

mmm... Monte Carlo!



South Africans are writing their own success stories all over the world, but spare a thought for the serious high rollers who have made it in Monaco — that most magical kingdom of all. We're talking Ferraris and yachts, Rose Balls and French champers. Meet the Van Vuurens and Fontaines of Monte Carlo, the Kiralys, Bodarts and Prestons of the French Riviera.

by Paula Sizer
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This is a place where a distinction is drawn between the rich, the idle rich and the retired rich. Elderly women stroll past in their fur coats, walking their poodles in the midday sun. To the south, white yachts shimmer alongside glistening beaches; to the north, the French Alps stand majestic in their snow-covered peaks.

In Monaco, the Bentley, Ferrari and Rolls Royce are the norm and the shop windows display no price tags — if you have to ask, you can't afford it.

And in the midst of it all, is a handful of South Africans, enjoying the extravagance and magic that is Monte Carlo.



JUDIT KIRALY

Where else in the world can one go shopping in Italy in the morning, eat lunch in Monaco and catch a concert in Nice before enjoying the nightlife of the casino at Cannes — all within a 40km radius of one's home?

It's because she knows the answer, that Judith Kiraly is staying put.

"Some of the summer parties here are absolutely incredible, like the famous bal masqué of Christophe Leroy in St Tropez. It's a live 'Who's Who' in show business. I had a good laugh last year when we were sitting close to a famous model whose clothing consisted of nothing more than a beaded bra and mini curtain over a thong. I mean, she wore hardly anything and yet she didn't look a bit out of place! My favourite evening is the opening night of the Merton Musical Everings, where the concert is held in the open air and is followed by a midnight gourmet souper in the illuminated

Serena Gardens that finishes around three in the morning. It really feels like being in a fairy tale."

But, fairy tales too have their funny moments.

"It's customary at the Monaco boat parties for guests to take their cocktails barefoot on the deck. Prince Albert arrived at one last year to christen the yacht, promptly taking off his shoes to come on board, while impeccably dressed in his blazer and tie with coordinated socks. But he still looked every bit a Prince!" laughs the petite blonde who wrote her PhD, in French, on the Anglo-Saxon influence on the development and culture of the French Riviera. It's a topic she lectures on, when she's not

museum-guiding or running the largest English library in southern France. Kiraly also travels a lot, having just returned from California, South Africa and Greece and is

already packing to go to the States. For the third year she's also president of the South African Club, the only one on the Côte d'Azur.

"The club started when a South African woman phoned Monaco's Riviera Radio station 10 years ago and asked if there were any South Africans out there. The phone calls have just kept on coming!"

Today the club has around 100 members, although Kiraly estimates there're closer to 300 South Africans living on the Riviera.

"There're basically three groups of South Africans here. Those who've retired to Monaco and who have money or are busy making more. There're quite a few of them but most don't want to be known because of financial reasons. Then there're those married to local French people and lastly those who've come to work here, mostly in the IT industry."



FRANCOIS BODART

Seven years ago Francois Bodart sat in a restaurant in Cannes and watched the sunset. He knew then — and said as much to his wife — that he was going to come to live here one day.

"The weather, food and wine are excellent," smiles the 42-year-old importer/exporter.

"This is where it's at. In the morning, I go to the market and all the food is fresh. The women are beautiful. They do everything wrong: they eat cream, olives, oil, pastry, but there're no obese women around. They all have superb figures. I once met Claudia Schiffer and she has to be one of the most gorgeous women I've ever seen," he smiles.

And he's been smiling ever since he moved here from Flandpark Ridge in Johannesburg. The former IT technician soon gave up technology for nature and now enjoys nothing more than to relax on a hammock, strung between two of the 13 ancient olive trees in his garden, PC in tow.

"We have wireless installation in the house and it's pretty cool to be able to mix 300 years of nature and history with modern

technology."

When he's not relaxing, the casual working hours see him arrive at his "Out of Africa" office, based in nearby Valbonne village, at 10 in the morning. The village is 800 years old and is one of the most popular destinations for expats to retire to. It is here that Bodart sells the exclusive rail-wood furniture he imports from southern Africa.

"In summer our house turns into a hotel with friends visiting from all over South Africa. We take them on trips into the backlands of France. Sometimes we'll pop over to Italy for a Sunday lunch or go to Spain for the weekend. There's so much to do here and you always land up seeing famous people. I once sat next to Sean Connery in a restaurant and remember seeing Mick Jagger trying to hide behind his glasses, but his lips gave him away! The most outrageous party I've ever been to was at the Salle des Éclaires (Hall of Stars) in Monte Carlo a few years back. We partied 'til four in the morning and later one of my colleagues phoned me to come and fetch him. He'd woken up in a hotel room without any clothes on and no idea of how he'd got there! He asked if I could bring some spare clothes as he could not find his!"



GABRIELA FONTAINE

Organising a helicopter to pick up Parmesan cheese to be served with the risotto at a birthday party on an island called Porquerolles is all part of a day's work for Gabriela Fontaine (née Gruber), who grew up in Higgovale and Bakoven in Cape Town, but now works in Monaco. For a few years she lived in the metropolis but eventually found it too stifling, built up and false and so moved to nearby Biot village with her husband and two children. The family lives in a huge house that is over 100 years old and has a garden dating back three generations. They spend their weekends on their boat, relaxing away from the crowds in summer and skiing in winter.

