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Always split on a pair of aces

In Paris and Monaco new friends of Lady Luck discover a charmed existence at the world's most luxurious hotels, writes Emma Newlands

It's a split-second decision, but I can't resist. Towards the end of a visit to the famous Casino de Monte-Carlo – and 15 years since it turned me away because I didn't have a passport – I decide the time has come to try my hand at blackjack.

And it proves a good move, although my winnings pale into insignificance in the vast surrounding affluence. Another reminder, if one were needed, that my vacation's two destinations of Paris and Monaco are always worth a punt.

My five-day adventure covers three properties in the Preferred Hotels & Resorts network, each with its unique spin on luxury accommodation. It's the world's largest independent hotel brand, with a portfolio covering more than 650 places to stay in 85 countries, and the merest of glances at the immaculate rooms pictured on its website is utterly envy-inducing.

The journey starts at St Pancras, travelling on the Eurostar in business class, which has its own luxurious waiting room, with an array of fresh pastries and glossy magazines. Once on board, pastries again play a deservedly prominent role in the breakfast menu compiled by chef Raymond Blanc, while passengers can also drink as much high-quality coffee as they choose.

It's an excellent way to acclimatise to the Parisian sophistication waiting at the end of the journey, and we are whisked off to our first destination, the 50-room Hotel Montalembert in the heart of the Left Bank. A member of the Preferred Hotels & Resorts LVX Collection, it is said to be the first boutique hotel

in Paris. Its neighbours include the renowned Gallimard publishing house that brought us such legendary names as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Marcel Proust, while the Musée d'Orsay and the Louvre are both within easy reach.

The hotel remains a hangout for writers and artists, as well as politicians, who are said to hold top secret meetings in a private dining area, and the Montalembert has undergone a "gentle" revamp, coinciding with its 90th birthday and aiming to keep its character intact.

The décor strikes that uniquely French balance between luxury and effortless style, and is designed to make you feel like you're staying in the guest bedroom of a Parisian apartment. My bijou room with a balcony is decked out in complementary golds and mahoganies, and surely only the French would decide that the hotel room staple of a TV should be presented like a work of art in a frame. Oh là là!

A local guide then takes us on a walking tour of the upscale local area, including the Rue du Bac, home to Deyrolle, which seems like something straight out of fantastical Parisian cinematic classic *Amélie*. At street level it is a seemingly conventional shop, but upstairs houses a staggering collection of taxidermy, from butterflies in every conceivable colour, to a huge tiger.

Also frozen in time is the shuttered home of the late, great Serge Gainsbourg on Rue de Verneuil, which is covered in graffiti paying tribute to the iconic Frenchman.



Clockwise from above: the room at the Montalembert; dining at the Buddha-Bar Hotel; the pink palace of the Monte-Carlo Bay Hotel & Resort



'Surely only the French would decide that the TV should be in a frame like a work of art'

Continuing both the musical theme and trend for graffiti, dinner that evening is at the Jazz Club & Restaurant Chez Papa. A cosy space with an intriguingly diverse clientele and a piano in the centre, the walls and ceiling are covered in scribbles by patrons, and the live performance is a highly relaxing way to end the evening.

The second day heralds a more modern, less understated side of Paris, and we cross the Seine to the opulent splendour of the Buddha-Bar Hotel Paris on the Right Bank. It is also a member of the Preferred Hotels & Resorts LVX Collection and continues the original Buddha-Bar concept of "a voyage within a voyage".

Housed in an 18th century townhouse in an area surrounded by designer shops, it has been transformed into an almost palatial space decorated in a neo-Asian style which harks back to 1930s

Shanghai, with bright jewel colours throughout. My room is predominantly kitted out in rich reds and blacks, including the bed's vast and intricate Japanese screen headboard, and sports a hi-tech Japanese toilet.

My room overlooks the courtyard, where we later have drinks tailor-made to our own personal tastes. It is also the scene for the hotel's remarkable, no-expense-spared brunch, which is served every Sunday from noon till 4pm with everything from oysters to patisserie, charcuterie to juices made on-site to order.

It's then time to head for the Côte d'Azur (isn't it always?), and after a short flight to Nice, check in at the Monte-Carlo Bay Hotel & Resort, another member of the Preferred Hotels & Resorts group, this time representing their Lifestyle Collection.

With an exterior painted in various pinks, offsetting the cobalt waters it gazes over, it has 334 rooms, and mine is sizeable and classically decorated in whites and ochres. It also has a truly spectacular vista that somehow manages to simultaneously look out to the sea, over the hotel's pool areas, and back to the green mountain landscape behind.

Giving further indication of the calibre of its guests, there is a helipad and casino, while its sandy-bottomed lagoon, the only one in Europe, heightens the resort feeling, as do the palm trees and Balinese poolside beds.

Further boosting the relaxation is a treatment at its SPA Cinq Mondes, and later, dinner at the hotel's Michelin-

starred Blue Bay restaurant, which looks out to the twinkling lights of the occasional yacht. It is led by chef Marcel Ravin, who brings his Martinique heritage to many of his dishes, which in our case include a dessert of a piña colada emulsion with spice crumble.

