

## TRAVEL FRANCE



# Right royal treatment

**Mary O'Brien** lives it up at Château du Grand-Lucé, an 18th-century residence in the Loire Valley that's now a luxurious hotel.

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 sleeper in the Loire Valley.

It's an unusually hot day when Adrienne, a hotel staff member, meets my partner and me 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 fairy tale. I can't help but gasp – the house is even more impressive than I had imagined.

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.

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 World War II. 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, American 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.

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



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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 the Baron went to see the finished house and dropped dead in the forecourt – whether from excitement or disappointment, nobody knows.

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 (\$24,350) 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.

"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, inspired by 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.

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.

Most of the château's guest rooms are on the first floor and each is different. While 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 plus village rooftops beyond, and has 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 bed linen 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 on to shimmering greenery outside.

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. **L&L**

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

Top left and right: The pool was once a fountain; murals in the Baron's Suite. Above: A bedroom in a Corner King Suite Garden View. Left: The formal dining room; artwork fit for a baron. Below left: A fireplace in the Baron's Suite. PHOTOS: ADAM LYNK, MICHAEL SPENGLER

## i Need to know

**Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé**  
9 Place de la République, Le Grand-Lucé.  
A 30-minute-drive from Le Mans, which is about one hour from Paris by TGV. Tel: +33 637 071 528.

**Rates**  
from €475 in low season to €950 in high season. Breakfast and Wi-Fi are included.