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# HOW TO SPEND IT

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WHERE TO GO  
HOW TO GO  
SHOULD WE GO?

# AWAY



# Roc stars

What happened when nine notorious photographers assembled at one of the world's most luxurious hotels...  
Catherine Fairweather reports

Photography by Don McCullin

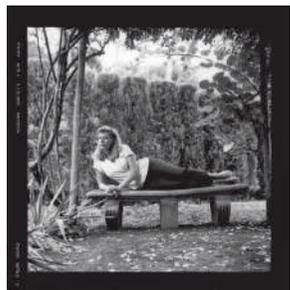


PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON MCCULLIN CONTACT PRESS IMAGES. JEAN-PIERRE BOUCHARD/GAMMA RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES

There is a plaque set in the gardens on the path down to the famous seafront cabanas of the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc that quotes the writer Anatole France. It reads: "What will be, is what was."

It perfectly captures the tone of the Hotel du Cap, a Riviera icon that looks down upon the coastline with a gaze that has seen it all: a century and a half of tumultuous times, various financial crashes and two world wars. During the second world war, the Americans requisitioned the building and in a sense they've never left, still making up 50 per cent of the devoted clientele that decamps here every summer with luggage sent on ahead and nanny, children and pets in tow. While the pandemic has curtailed that annual migratory flightpath, an army of valets and gardeners – "artisans du paradis", as they are dubbed – have been preparing since July for their return. At 6am, the hosing-down of the clay tennis courts settles the dust for a day's play, and wind machines remove rogue leaves and begonia blossom from the cushioned pathways that run parallel to the Grande Allée, the famous avenue connecting the belle époque hotel to the sea. In this rarefied atmosphere – whispering pines and Whispering Angel, the Riviera's favourite rosé, left to rest in chilled silver buckets – everything seems right with the world. It's a return to Baudelaire's state of grace: *lux, calme et volupté*, albeit with a surgical face-mask on.

As a photogenic backdrop, the hotel has always drawn attention. It was exploited most memorably by Jacques Henri Lartigue, another hotel regular and one of France's national treasures. The late '70s brought a group of nine of the top photographers of the day – among them Helmut Newton, David Bailey, Lartigue and my husband, the war photographer Don McCullin – all invited by Olympus Cameras to spend time in the creative environs of the hotel and to test-drive the brand's new XA. Over a handful



Photographers who gathered at the hotel in the late 1970s-early '80s included (top) Helmut Newton and Ralph Gibson, (below) Jacques Henri Lartigue and (right) Annie Leibovitz. Above: Don McCullin's then girlfriend, Laraine Ashton



then girlfriend Laraine Ashton (owner of the eponymous model agency) gazing candidly, almost childlike, at the camera. The model Marie Helvin, all limbs and languor, is caught draped over an armchair – or over her new husband, David Bailey. Gibson and Newton link arms and cavort in their Speedos. You can hear the shuffling of ice in the wine buckets, feel the warmth of the rocky platforms around the pool.

The exuberant, unbuttoned late '70s – an era of shifting social paradigms and expanding creative boundaries – was also the high-water mark for the hotel. The Oetkers, a German food-production family keen to expand their empire into hospitality, had bought it in 1969, and attracted a new kind of clientele. It was no longer just royalty and aristocracy around the

## HALF-CLAD AND HIGH ON CHAMPAGNE, THEY HAD LARKY DEBATES

pool – Hollywood rock stars mingled with European mobsters, artists, writers and reprobates to form an intoxicatingly democratic mix.

"I had just witnessed the brutality to which humankind can sink, in Lebanon," remembers Don. "I should have been unshockable. Yet the toplessness still threw me – me, a boy from Finsbury Park, in a place where the bills were settled only in cash, and where you 'summoned' the valets from a panel of buttons from your bedside table.

"But it was liberating, exhilarating," he continues. "I felt no guilt. I felt I had earned the pleasure of ironed sheets and manicured lawns after spending nights under tables to protect myself from air bombardments. I arrived in my DMs and khaki, tailored by Mr Mingh in Saigon, which had served me well in the Vietnam war but were out of place in those silent marble halls where you could hear a pin drop."



