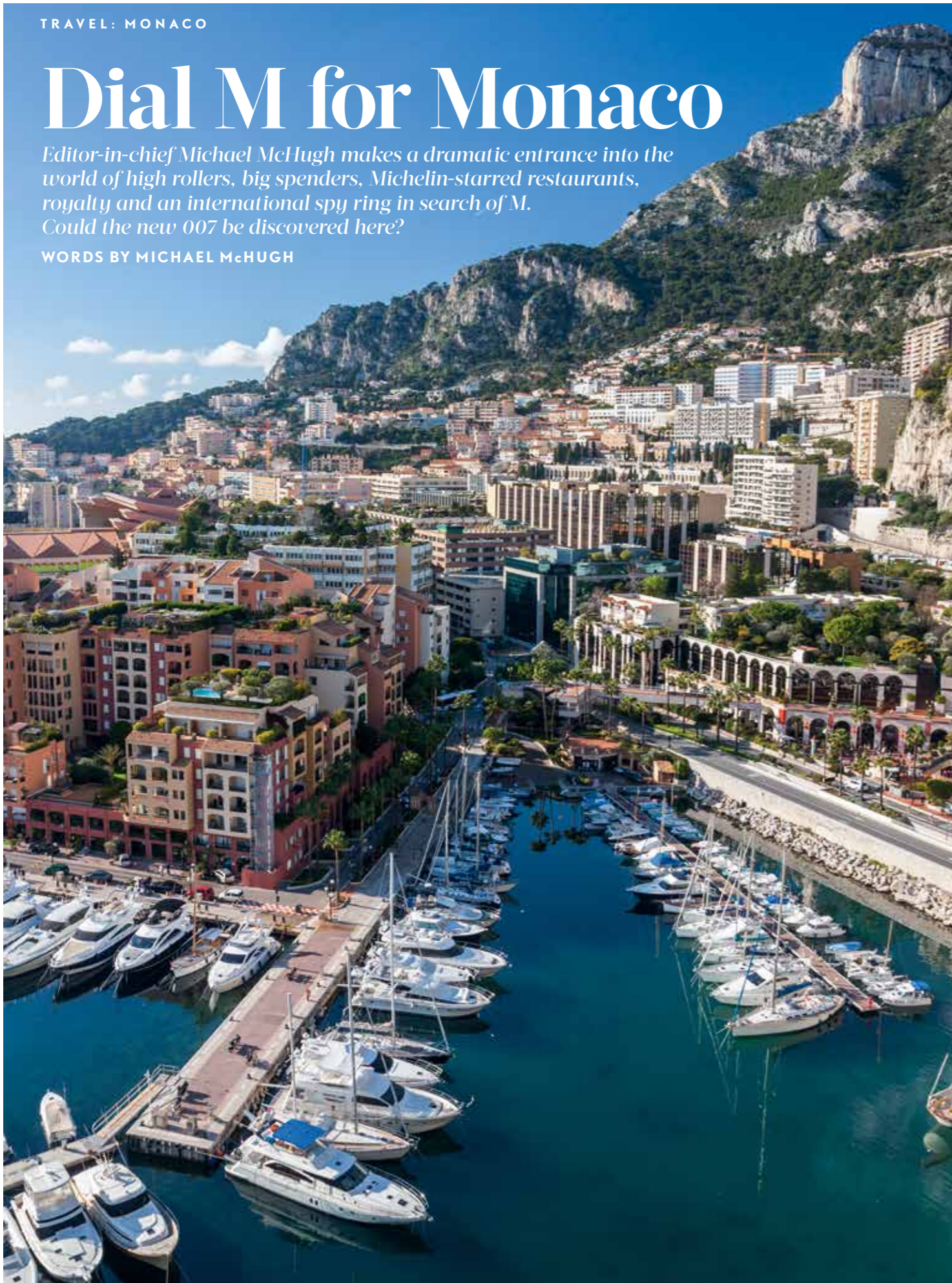


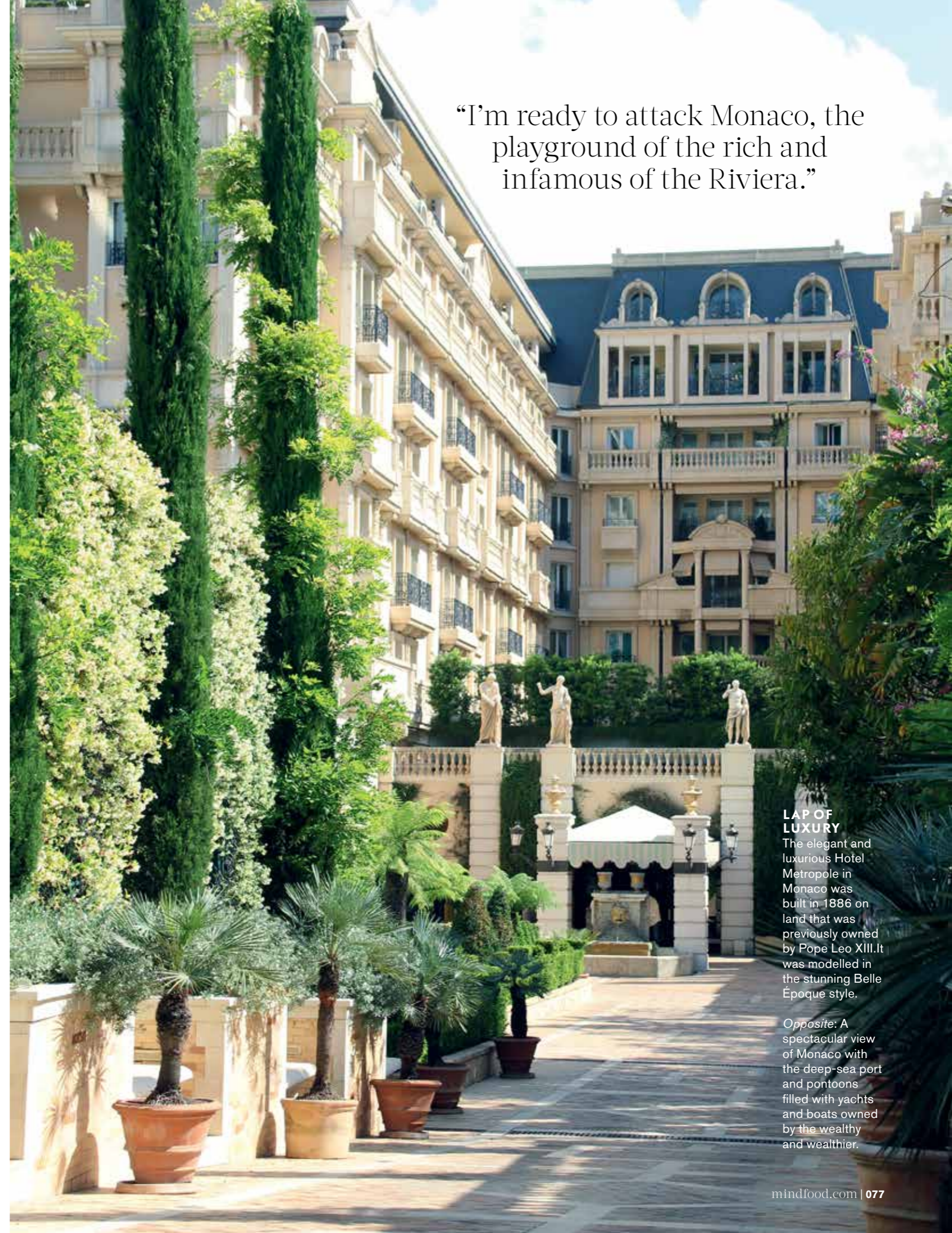
Dial M for Monaco

Editor-in-chief Michael McHugh makes a dramatic entrance into the world of high rollers, big spenders, Michelin-starred restaurants, royalty and an international spy ring in search of M. Could the new 007 be discovered here?

WORDS BY MICHAEL McHUGH



“I’m ready to attack Monaco, the playground of the rich and infamous of the Riviera.”



LAP OF LUXURY

The elegant and luxurious Hotel Metropole in Monaco was built in 1886 on land that was previously owned by Pope Leo XIII. It was modelled in the stunning Belle Époque style.

Opposite: A spectacular view of Monaco with the deep-sea port and pontoons filled with yachts and boats owned by the wealthy and wealthier.



I understand they may be looking for a new James Bond; I'm thinking I may throw my name (and cufflinks) into the ring. Landing in Nice and climbing aboard the Squirrel AS350 single engine helicopter, with a cruising speed of 220km/h, I chopper into Monaco, surrounded by some of the world's best elite spies – undercover, of course.

Sisi, award-winning international journalist by day and ninja by night, understands the upside-down, topsy-turvy world of the Japanese Yakuza. Chrissi, of German descent and master of a quick left chop, is, rather interestingly, the owner of a python snake by the name of Shakira. Always late on arrival is Jane, never plain, a rock'n'roll chick with a quick wit and a little black book filled with the who's who of the Riviera underworld. And there's CC, a

linguist fluent in nine languages who spent time in the deserts of Africa learning the many different local dialects. Our goal is to meet our local informers, "Astrid the Austrian" and Alison "RB", a trained local attaché, easy on the eye, but hard to spot in a crowd. I never did discover what the RB stood for, perhaps "Riviera Bombshell"?

