

Live like a king in an 18th-century French château

Château du Grand-Lucé is a neoclassical masterpiece in the Loire Valley – and a relaxing pied-à-terre to call your own, if only for a while.



The Château du Grand-Lucé, now a luxury hotel, was one of few aristocratic residences to emerge unscathed from the French Revolution.

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When Louise Pineau de Viennay helped the peasants of Le Grand-Lucé rebuild their homes after a fire destroyed the village in 1781, little did she imagine that her kindness would be repaid just eight years later. Not only did the villagers hide the aristocrat when the [French Revolution](#) erupted, they protected her family home, the Château du Grand-Lucé – one of the few mansions in [France](#) to survive the rampage intact.

Today, the mid 18th-century masterpiece that was once a favourite haunt of Rousseau, Voltaire and Mozart is the latest posh sleepover in the Loire Valley.



Baron de Lucé commissioned architect Mathieu de Bayeux to design the château in 1760. [Adam Lynk](#)

It's an unusually hot day when Adrienne, a hotel staff member, meets my partner and I at Le Mans train station and whisks us off on a half-hour drive through the countryside to Le Grand-Lucé – a tiny village with a 15th-century church, a pub, a charcuterie, two bakeries, three hair salons, a busy weekly market and one very grand château.

Soon, we're drawing up in front of the imposing iron gates, which swing open to reveal a three-storey château straight out of a fairytale. I can't help but gasp – the house is even more impressive than I had imagined.



The château sits within 30 hectares of gardens. The statues were a gift from King Louis XV. Michael Spengler

Five minutes later we're sipping champagne in the beautiful hall and admiring the landscaped gardens beyond. The château has just 17 guest rooms and I'm wondering when nobles in their wigs and billowing dresses might arrive, and whether I'm suitably dressed.



A room in the Baron's Suite, which includes private access to the gardens, and its own library. Michael Spengler

The château's splendour belies a chequered past in more recent times. It was used as a hospital during World War I and artworks from the Louvre were hidden there during the Second World War. The French government later bought the property and revived its magnificent gardens, using the buildings for tourism offices.

In 2003, the house caught the eye of American interior designer Timothy Corrigan, who spent 12 years restoring the residence to its former grandeur. It was a labour of love he documented in his lavish book, *An Invitation to Château du Grand-Lucé: Decorating a Great French Country House*.

Two years ago, US hotelier Marcy Holthus of Pilot Hotels heard the château was on the market. She fell in love with the property and persuaded Corrigan to sell it to her, promising it would make a superb hotel.

There's a wealth of art and antiques throughout, as you might expect, but the château is a place to relax, too.

What makes the château so special is that it was shaped by the ideas of the Enlightenment, when good design was a big deal. In 1760, Louise Pineau de Viennay's father, Baron de Lucé, invited architect Mathieu de Bayeux to design a château using the most modern ideas. The house was built from limestone on a north-south axis, inspired by neoclassical symmetry – but the baron never got to live there. The story goes he went to see the finished house and dropped dead in the forecourt – whether from excitement or disappointment, nobody knows.



The opulent Baron's suite was designed for Baron de Lucé. Michael Spengler

I think about the far-sighted baron as I wander through his quarters, which are usually open to guests to look through unless someone has booked the entire Baron's Suite for €15,000 (\$24,450) a night. In the Salon Chinois, I admire the murals that have miraculously survived the centuries. The scenes of an imaginary Orient were painted on canvas-covered walls by Jean-Baptiste Pillement, whose work is also found in Marie-Antoinette's garden palace at Versailles.

There's a wealth of art and antiques throughout, as you might expect, but the château is a place to relax, too. The pink dining room is very Wes Anderson-ish – think of his 2014 film, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* – while the grand salon is light and airy. An old church has been turned into a bar, while the ornate dining room is used for events or special occasions – guests eat on the terrace or in the restaurant.



The centuries-old murals in the Salon Chinois in the Baron's Suite. Michael Spengler

“No matter how many times I go through the rooms, every day I see something new,” enthuses Lourine, a hotel assistant.

The hotel has been open for just a few weeks and we are the only guests, which only enhances the feeling of living a dream. Dinner is served on the terrace as the rays of the setting sun highlight the sculpted gardens, which are inspired by those at Versailles.

Thank goodness manners have relaxed somewhat since the 18th century – the service is friendly. The food is seriously good (thanks to chef Maxime Thomas) and the wine-matched dinner is a highlight. I particularly enjoy the extra little dishes which sneak in between courses – this is the land of amuse-bouche, after all.

The 4000 square-metre château is in its own little kingdom, surrounded by 30 hectares of classical gardens and statues (a gift from King Louis XV), the remains of an ancient white oak forest, a kitchen garden and a pretty pond. We borrow electric bikes and enjoy a picnic in the grounds before immersing ourselves in the pool. A fountain in a previous life, the pool provides welcome relief from the heat.



The hotel's swimming pool is perfect for whiling away a lazy afternoon. Adam Lynk

I spend an afternoon poolside in the shade of umbrellas, a book in one hand and a cocktail in the other. The nearby spa, housed in a former laundry, isn't up and running yet and the surrounding buildings – an old stables and orangery – are still being restored.



The Corner King Suite Garden View is one of the most private guest rooms in the château. Michael Spengler

Most of the château's guest rooms are on the first floor and each is different. Although Timothy Corrigan did the major restoration work, Paul and Shannon Wehsener of Paul Allen Design have reworked the interiors with a lighter touch.

I'm staying in the Corner King Suite, which is flooded with light and overlooks the forecourt, with a glimpse of village rooftops beyond and expansive views of the western garden. The room is grand, with a 4.5-metre high ceiling, huge casement windows, original oak parquet floors, antique furniture, plush fabrics, Pratesi bedlinen and soothing green toile wallpaper (there is no TV in the room but the Wi-Fi is good). The bathroom is generous, with a separate marble shower and a claw-foot bath near the window, looking onto shimmering greenery outside.



Lavish attention to detail abounds, as in the King Suite Village View. Michael Spengler

Sadly, all good fantasies must come to an end. On our last day, we learn that a family of five are on the way, followed by the hotel's owner, Marcy Holthus, and a party of US politicians.

Our stay is drawing to a close, but the château is ready and waiting to fulfil the dreams of its next visitors.

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[Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé](#) 9 Place de la République, Le Grand-Lucé. Tel: +33 637 071 528. Rates from €475 in low season to €950 in high season. Breakfast and Wi-Fi are included.

[Le Grand-Lucé](#) is a 30-minute-drive from Le Mans, which is about one hour from Paris by TGV.

The writer was a guest of Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé.



La Galerie de Chasse – the expansive gardens can be viewed from many rooms in the house. **Michael Spengler**