



## Luxury travel

# Secret France: wine, antiques and a chic chateau hotel

Just 40km north of the Loire Valley lies the Loir (the one with no 'é').

Lisa Grainger explores



Not many hoteliers create hotels in areas where there are very few tourists. But then Marcy Holthus, as she readily admits, isn't a straightforward hotelier. "For me, areas that aren't touristy are wonderful because they feel more authentic," the Californian says. "There isn't the pressure to go and see famous things, so you can hang out with locals and get a feeling for what it's like to live there. It's even better if you are staying in a building that's historic because they have stories, they have a background, which is what I think luxury travellers like me now want."

The attitude of the property financier turned hotelier explains why, when the details for a grand chateau in the little-known Vallée du Loir landed on her desk in 2017, rather than trying to sell it, she bought it. "At first I thought, 'This is crazy. I don't speak the language, I don't know the laws,'" she says. "But then I walked through the door... and I couldn't believe it was real. I knew these chateaux existed, but I thought they were museums, rather than homes that people owned. By the time I had stayed the night, I'd fallen in love with it."

Being what she calls "a serial researcher," Holthus knew what the Château du Grand-Lucé was not. For a start, the property is not in the touristy Loire Valley, but the Vallée du Loir, the quiet agricultural region 40km to its north. While the 1760 limestone building is grand, it is not

palatial, with just 17 bedrooms and 30 hectares of parkland. There is only one Michelin-starred restaurant in the vicinity and no chichi boutiques. What the property was, she thought, was the perfect place to escape from the modern world, a place to ride and walk in the forests, to stroll around the local market, visit family-owned vineyards or have long conversations over a glass of wine in the rose gardens. Not Provence, the Dordogne or the Loire, but a part of rural France.

It may not be one of the great "Châteaux de la Loire", but the hotel that Holthus has created from the Château du Grand-Lucé is gorgeous. So gorgeous, in fact, that having driven through its big iron gates, I have to stop in the middle of the gravel driveway to take it all in. Considered to be one of the finest examples of 18th-century neoclassical style in France, created for Jacques Pineau de Viennay III, Baron de Lucé, who administered eastern France for Louis XV, it is picture-perfect pretty: three storeys overlooking gardens dotted with fountains and Versailles-style statuary.

While I'm the first guest to stop in the middle of the driveway, I'm not, I'm told, the first to be overwhelmed by the initial sight of the building. When the baron arrived from Strasbourg to inspect his new abode, he was apparently so overcome that he keeled over and died.

Keen not to do the same before I've had a proper chance to enjoy it, I hand over my car keys to a genial young general manager, gratefully accept a glass of



champagne from a silver tray and enter the limestone hallway.

As with nearly all of the other hundred or so châteaux dotted about Le Loir, Grand-Lucé was a private home. This one, however, was owned by another American, Timothy Corrigan, who, luckily for Holthus, had spent more than \$10 million and six years of his life turning it from a dilapidated former Second World War hospital into a château with 17 en suite bedrooms, a swimming pool (converted from an old round pond) and 21st-century plumbing and electrics.

During the past two years Holthus and her team have taken the bones of what Corrigan handed over and turned it into a polished hotel — what she describes as “a place that travellers like me, who want the very best, want to stay”. When she says “the very best”, Holthus isn’t exaggerating. She can’t remember, she says, staying recently in a hotel that cost less than \$1,000 a night, and cites Aman hotels and La Reserve in Paris as examples of what she aims to achieve.

As I take a tour with one of the polished young staff — all wearing urbane outfits from Cos and J Crew — it’s clear that the interiors have been created for a visitor who likes everything to be crisp and uncluttered. Walls are painted or wallpapered in light or bright colours. Passageways are wide and airy. There are no carpets. Antiques and French reproductions have been regilded so that the gold glows brightly. “I loved Tim’s lavish designs, but I wanted it to have a unique style that’s mine

Château du Grand-Lucé. Top, the King Suite. Above, the main sitting room and, right, the swimming pool

### Need to know

Lisa Grainger was a guest of Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé ([chateau-grandlucé.com](http://chateau-grandlucé.com)). Double rooms cost from €480 a night in low season. First-class Eurostar returns from London to Paris cost from £490pp ([eurostar.com](http://eurostar.com)) and the return train from Paris to Le Mans from £86 return ([enoui.sncf](http://enoui.sncf)). Stuart Paterson can organise antique-hunting itineraries and arrange transportation of goods back to the UK from €500 a day ([stupat@gmail.com](mailto:stupat@gmail.com)). For more information see [vallee-du-loir.com](http://vallee-du-loir.com)

— which is more spare,” Holthus says. “I like to have a few things that are special so you aren’t overwhelmed, a beautiful sparseness that’s also undeniably opulent.”

She has obviously had fun with her design team, Paul and Shannon Wehsener, who oversaw the design of her other hotel, the Washington School House in Utah, and with the help of the antiques dealers Hugh and Susannah Cameron of the Provence-based Chez Pluie. Each of the 17 rooms (five of which are still to be completed) is unique in size and style, ranging from the baron’s quarters on the ground floor, with a salon lined with priceless Chinoiserie canvas walls painted by Jean-Baptiste Pillemeut (€15,000 a night in high season) to a cosy village-view king room, with deep-blue damask walls and a shower room (€950).