THE MISSION
I'm ready to attack Monaco, the playground of the rich and infamous of the Riviera. As spies go, I may be a little tall and conspicuous at 6ft 4in, however my chosen point of rendezvous was Le Marché de la Condamine at Place d'Armes.

My informer is Sylvain Etiévant, a handsome chef who used to work at Alain Ducasse's restaurant and who now runs the raw food vegan eaterie L'Inattendu-e. A decoy of a young Australian nanny/

MAKING A MARK ON MONACO

This page and opposite, clockwise from top left: Le Marché de la Condamine is the spot for fresh flavours and unique fruits and veggies; our chef Sylvain showcases the chosen ingredients for our raw lunch; the sensational site of the Oceanographic Museum, worth a visit for the view alone; the opening cloche of the big dinner reveal; Alain Ducasse's restaurant is a luxuriant sight in a gorgeous cream palette, and the decadently delicious food tastes even better; a prawn dish with caviar and an amuse-bouche at the Ducasse restaurant; the yellow submarine outside the Oceanographic Museum was built in 1966 and used by Jacques-Yves Cousteau; Anish Kapoor's Sky Mirror sculpture sits outside Monte Carlo Casino; fresh lemons from the markets.

chef wanders into view and starts discussing life in a gin palace minding wealthy Russian minions, when CC is the first to notice something.

The zucchini flowers appear to be pointing towards something, and I don't mean the fresh Spanish plums for €5, or the haricot beans, or even the vast range of French tomatoes and courgettes that Sylvain was explaining were best for his latest healthy dish.

I followed the flowers' directions and, in the corner of the market, next to a box of lemons and gorgeous shiny

eggplants was a woman in typical south of France holiday get-up: blue and white striped top and over-the-shoulder Burberry bag. Her eyes were saying, "Follow me."

Never needing to be told twice, to look a gift horse in the mouth or a French tourist in the eye, I followed her gaze inside the covered market hall. There in front of me was VitaSensys juice bar, offering fresh blends served in small screw-topped, ball-shaped bottles. Healthy juices packed full of vitamins and available to order in any

combination of fruit and veggies you like. An interesting concept, but where were our informers "Astrid the Austrian" and Alison "RB"?

CLIFFTOP CAVORTING

The next stop was the impressive Oceanographic Museum that hangs off a cliff face, surrounded by beautiful gardens. Each successive Prince of Monaco

has been involved in some shape or form with the organisation. The building itself is rather grand and the garden along the cliff is a perfect spot to lose yourself on a sunny day looking out to sea.

We pass Monaco Cathedral, in which Princess Grace was married in 1956, then buried in 1982. The Prince's Palace of Monaco is quite the blend of architectural styles. From the

exterior, and to my untrained eye, it looks a little like "Westfield does Disney".

The official residence of the Prince of Monaco was built in 1191 as a Genoese fortress. The Grimaldi family captured it in 1297 and ruled the area first as feudal lords, then from the 17th century as sovereign princes.

Fellow spy CC bamboozled everyone with her African dialects and tongue clicking,

a perfect foil for giving our guide the slip, and allowing the rest of us to trip from room to room searching for signs of the Princess Grace-era style.

The blue room was my favourite with blue brocade, Grimaldi family portraits and Murano glass chandeliers.

My personal palace for my Monaco sourjourn was Hotel Metropole, which is within walking distance of everything. ▶



STYLISH EXTRAVAGANCE

Top row: The pool area was redesigned by famed fashion icon Karl Lagerfeld, including a constellation of lights on the pool floor. *Second row:* Out on the deck of the Yacht Club de Monaco is an exclusive members only club; St Nicholas Cathedral, also known as the Monaco Cathedral, is where many members of the founding Grimaldi family are buried, as well as Grace Kelly and Rainier III.

Third row: The upscale interior and impressive exterior of the Yacht Club de Monaco, which is the focal point of the harbour in Port Hercules. *Bottom row:* The Bay of Monaco offers breathtaking views to the Mediterranean Sea; a striking flower arrangement in the plush lobby of Hotel Metropole; with blue skies, distinct architectural building styles and manicured streets lined with bougainvillea flowers, the walk to the Palace looking out to the Mediterranean.



The sophisticated décor of the Karl Lagerfeld-designed poolside pavilion is where I had breakfast each morning talking tactics with spy Chrissie. The tree-lined pool enclosure is just perfect for those lazy holiday morning starts.

In the evening, executive chef Joël Robuchon leaves nothing to chance with an indulgent level of detail in this gastronomic temple of delight.

