

Monaco Grand Prix Culture

by
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“Watching People Watching People Watching People Driving Cars”



I'm here at the Monaco Grand Prix ... but *not* to watch people driving cars. I'm watching the people who are watching the *other* people who are watching the people who are driving the cars.

It's all in the numbers. The Monaco Grand Prix's maximum seating plus standing room is 37,000, but the worldwide TV audience is over a billion. Of those who are actually at the circuit in Monaco, a minute few people are actually *driving* Grand Prix cars; more are watching them drive cars; and many, many more are watching the people who are watching the people who drive Grand Prix cars. And I'm watching *them*.

It's all about which circle you're in.

Actual Grand Prix drivers are demigods, occupying the first circle. It's the most exclusive by far, and comes with a host of special privileges and recognitions. Credit Suisse hosts a "Grand Prix Drivers Club" tent out by the *Yacht Club de Monaco* and requires that you be a certified demigod to enter. Grand Prix drivers are prime prospects for private banking; many are already valued depositors holding Swiss bank accounts. It's a big money sport.

The second circle outside the drivers consists of the people who are true race enthusiasts. They can glance at any old race car from twenty or thirty years ago and tell you how it placed in that year's Grand Prix. The most elite of this circle, closest to the demigods, actually own their own classic race cars. They wish they could be drivers, rather than mere owners. But instead, they watch the drivers.

The third circle, just outside the race enthusiasts, is composed of the people who have no particular interest in the race, but a very high level of interest in watching the people who make sure they never miss a race. They watch the people who watch the people watching the drivers. They aspire to be fashion leaders, donning just the right sunglasses and sporting authentic logos on every visible clothing article. They watch the Grand Prix "in crowd" to be sure they do and wear what they should to appear "in."

Finally, there's a fourth circle, consisting of people like me: the people who are watching people watching people who are watching people driving cars.

Actually, there's also a fifth circle — the totally uninterested! Barbie's in this group. They have no interest at all in the race or the crowd it attracts. The uninterested just stay away.

I love to study other cultures, and these circles of Grand Prix people certainly qualify as their own sub-cultures. I don't really want to be one of them; but I'd love to mingle with one or a few of them.

I'm sitting out on the deck of the Fairmont Hotel in Monte Carlo just before sunrise on the first day of the Historic Monaco Grand Prix races. I walked Barbie to the gym this morning because she works out as a member of the hotel's rooftop fitness center. It just happens to be positioned right at the most famous curve on the Grand Prix circuit: the Fairmont Hairpin Turn.



While she exercised, I decided to enjoy a luxury breakfast at a rooftop table before heading out to the actual race. I had a \$25 dining credit coupon we hadn't used, so I decided to use it. The few others on the rooftop this early are members of the third circle: The world's richest jetsetters, who'd never miss this opportunity to mingle with their clan, watching the people watching the drivers at the Grand Prix. I decided to watch them, and maybe even mingle with them ... as study subjects of an alien culture, of course.

The restaurant hostess smiled and asked if I'd be having the buffet. I checked the menu, not sure that my \$25 coupon, worth about 18 € (euros) would be sufficient for the buffet. Good thing I asked for a menu; the buffet cost €48! That translates to \$66 U.S. dollars. Who pays USD \$66 for breakfast? I know the answer: the international Grand Prix racing crowd.

I ordered some coffee and crêpes, the lowest priced items on the menu.

Then I began my study of how the second and third circles travel to Monaco for the Grand Prix.



Straight ahead of me, out in the Mediterranean, moored just offshore from the Monte Carlo Fairmont, were the superyachts. These are huge vessels with “garage doors” at their sterns or on the sides of the hulls just above the waterline. When these doors open, perfectly honed systems of rollers and little cranes lift the “tenders” out of the garages and lower them into the water.

These photos are mere yachts. The superyachts have much bigger garages.

Keep in mind that these small tenders may actually be little luxury boats themselves, in addition to the various Wave Runners and Zodiac inflatable boats any self-respecting superyacht (or even mere yacht) owner has parked in the “garage.”



If you've arrived for the big race on your yacht, it's just so practical to anchor offshore, jump into the tender and have one of your crew members drop you in front of the race track at the port, rather than deal with the obstructed pedestrian walkways and surface streets of Monaco.



The superyachts just offshore from the Fairmont are so large that the Mediterranean swells barely affect them. The only noticeable sign of their swaying and rolling is the changing pattern of their underwater lights.