Above: Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc. Patrick Lichfield (left), David Bailey (top right, with his then wife Marie Helvin) and (below right) Helmut Newton. Bottom right: the hotel's pool

of summers until the early '80s, they contributed to an album of images that would eventually be published by Lustrum Press as *Nine by Nine*, which formed the basis for the opening exhibitions of Olympus Galleries in London, Hamburg and Tokyo.

These Riviera images conjure balmy days and nights, where, as the foreword reads, "cameras and photographers clicked, and conversation flowed". Half-clad and high on champagne, they had larky debates about their craft, with Ralph Gibson, the American conceptual photographer throwing down the gauntlet: "We know how to use photography, but we still don't know what it is." The photographers acknowledged the challenges of the erotic image; its master, the Japanese Eikoh Hosoe, kept silent while Helmut Newton, bumming Marlboros, lamented his own inability to capture the perfect nude. This atmosphere of lighthearted joshing and unbridled enjoyment evidently unleashed something in the normally reserved, war-weary Don, who posed for Lartigue stretched out horizontally on the gravel of the Grande Allée. For Lartigue, the Olympus folios were a return to the familiar Cap d'Antibes autochromes of the 1920s and '30s – sensual snapshots of a naked shoulder spangled with seawater, a spaghetti tangle of oil-slicked limbs on the iconic diving board, a sunbather in plaits.

Don's portraits of his colleagues lounging around Eden-Roc also convey the easy playfulness of the time. Spontaneous, underproduced, they evince unselfconscious intimacy and optimism, with sweet snapshots of his



recalls. "I said, 'What do I need a fucking bodyguard for?' Then Helmut rowed with my wife over the issue of a Montblanc pen and, well, that was the end, my friend."

Don left his job at *The Sunday Times* well before then. The world view had shifted, and he was disillusioned to have his pictures passed over in favour of style and celebrity shoots by the new proprietorship. "When I look back on these images, it's with a kind of nostalgic fondness for a dreamy, playful decade," he says. The moment is frozen in the smile of Lartigue, in his white suits and flowery shirts. He, like many in these pictures, is dead now. And, Don notes, it's the end of an era too for Olympus, which sold its camera operations to a Japanese private-equity firm earlier this year.

No one can yet say whether the aftermath of the pandemic will usher in another roaring decade of euphoria, as it did for the Lost Generation in the 1920s, escaping prohibition to the Cap d'Antibes, thrilled to have survived the war. Or a revival of the Swinging '60s, the liberated '70s, or the consumerist '80s – decades intoxicated with pleasures. But strangely, if the black-and-white images of a handful of weekends in the Hotel du Cap still strike a chord, it is for a joyful innocence that is all but lost. ■HTSI

But he quickly settled into the rhythm of a new lifestyle. On the advertising guru Frank Lowe's yacht, *The Floating Pound*, Helmut Newton and Helvin gambolled with the others on the decks. "Newton's role was to be life and soul of the party," recalls Helvin. "We fell about when he tied me to the mast. It was living the dream. I was top of my game, still very much in love with Bailey and thanks to him no magazine was allowed to become bored with me."

John Swannell, the fashion photographer, was an Olympus assistant at the time: "Photographers then were rock stars; no one was trying to be top dog, but they spent their time photographing each other endlessly. Patch [Patrick] Lichfield geekishly fiddled around with the equipment, Brian Duffy stomped about in a Che Guevara T-shirt. Wondrous Sarah Moon was always swimming. There were the statuesque Americans, Mary Ellen Mark and a young Annie Leibovitz, and Hosoe, singing karaoke. I can't even remember if there were other guests around; we were absorbed in a bubble of our own. The hotel gracefully turned a blind eye to the shenanigans – even when Gibson came down the central staircase in Marie's Ralph Lauren kaftan with a rose clamped to his mouth."

"Yeah," adds David Bailey. "I think I asked why no one had thought to tell Gibson it wasn't a fucking fancy-dress party." Bailey, who was in effect the poster boy for Olympus' new cameras and the reason they were all there, is not given to nostalgia. But it was a pinnacle moment for fashion, photography and advertising – and the Hotel du Cap, he acknowledges, was properly old-school grand.

But the magic of those weekends eventually waned; by the 2000s, an economic tidal wave had tipped what was fun into decadent excess. "[In 2004] we were assigned our own bodyguards for the weekend," Bailey

