

Menton, a Town of Grand Hotels - the Winter Hotels of the International Aristocracy 1864 – 1914

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"Menton is through its climate, the best place to spend winter among the European sea resorts" Paul Joanne states in his "Mediterranean winter resorts" So starts the book, of which this is a summary. It explains and describes why a poor and small French coastal town on the border with Italy, came to play a central role for the high end tourists of Europe over more than a fifty year period.

As early as the eighteenth century the Grimaldi family had enjoyed their visits to their Carnoles palace (today the Art Museum of Menton) and the first visit by the Empress of Russia was already in 1867.

Doctor Henry Bennet, "gynecologist for the empress of India", who lived and had his practice at "Le pension des Anglais" (the English Boarding House), was responsible for initiating the successful publicity campaign in 1859, the purpose of which was to attract people suffering from tuberculosis to come to Menton and enjoy what was suggested to be the ideal winter climate with an "eternal spring". (Between 1860 and 1900, sixty seven doctors of half a dozen different nationalities wrote fifty publications promoting Menton). This coincided with the completion of the railway line linking Menton to both Genoa and Lyon as well as Paris. In addition, there was the development of a new port that could also receive ferries and private yachts. An early visitor was Queen Victoria herself with her sickly son Leopold. The initial formula for success was thus in place and the popularity of Menton began.

A building boom saw the development of hotels in what would, still today, be considered record time; just two to three years to complete construction of a two hundred room hotel, cutlery and all. Forty years after Bennet's campaign there were three hundred villas, fourteen pensions and forty five hotels providing for over 9000 guests.

What is remarkable for Menton, in addition to its microclimate, natural scenery and geographical location, is the density of "grand hotels". The twenty six establishments described in the book brought the most sophisticated way of life available in Europe to Menton, like a spaceship landing in the two bays of the town. Merging Taylorist production systems and the lifestyle of an aristocratic palace, the hotels offered all that a sophisticated clientele required; high architectural standards, rich decor and exclusive interiors, generous suites of rooms, with balconies and terraces, always with sea views, restaurants, billiards, bridge, rooms for smoking, correspondence and reading, plus all the modern comforts including ventilation, central heating, bathrooms, telephones, all to the highest quality and with great attention to detail. These residences were designed by renowned architects such as Hans

Georg Tersling, Joseph Albert Tournaire and Abel Glenda. The most prolific was Tersling, a Dane who settled in Menton in 1880. He quickly formed a partnership with the architect Gustave Rive to lead the construction of Hotel Alexandra, one of the first grand hotels, and subsequently won a number of prestigious commissions such as the Kursaal and Hotel Imperial.

The hotels were run by top international managers including Ritz, Leubner, Wicker, Wasmus and Aletti who from 1893 were able to draw on trained staff from the first hotel school that had just opened in Switzerland. The teams consisted of highly qualified foreign staff who worked alongside local Mentonnaise. The foreign staff, predominantly Italian or Swiss, often moved to northern Europe for the summer season with the same hotel managers. Up to the First World War about forty percent of the guests were British but Germans, Austrians and Swiss as well as Russians were also well represented.

Outside the exotic gardens was the town itself. Menton offered shops with international products such as the Grand Magasin Russe de Paris selling caviar, a Swiss Patisserie and the English Pharmacy. There were churches with a variety of European denominations including Russian Orthodox, Anglican and German Protestant as well as consulates of thirteen nations. An important pastime was the midday walk along the Promenade du Midi, now the Promenade du Soleil. There was a music pavilion with daily concerts. One in the series of old casinos, the Kursaal (now Palais d'Europe) also housed a theatre and ball rooms which provided entertainment. To get around, people used donkeys, hippomobiles, and later motor cars. Everyone knew who was present for the season, as guest lists were published from 1863.

There were activities galore; the Menton Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club opened in 1901, however, hotels such as the Louvre, the Riviera and the Winter Palace had their own. Roller skating was offered at the Kursaal or next to the Carlton and walking to the nearby picturesque villages of St Agnes or Gorbio was popular with sporty visitors. There was horse racing at Cap Martin, regattas (starting 1884) and golf (from 1909). The Lemon Festival which is still part of the yearly calendar, started as an exhibition of flowers and lemons at Hotel Riviera in 1928. There were in fact a multitude of carnivals such as the Big Heads parade, the Flower Battle, the children's parade and of course fireworks.

