

# Monaco

September 20, 2014

I have a few countries left before I will have visited all countries in Europe smaller than (or equal to) Luxembourg. Monaco was next on the list. I just finished a conference in Porto, Portugal and was going to spend a few days in Nice at the Observatory. I arrived in Nice on Saturday just before noon. I had looked to see where church was going to be on Sunday—I kept getting information that it was going to be at the NOVOTEL across from the airport. So, a quick hike to the NOVOTEL and a few questions gave me the impression that whatever renovations were being done to the actual chapel had finished and that we no longer met at the hotel. This impression turned out to be wrong, but I only found that out on the next day, after I'd visited Monaco (which is what this is actually about). Moving right along.

I took the bus down to the neighborhood near the Riquier Gare (gare = station—with a train station being the default definition) and checked in to the hotel. After settling in I had to decide whether to take the afternoon and head to Monaco or to be lazy and put it off for another day. Laziness had served me well in Denmark, but I decided that since I planned to go to church the next day it was better to go to Monaco right away—you never know what kinds of dinner appointments you'll get when you show up at church in a new location. So, out the door I went, walking the few blocks to the small train station on the east side of Nice.

Upon arriving there was a fairly short line, two people were talking to staff behind the windows, and two other people in line ahead of me. After a few seconds I noticed that the two in line kept looking at their watches and then at the ticket counter, then the wall clock, then with an agitated look back at their watches and the ticket counter. I looked up at the schedule... great, a train is coming in just a couple of minutes. As time passed it dawned on me that the two people at the counter had been there a while. One was a 30 or 40-something guy and the other was maybe a 15-year-old boy. Apparently these were the only two Frenchmen left in the country who had never purchased a train ticket before. After getting instructions repeated to them, again, they asked a couple more questions. Needless to say, I started looking at the time, the wall clock, the ticket window, and at the train schedule—in an agitated fashion.

Finally the two rookies were satisfied and there was a mad rush to get tickets for the next train to Monaco. Fortunately, it seemed like I would make it OK. I ran out the back door and up the stairs. Just then, the train to Monaco

approached—on the other track. I ran back down the stairs, under the tracks, back up the other side, and onto the train. Sometimes it's a good thing when people are slow. Sometimes.

I have to admit that I didn't have particularly high hopes for Monaco. Not because it isn't a famous place or a great tourist destination, but because I tend to like places that are less famous and less of tourist destinations. Las Vegas is also a famous tourist destination, but let's face it, I don't really care to donate my money to support the lifestyles of casino owners and it isn't really my style. Having been to Las Vegas several times growing up (primarily to get the cheap food on our way to destinations in southern California), the gambling scene provided no incentive, nor did the possibility of seeing some famous socialite. (For the record, I was pleasantly surprised with Monaco. It was much cleaner than Las Vegas, less showy, and had the distinct advantage of being a country in Europe that was smaller than Luxembourg—so I had an important reason to be there.)

The train ride itself was pretty fascinating. That whole area is basically a modern version of the cliff dwellings in southern Utah and northern Arizona. People live in houses that are attached firmly to the side of a cliff. The train itself was frequently inside the mountain. The Mediterranean made some pretty impressive cameos along the way. Of course, it would have been easier to see all of this, and easier to keep my stomach quiet, had I been facing forward, but that was a detail. Some of the houses were clearly there before this area became famous, others were clearly built after the fame. There were a couple of stops along the way, but Monte Carlo came pretty quickly.

Exiting the train there was an exit to the train station across the tracks. When I mounted the stairs I saw a sign pointing the other direction. So, I exited that way. To give just a sense of how steep this area really is, the exit to the gare that I took was something like six stories above the first. So, there I was, at the top of Monaco looking down (far down) on the harbor. I started walking along the road, parallel to the shore taking in the sights. Banks were on nearly every corner, and half way between most corners. It made the place seem like the ability to get cash was important here.

The streets through Monaco were relatively skinny and had to wind along the contours of the cliff (Monaco is nearly as tall as it is wide, if not more so). This fact made me think about how much fun it must be to drive a breakneck speed in a formula-1 car along these streets—careening around hairpin turns a few meters from large drops into the street below, or the buildings below, or the sea below. Well, OK, “fun” is not really what came to mind. But more than racecar drivers, bus drivers have to do the same thing without the advantage of a low center of gravity. Of course, maybe the buses drive straight from one side of the country to the other, then find a flatter area in France where they can turn around to drive back the other way (I doubt it though, the topography doesn't change much all along the coast).

I took a few paths that appeared to be “less traveled by” to work my way toward the coast. There was a public elevator that dropped me down a ways, and eventually I came across a large palace-looking place. I'm not sure, but I

think it was the palace or a government building. It may have been the casino. Of course, in Monte Carlo one has to wonder if there is a difference. There were several terraces where you could overlook the port and the sea. There were a lot of boats of different sizes—big ones, bigger ones, and very large ones (it would be fun to tie-up a rickety old row boat down there just to see what kind of looks you get).

I made my way around the current building toward the back. It was there, I believe, that the real casino was located. However, I should point out that the building I had circled did have a sign for “private games” painted on the doorway. Walking past the casino there was an interesting sculpture (the “sky mirror” I believe was the name). It was similar to Cloud Gate (the Bean) in Chicago in that it was basically designed to reflect the sky. It was relatively small, but still very cool and the palace behind made a nice picture. That area had some gardens, but the landscape doesn’t allow for much.

At this point I was getting hungry so I started walking around looking for a place to eat. It was the middle of the afternoon, so a lot of places weren’t expecting customers—including the place that I eventually found. I picked up a sandwich and continued climbing toward the gare. When I got to the top I had the impression that it was time to head back to the hotel. At the same time, there were a couple of other places that I wanted to see. Unfortunately, I had seen the middle third of Monaco so I had a decision to make about where to go from there, or if I should head out. Once I went into the gare I realized how badly I needed to use the facilities.

I worked my way to the lower entrance to the gare in order to see what life was like on the other side of the tracks. I noticed that there was a train that was supposed to have just left. So, I started going out the door, saw a sign that said (in effect) “because of the strike, service will be interrupted”. Just then the train back to Nice showed up—the one that was supposed to have left already. All aboard. Of course, it was a very short train, and the engineer decided to go all the way to the far end of the station. So, along with a sizeable group of companions, I started running.

I had the distinct pleasure of facing backwards again on the ride out. But the views of the sea were still great. And, while I may have liked to see some of the other parts of Monaco (not that there are many “parts”) I was pretty satisfied that I’d been to the country and had a chance to walk around for a couple of hours. With places that aren’t always easy to get to, a couple hours is sometimes all you have to spare. And with places that are as small as those on my bucket list, you can actually see a decent fraction of them in that amount of time.