What, don't you know?

If you own a superyacht, you really need to upgrade by installing disco-type lights just below the waterline — the type that change colors on a cycle, like disco lights: blue fades into green fades into yellow fades into red. These draw the attention of the less fortunate who look at your yacht at night, as well as the envious owners whose mere ordinary yachts are smaller than your superyacht. You really must have fancy multi-colored cycling lights glowing underwater if you want any significance in the yachting world.



The Grand Prix racing crowd that has arrived by yacht is still sound asleep after their caviar parties last night. As the yachts sway very gently, the underwater lights vary slightly, beaming out their significance with disco colored disco rays projecting through the water.



But not everyone arrives by yacht. At the table next to me, there's a foursome that arrived by Bentley. In fact, the Fairmont hotel is filled with Bentley people — 300 of them. I was impressed to see the dozen or so classic Bentleys parked by the hotel's front door.



I overheard the nearby Bentley diners making reference to yachts at Catalina Island, so I excused myself, stepped back from my crêpes and interrupted



to ask if they were visiting from California. No, they're from Washington. Since I still own a house there, I thought this would be an entrée to a friendly conversation, and an opportunity to mingle with my culture-study group. But apparently I don't look Bentley enough to fit in. My intrusion was unwelcome. At least I made the effort.

The closest significant airport for those super rich who don't come by superyacht is Nice, France. During the two-week span that includes the Monaco Historic Grand Prix, the Cannes film Festival, and the Formula One Grand Prix, the airport's apron is absolutely jammed with private jets.



There are dozens of them. And we're not talking about mere Learjets or Citations or Gulfstreams. Many of these are Boeings; I've even spotted the private 747 owned by Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal of Saudi Arabia. If you're from the Middle East and are in the royal family sitting on large deposits of oil, you're probably rolling in billions and it's an easy hop from Doha or Riyadh or Kuwait straight to Nice, and then a helicopter gets you quickly to your villa in Monaco.

So far, I haven't spotted any authentic Grand Prix jet setters to study in an up close and personal way. But there's still time

Although the Formula One race takes place every year, there's also the "Grand Prix de Monaco Historique" involving only classic cars every other year. That's what begins today.



Some of the cars have competed in earlier Formula One Grand Prix races, and others are just spectacular old roadsters of the forties, fifties and sixties.

The first set of early morning races will begin in an hour or so, so I pay for my crêpes, which has come to a mere \$13 in addition to my \$25 certificate. The service has been impeccable and I did completely enjoy the \$38 meager serving of thin, tiny,

more aptly named crêpettes. I'm here mainly to observe the Grand Prix racing culture, not to linger over a \$66 buffet breakfast, so I get set to push off.

Of course, the real bonus would be to mingle with my study groups.

I had purchased a ticket for grandstand "P," situated right in the center of the harbor, Port Hercule. This location affords a good view of the chicane curves just before the start/finish line, as well as a massive and crisp high-resolution video screen so I can watch what's going on elsewhere on the circuit.



One of the video feeds is from a camera that's positioned on the roof right above Barbie's treadmill at the Fairmont. It's a prime viewing spot. Too bad Barbie has no interest. She just doesn't know what she's missing.

Monaco is extremely conscientious about blocking off any walkways that might possibly afford a brief sneak peek at the race without having purchased a ticket.

Unless you keep an apartment in a building right on the race circuit, or take a room with a balcony racetrack view at the Fairmont for \$13,000 a night with a four night minimum (and breakfast is included), you're not going to see the race.

Or, you can buy a special package that includes a catered meal on someone's personal balcony. (I was so grateful when a good friend hosted me with just such a treat, right beside Prince Albert II's balcony and the start/finish line a couple of years ago. The race noise blew out my Bose noise-canceling headphones and I still can't hear very well.)

Or, you can purchase a grandstand ticket for today's race, as I did. Otherwise, you absolutely cannot get even a glimpse of the actual race, though you'll hear the reverberations throughout the country, which is, after all, less than one square mile. People in France, which surrounds Monaco on three sides, hear the race from miles away. (I'm not sure they're permitted to even look toward the race circuit, having not purchased tickets.)