The hotels have been divided in clusters to facilitate this overview. The exact dates of construction are sometimes difficult to establish so the dates given below are not always precise. Furthermore, extensions and upgrades seem to have been continuous. What is striking is how quickly they were built, and within such a short overall period.

Just west of the old town were Grand Hotel Balmoral (1859), Regina Palace Hotel (1862 and 1867), and Hotel Westminster (1870). All lining the seafront with entrances on both the sea and town sides. The restaurant in the Hotel Westminster called London House, served American and English lunches and offered draught beer. It later merged with its neighbour, the Royal, and was the venue for the Menton Literary Society in the thirties.

The Grand Hotel de Garavan (1867), Hotel Bellevue (1873), Garavan Palace (1912) and Hotel des Anglais (1880, now gone) were all east of the old town and followed the opening of the Menton Garavan train station in 1869. They are all close to the Roman road Via Julia Augusta. Hotel Bellevue once had an Anglican Chapel, now gone. The auction that followed the hotel's bankruptcy in 1937 included 3000 bottles of wine.

The Grand Hotel de Venise (1869), Grand Hotel de Matte (1869), and Grand Hotel d'Orient (1870) were built on the outskirts of the town, although today they find themselves in the

now expanded town centre. The Grand Hotel d'Orient was run by the Brunetti family from the start and they still own part of the building. In 1903, there were already telephones in all rooms. The transformation in 1924 to a "Neo Moroccan" style was the work of architect Felix Verola.

Next to Jardin Bioves and the Kursaal are Grand Hotel des Ambassadeurs (1875), Leubner's Grand Hotel (1908-1909), Grand Hotel du Louvre (between 1862 and 1868) and, on the other side of the park, Hotel Astoria (1914). Hotel des Ambassadeurs is still a hotel. The Salons of Grand Hotel du Louvre offered the first facilities for playing bridge in 1890. Bridge is still played in the same rooms. Leubner's Grand Hotel is the only hotel with shops on ground floor and reception upstairs. As Leubner was German, the hotel was expropriated at the outbreak of WW1.

On the hillsides above the railway are the Grand Hotel des Iles Britanniques (1874-1875), Grand Hotel National (1879), Hotel Mont Fleuri ((1882), Riviera Palace (1897-1899) and the Winter Palace (1901-1903). The Grand Hotel National still has parts of its original magnificent dining room decorations. It was the first hotel to be attached to the town water and sewage system, the payment being calculated by reference to the length of its facade. Cesar Ritz spent part of his early career at the Grand Hotel des Iles Britanniques.

The two behemoths, the Riviera and the Winter Palace had a "special relationship" in the past. The Swiss hotel family Widmer started buying land for the Riviera in the early nineties. One landowner, Rosnoblet, refused to sell. Within months of the opening of the Riviera, Rosnoblet started to build the Winter Palace, right in front of the Riviera. Widmer was obliged to go up, and the Riviera ended up taller than the Winter. These two, along with Imperial and Grand Hotel du Cap, were the "Grand Lux" Hotels in Menton.

West of town, close to or in Carnoles and Roquebrune, are Hotel Imperial (1913), Carlton Palace Hotel (1912), Alexandra Hotel (1884) and the Grand Hotel du Cap, (the Cap Martin Hotel) (1891). Marie Curie is believed to have tested her radiographic equipment in the basement of Hotel Imperial. The Alexandra Hotel, named after the Tsarina Alexandra, was neighbour to the Russian Orthodox church and to the Russian Sanatorium. However, it also had a strong Scandinavian connection and on the facade you can see three crowns, the coat of arms of Sweden. The Cap Martin Hotel was built within the old hunting grounds of the Prince of Monaco. The architect was Hans Georg Tersling. It is known for having had two empresses as guests; "Sissi" of Austria-Hungary, who lived in a six room suite and housed her chapel in the billiards room, and Eugenie of France, who lived there before moving to nearby Villa Cynros, also designed by Tersling.

Generally speaking, the architecture of the hotels in Menton represents what was fashionable elsewhere in Europe. Initially a neo-classical or Haussmanesque style predominated, becoming more eclectic over time. Art Deco and Arts and Crafts are however rare. The facades, always south facing, are decorated with bow windows, terraces, balconies and cupolas that serve as signs of recognition, the most visible being the yellow towers of the Winter Palace by Joseph Albert Tournaire.