LOST IN TRANSLATION Unbelievable as this may seem in this small principality, I somehow got lost and ended up discovering tunnel after tunnel and an incredible subterranean corridor from the Hôtel de Paris to Monaco's Thermes Marins, offering the latest in wellness and health procedures.

On offer was Cryotherapy Treatment, which I passed on. How old did they actually think I was? Instead, I opted for an

Norman Foster-designed clubhouse, inaugurated in 2014, captures the sun with wraparound decks that look out to pontoons of bobbing boats in all shapes and sizes. Clearly there is a lot of money tied up at the jetty.

Below the club is the Wine Palace, which enjoys views out across Port Hercules. With more than 2300 wine and spirits to choose from this wine/shop/restaurant is an essential visit.

Head sommelier Joshua Birks was most informative with his recommendations of the local drops and surrounds. "You can purchase a cabernet from South Africa, which is signed by Prince Albert and Princess Charlene. The money goes to the Princess Charlene of Monaco Foundation. It was also served at their wedding," he says. "Here in Monaco many years ago they use to make Campari, and now wine is

PHOTOGRAPHY: C. LARIT; M. JOLIBOIS; MONACO TOURISM OFFICIAL WEBSITE, VISITMONACO.COM; PIERRE MONETTA.

"Dinner at Le Louis XV Alain Ducasse was one of those pinch-me moments."

exfoliating mud wrap choosing the theme of relaxation and my own fragrance for a customised spa treatment. The room itself felt more surgical than a day spa, where I was all washed and buffed feeling a whole skin layer lighter at the end of it.

My next rendezvous point was the Yacht Club de Monaco, which is a members-only establishment. I had completely cased the joint in under 10 minutes, noticing the corner card game with hardened locals, Okay, it was a game of bridge that looked a little sleepy.

Founded in 1953 by Prince Rainier, the yacht club is an institution in Monaco. The

stored in those old Campari tanks underground." However, there is still no sign of our "informers", either "RB" or "Astrid the Austrian". As far as a potential spy goes, I don't think I have it. I'm heading back to meet Sylvain again to see if he knows anything.

GLORIOUS FOOD As the season changes so does the menu, and our man from the market is not quite sure what he will be cooking each day, as it depends on what is fresh and on offer. "So many new vegetables come from Italy now," he says, "so the variety is here, it's an adventure in following the season." We

DIVERSE DINING



The surprising food scene in Monaco is probably best described as extreme. From the three-star Michelin restaurant of Alain Ducasse at one end of the spectrum and the healthy alternative of raw food L'Inattendu-e (pictured above and below), offering complete opposites in dining experiences.

This backdrop of "Universal Cuisine" is probably best seen by chef Marcel Ravin from the Blue Bay Monte-Carlo Bay hotel & Resort. Of his approach to cooking, he says, "By blending my past from my native Caribbean and the produce from the Mediterranean we want to create a signature cuisine."

This diverse cultural mix brings a unique palate to the food offering of Monaco. West Indian spice mixes combine with seafood from the Med to give this visiting potential spy much to sample. Combinations that perhaps have not been seen or tasted together before somehow work in this tiny but perfectly formed principality. visitmonaco.com



began with a fresh vegetable and fruit juice, our starter was a cold zucchini soup, followed by quinoa, germinated lentils, vegan stuffed vegetables and socca (chickpea flatbread), and a false risotto of the season, which was cauliflower and delicious. This raw food restaurant was an absolute surprise and not expected in the obvious surrounds on Monaco. A must visit.

Dinner at Le Louis XV Alain Ducasse was one of those pinch-me moments. If I had a bucket list, this would be on it and I could tick it off happily.

Located in the famous Hôtel de Paris, overlooking the Place du Casino, the three-star Michelin restaurant of Alain Ducasse opened 28 years ago, and was refurbished last year. Its colour palette felt sumptuous in milky creams, with modern touches in the furnishings and ceramics, with mirrored walls and handpainted ceilings.

Sisi, of course, already clocked the ceiling and had plans to hang upside down to dangle the night away, and Jane was casing the joint to see who she knew. For the rest of us it was an absolute pleasure to have dinner with our informers who we had finally found. Apparently they had been tracking us during our stay.

For every course the waiting staff stood behind each dinner guest and pulled a cloche from our next plate in a wonderful "wow" moment.

Much like Monaco, it was full of surprises. So life as a spy it is for me; 007 here I come. Although now back to reality, my wife thinks perhaps I'm a little more 00XL.

MINDFOOD.COM

VISIT Go to mindfood.com to see a gallery of Michael's images from Monaco.
KEYWORD: Monaco