The next day, we're treated to a walking tour of Monaco, looking behind the curtain of the principality's flashy exterior. Our Monégasque guide explains that it is home to 125 nationalities, and its population more than doubles every day with the arrival of workers from neighbouring France and Italy. We also take in monuments including the Sainte-Dévote Chapel, which dates back to the 11th century and is dedicated to the principality's patron saint.

At lunchtime we stop off at the famous Café de Paris brasserie on the Place du Casino, where I am unable to resist the Café Gourmand, a selection of several small versions of desserts, including a tiny chocolate mousse tart.

On the eve of the dreaded journey back to reality, there's time to walk through the doors of the nearby casino, where, before placing our bets, we dine at the Train Bleu restaurant, styled to look like the Orient Express, and with a French-Italian-based menu.

Perhaps if I'd played more rounds of blackjack, I'd have been able to check in at all three hotels for prolonged stays, or even travel to the full network of Preferred Hotels. I guess I'll never know. But I'm left in no doubt that Paris and Monaco prove a very difficult hand to beat indeed.

FACT FILE

Rates at Hotel Montalembert start at €371 (£319). At Buddha-Bar Hotel Paris rates start from €410 (£353). At Monte-Carlo Bay Hotel & Resort rates start from €240 (£207).

All three are members of Preferred Hotels & Resorts (www.preferredhotels.com). Eurostar operates up to 21 daily services from London St Pancras International to Paris Gare Du Nord with one-way fares starting from £29, (03432 186 186, www.eurostar.com).

EasyJet flies from Edinburgh to London Gatwick and London Luton up to seven times per week, with prices starting from £18.99 per person.

EasyJet flies from Paris Charles de Gaulle and Paris Orly to Nice up to seven times per week, with prices starting from £25.08 per person.

EasyJet flies from Nice to Edinburgh up to seven times per week, with prices starting from £26.48 per person.

All prices are one-way, including taxes and based on two people on the same booking (www.easyjet.com).

Do Not Disturb

Coniston Park Coppice Caravan and Motorhome Club Site

Join the pod squad

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Maybe using our satnav to take a tiny dirt road, and in the process ignoring a big sign that said not to follow satnav to take said road, was an early indication we weren't exactly at one with travelling to the great outdoors for our trip to Coniston Park Coppice Caravan and Motorhome Club Site.

We ended up traversing a horribly stomach-tossing track known locally in the Lake District as "The Struggle". By crikey, that was apposite when, two hours behind schedule, we started to struggle with a barbecue shortly after arriving at our destination, set in 63 acres of National Trust woodland. It was a disposable one that had been in our cupboard for years and it gave off all the heat of an ice-bucket.

Another indication we weren't exactly naturals being out among nature. It was, though, forgetting the bedding we had been explicitly informed we would require for our sleeping arrangements – which meant I had to sleep covered in jackets and a Buzz Lightyear blanket you could spit peas through – that clinched the fact my family and I are real townies.

All that said, my weans of seven and ten, who have never spent a night under canvas, had a whale of a time in their little pod. Which isn't under canvas, admittedly. Effectively a pod is a dinky wooden tent.

Budget or boutique? Budget, at £49 per night for four, and it was a cosy step up from canvas.

Room service Conditions meant spending a bit of time in the pods. Whenever night-time descended, I thanked the Lord for the electric radiator every pod has fitted. I could have kissed that thing whenever Buzz failed to offer me protection from the chill.

The pods have lighting, electric sockets, seating and sleeping for two adults and two small children, with a futon that converts into a double bed and two camp beds. You also have access to



felt as if they were just trying too damn hard to be picture postcard perfect. In surrounding hamlets, meanwhile, on the Saturday evening we found more Gore-Tex than you can shake a walking pole at vying for the tables at the front of every pub.

The children were keen on sampling Tree Tops at the Lake District visitors centre. Essentially this was a giant lattice network of trampolines suspended 30ft up among the trees. It was fun jumping around, and sliding down twine tunnels. For a bit. We didn't last the two-hour time slot we acquired for £54 – £16 for children over five and £11 for adults accompanying them. It wasn't just the tree tops that were on the steep side, then. Or, to offer up a one-liner from my wife, there was more than an element of money for old rope.

Wining and dining

There are various pubs and cafés in walking distance of the site in Coniston. We liked the Bluebird Café, which has a good selection of light snacks and cakes. For dinner there's Sara's Indian, which offers reasonably priced cuisine and BYOB.

Little extras

A supreme element was how spotless at all times proved the communal wash areas – even in the midst of a mud-creating rainy weekend – and hairdryers are a bonus. **Guestbook comments** It was the sort of place you could see become a regular spot to return to time and again across a lifetime.

Andrew Smith

A Camping Pod at Coniston Park Coppice Club Site, costs £45 per night. (19 March to 31 December). To book please contact The Caravan and Motorhome Club on 01342 326 944 or visit www.camc.com