The oversized entrances and staircases provided the element of "shock and awe". The interior decoration and furniture was suited to its function, so Louis XVI for the ladies' salons, or renaissance for the dining rooms; the designers excelled in presenting a wide variety of styles, intending to offer comfort, but also to impress; Pompeian, Oriental, Greek,

Moorish are all in evidence. Early on an abundance of textiles and furniture would fill the rooms. Furniture, as well as imitating historic styles, had exotic variations in bamboo or rattan. Over time a more sober style prevailed, not least because of an increased hygienic consciousness. The modern world also required bathrooms that were larger, better equipped and more in number. Unfortunately, most original decorations and furniture are long gone.

Some of the hotels such as the Imperial, the Riviera, and the Winter Palace had extensive parks. Their original size is, today, much diminished by subsequent construction of apartment buildings and garages. The planting of the parks combined the flora of the Mediterranean with imported plants from all over the world to create an exotic landscape of year round greenery. A number of distinguished botanists designed these unique gardens, not least Thomas Hanbury who established an extensive botanical garden at nearby Mortola.

Before the First World War, European royalty visited in great numbers. The list is impressive.

The Duchess of York, the Duke of Albany, the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, the Prince and Princess of Japan, the Princes of Siam, the Prince of Denmark, the Prince and Princess of Wales, the Archduke and Archduchess of Austria, the Crown Prince of Spain, the Princess of Montenegro, the King and Queen of Sweden, the King and Queen of Saxony, the Prince of Bulgaria, the Prince and Princess of Saxe Coburg Gotha, the Prince of Greece, the Prince and Princess of Sweden, the King of Wurtemberg, the King and Queen of Baden, the Empress of France, the Emperor and Empress of Austria Hungary. The list is not exhaustive but exhausting.

And it was not only royalty you had to look out for; John D Rockefeller, Aubrey Beardsley, Mark Twain, the Renault family, Baron de Rothschild and Jules Ferry, all spent time here.

Those who did not stay in hotels would rent villas, or indeed buy their own. These included Count Orlov, Princess Ouroussov, Princess Lobanov de Rostov, Princess Dolgorouki, Count Moussine Pouchkine, Prime Minister Lloyd George, Marshal Mac Mahon, President Paul Kruger and Blasco Ibanez. And these were just a few.

During the First World War, many of the hotels became military hospitals for French, American and British forces. Several others stayed open, but not the German ones, which were expropriated and auctioned off.

The twenties were marked by modernisation. The illustrations to the advertisements reveal how times were changing. Hotels were now open all year around. Swimming pools, solariums, and gyms were desirable. Several American bars were opened, the old Kursaal introduced a night club and, following the fashion, the Grand Hotel d'Orient was transformed into an oriental fantasy, it was the days of Rudolf Valentino and the Sheikh.

The music pavilion gave way to the new casino in the thirties, with a seawater pool and a cinema. Hotel staff were now paid a fixed salary, rather than relying on tips and gratuities. The guests were still grand; the Shah of Persia and the Princess of Greece were visitors alongside Marechal Joffre, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Vladimir Nabokov.

By 1939, a few hotels realised their best days were behind them, and shut up shop. The start of the transformation to apartments can be dated to this time. During the war years many were commandeered by Italians, Germans and then the Allies. They served as garrisons, communications centres, air raid shelters, coal depots, even as convalescent homes. They suffered much damage from bombardment and looting.

Once the war was over some tried to meet the changing market conditions by becoming lower cost hotels, holiday homes, or in one case, a chirurgical clinic. Those closest to the sea found

it easier to survive and some still continue as hotels, but the great majority were transformed to apartments in the mid-fifties. The restaurants, salons and other grand rooms were converted to apartments so they have mostly disappeared, although some vestiges of their splendour still remain. The times have moved on.

A testament to their durability is, however, that with only two exceptions, Menton's Grand Hotels are still here to tell their story. It is a strange twist of fate that one of the "Disappeared" is the Grand Hotel des Anglais, the successor to the Pension des Anglais where Henry Bennet started this extraordinary story in 1859.