Ten years ago, the 35-year-old entrepreneur set up a hotel reservation business that now runs itself. She's since started "Services 4U", an upmarket personal assistance business for foreigners settling in Monaco or the south of France.

"In Monaco there's too much money in too small a place. People scream at their staff for the smallest of things. I remember a woman throwing a tantrum because her hat was squashed by the housekeeper when she took it off the boat for her."

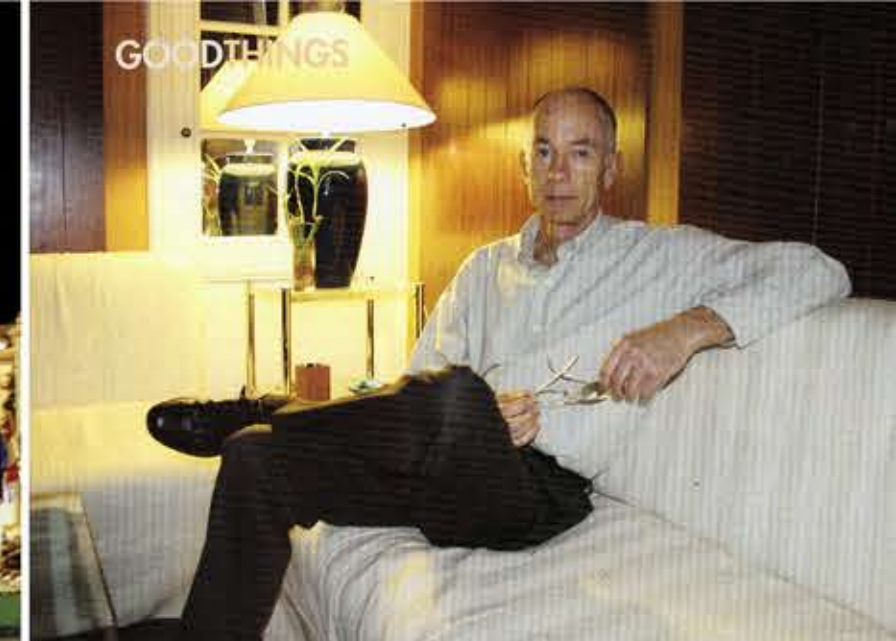
Hence the Parmesan cheese story.

"It was a no-budget party for 35 Monagasquans. I flew the singer in from Italy and the guests arrived by either boat or helicopter. On the Saturday night we realised we'd forgotten the Parmesan cheese and so on the Sunday morning I sent a helicopter to Italy to pick it up."

She's also organised a funeral for an old man who thought he was going to die and wanted his ashes thrown from a helicopter into the sea. Needless to say, he's still alive...

The most outrageous parties she attends are those held during the Grand Prix that go on into the wee hours of the morning. She's also met Prince Albert several times at various functions and private parties.

"The people here are really warm once you get to know them, the weather's great and the lifestyle, which is actually quite similar to South Africa, is fantastic. The food and wine are superb."



TONY VAN VUUREN

It's ironic that ex-South African Antony David Janse Van Vuuren had to travel halfway around the world from his Umbilo, Durban home to be hijacked. Now a Monaco resident, the business consultant's BMW was taken not far from his home. No weapons were used, but the incident was unusual enough to get a write-up in the local newspaper.

"I was too embarrassed to tell friends in South Africa," chuckles the 52-year-old father of four.

And so he should be, living in a country that boasts the highest number of police per capita in the world and motorised cameras on every street corner.

Not much has changed since Tony first arrived here 26 years ago, not speaking a word of French.

"I needed a job. I knew absolutely nothing about Monaco and suffered from vertigo because of all the hills and steps. But I was bowled over. It certainly was — and still is — a magical place."

It's a different world to the Glenwood High School he matriculated from, before obtaining a MBA from Durham University in England. Van Vuuren worked for Salmarine for two years before getting a job with Aristotle Onassis as an internal auditor. He now works for himself, offering professional company and tax planning services, dividing his time between his offices in Monaco, France

and London.

"There's no personal, inheritance or capital gains tax in Monaco. But the property taxes are high and you have to pay nine percent notarial fees, which includes seven percent to the government. It's not difficult to do business here, although it is getting harder to open a bank account because of money laundering."

Only three percent of the Monaco government's revenue comes from its world-famous casino, as most of its income comes from VAT.

"You get a bit blasé about the casino and nowadays I only go when I have a visitor in town."

Like other locals, he spends his weekends skiing in France, Switzerland or Italy and playing golf. As is also the norm, he tries to get out of town during the Grand Prix.

"It's terrible. About a month before there are barriers all over the road and parking is impossible. But it's huge business. For the three days during the race that I rent out my apartment (which overlooks locks the track), I get three-and-a-half months rent!"

And while he's bumped into Ringo Starr, Roger Moore, Ralf Schumacher and Princess Stephanie (he met her at the popular local hang-out, Jimmy's night club), he still describes himself as "just a simple oke from Durban".