Walking leisurely from the Fairmont to the port normally takes me six or seven minutes. But today, it's an hour-long journey. Sidewalks are blocked, passageways are closed off, and the roads are shut down. Immaculately-uniformed Monaco police with perfect postures and no tattoos are posted along all the closed roads and blocked sidewalks.

For second circle race enthusiasts, third circle in-crowd observers, and even fourth circle spectators like me watching spectators watching spectators watching car drivers, no inconvenience is too great to see the race and the people watching it.



Multiple pedestrian detours require that you use the amazing temporary infrastructure that's erected in Monaco each year just for the race.

Where do they keep this stuff the rest of the year?

There are massive temporary steel bridges, multistory press and VIP boxes, and vast, sweeping grandstands built up over the six weeks before race day. They'll be all dismantled within two weeks after the race.



Finally, after being blocked by the multiple very courteous and professional police of Monaco, I'm told that in order to reach the harbor

where my grandstand is, I really have to walk up to the train station. That's in the wrong direction and far up the hill from where I want to end up. But they instruct me that if I go there I will be able to take a series of elevators and escalators and long tunnels bored through the solid rock of the Côte d'Azur and finally emerge in the same general area as my grandstand.

The pedestrian signage from the station is excellent and that's where most people arrive for the races. The Bentley and private jet and yacht people are in the tiny minority; most watchers come by train from other parts of France or Italy, especially the French and Italian Riviéras adjacent to Monaco. These are the people who watch the people watching the people driving the cars. They strive to be like them.

I eventually reach my grandstand and find it mostly empty. How am I going to mingle — and study — this culture if nobody's there? Although the first race is about to begin, these aren't the “big cars” that are the loudest and which race later in the day, when the grandstand will be crowded. These early races are just qualifying rounds for the vintage cars that I find far more interesting than present-day technologically-triumphant race cars.



I haven't much to say about the race itself because that's not what fascinates me. Lots of beautiful old cars zoomed past right to left, moving very fast, emitting loud, high-pitched screeching sounds as their finely tuned engines squealed out hundreds of horsepower.



The best part is watching the rest of the race on the Jumbo monitors, everyone secretly hoping they will see video of a crash somewhere out on the circuit. There are a few, but nothing serious.



Not many of the race watchers who eventually arrive at my grandstand are true race fans. Their motivation is more like, *“This is a big event on the world jet setters’ scene and you really must plan on going there to drool over their lifestyle.”* I admit that it’s easy to get caught up in all the excitement.

At the end of the first day, I went home and told Barbie all about it. She just sat and listened as I went on and on about how much effort I’d made to get to my seat, watch the race, and try unsuccessfully to meet some second, third, or fourth circle spectators.

When I finished, I said, *“Gee, honey, don’t you have any interest in the race at all? You’re missing out!”*

“Missing out?” she replied. *“What do you mean? I watched the race from the gym. I was perched right above the Fairmont Hairpin Turn, with nobody in front of me.”*



My jaw dropped. She had the best possible view from her treadmill and hadn’t made the slightest effort to get it!

“Oh,” she continued, “I met Peter Greene, a very down-to-earth and somewhat eccentric Bentley owner.”

My jaw dropped further. *“Why couldn’t I meet someone like that? Did you start up a conversation with him?”*

“No. He introduced himself to me at the gym; he was interested in my workout.”

“I want to meet someone like that!”

“Come with me to the gym tomorrow, and I’ll introduce you to him. He’ll be there. He’s set a goal of walking completely around the circumference of the world between his 70th and 80th birthdays. He’s doing it mainly on the treadmills at luxury hotels. He has it all worked out right down to the number of steps he must take each day to accomplish his goal. So far, he’s on track to finish three years ahead of schedule. He’s quite fit — 73 but looks at least ten years younger.”

The next morning, there he was, greeting Barbie and meeting me.

“I’m interested in your wife’s workouts,” he said. “She’s so lithe and fit! She fascinates me.”

“Tell me about your Bentleys,” I said, wanting to chat about his “foreign culture.”

“I own a few classic cars and exhibit them all around the world — a rather expensive hobby.” He took me down to the garage to see them.



As we stood in the garage among the shiny classic collection of expensive cars, I thought, *“Finally! I’m actually talking with rather than just watching someone in an inner circle. How fascinating!”*

Peter looked at me and shook his head.

“I’m fascinated by your lifestyle living all over the world, experiencing a different country each year. What’s your secret? How can you afford to live this way?”

“I don’t own any Bentleys.”