Some feel more historic than others: a few feature fairly bold choices of fabrics by Jean Paul Gaultier and jewel-shaded wallcoverings (plum and lime green in one room). Wonderfully, all feature 21st-century technology and conveniences, from fast wifi and USB-charging points to power showers with deliciously fragrant-smelling Buly 1803 lotions and potions.

Holthus wants guests to feel at home, rather than in a stiff hotel, so staff are there when you need them and disappear when you don’t. When I awake at 6am I have the place to myself, slipping down the staircase past historic portraits, through grand living spaces and a formal rose-pink dining room out into the garden, where I float

about quietly on my own, enjoying the fact that, just for a moment, it’s all mine: the roses and the jasmine, the fountains and the statuary.

The classical gardens, Holthus says, have taken more time than anything else to restore. Over the past two years, with the aid of French specialists and four full-time gardeners, the topiary has been reshaped, rose beds hundreds of feet long dug, multicoloured borders planted, greenhouses in the Jardin Exotique around the pool fixed, the potager planted with edible species. A big flock of white geese has also been rehoused beneath willows by a lake, and they hiss and honk as I stroll by.

Because the surrounding area is not touristy, and attractions are therefore relatively unknown, I take advice on what to do from two sources: the helpful women at the tourist office in the charming stone village of La Chartre-sur-le-Loir, and Stuart Paterson, a London-based francophile antiques dealer whom I recruit to help me to sniff out château-style antiques from *brocantes* (second-hand furniture and antiques dealers).

Unlike the Loire Valley, the women at the tourist office explain, Le Loir doesn’t have big state-run attractions. Rather, it’s a place to hire e-bikes and ride through the Versailles forest, to sample local wines in the 27 domaines with farmers, to visit family-owned châteaux, and to picnic beside rivers with a basket of home-made terrines and cheeses. The first thing I learn from Paterson is that if you are serious

about hunting for antiques in this area, you shouldn’t arrive on a weekday. *Brocantes* and antique shops generally open only on weekends — or by appointment.

Thankfully, in La Chartre-sur-le-Loir, where we start, Grégoire Courtin, the owner of the prettiest shop, the Quince Gallery, answers his phone when Paterson rings and sends his cousin to let us in. Courtin often works on film sets and shoots, and his converted house and back warehouse are stuffed with treasures: some are for sale, some are not, but all are laid out like a tasteful museum. There are shelves of birds’ nests, cupboards of gilt-embossed leather books, trunks, mannequins: so many things that would empty my bank account that I’m relieved to hear that he (rather quaintly) sells only between 11am and 1pm on Sundays.

There are two enormous other *brocantes* in which to spend our euros, though: Guenatone, not far outside the town of Nogent-le-Rotrou, and Kaluka, near the hamlet of Male. While Paterson says that the stock is not nearly as grand as you may find in the markets in Paris or L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, we spend a couple of happy hours wandering through armoires and chandeliers, charming garden furniture and knick-knacks — and I find a gorgeous pair of still-life oil paintings to pack in my bag.

In between antique hunting, we also discover two pretty privately owned châteaux worth visiting: the homely Le Lude, which has been owned by the same family for 260 years and is a charming mix of snug and Disney-like; and the pretty Château de Poncé at Poncé-sur-Loire, whose village church is adorned with some of the rarest and most beautiful 12th-century frescoes in France.

Equally glorious was the private Jardin Remarquable created by the eccentric “botanic artist” Thierry Juge that we eventually found along a tiny back road. When the wiry, energetic Juge bought his Prieuré de Vauboin more than two decades ago, the hillside beside it was covered in a wild box forest. Fascinated by the trees’ wry shapes, he tells us, he started to sculpt them. Today more than 700 growing box sculptures adorn the limestone hillside: a ballerina here, a Daliesque abstract shape there, rising like a tribe of phantasmagorical creations above his quaint double-storey 1486 house.

Equally fascinating was France’s oldest apothecary within the Hôtel Dieu at Baugé-en-Anjou. The tiny 17th-century wood-paneled room, with a marquetry floor so precious that it is listed as a national treasure, is lined from top to bottom with more than 600 bottles, jars and elaborately painted walnut containers. Each of the Latin-labelled jars, explained our thoughtful guide, Benoit Alex, is still filled with original “cures”: plant oils and botanical concoctions, alcohols and mercury, crayfish eyes and powdered mummies’ fingers (which were, rather ghoulishly, ground up and sprinkled on to wounds).

We don’t stay long because we have our own magical elixirs to sample that night: the dishes of the Grand-Lucé’s chef. Having spent three years working in Lausanne in Switzerland under the three-Michelin-star Anne-Sophie Pic, 30-year-old Maxime Thomas has learnt to cook food that is among the most accomplished I’ve eaten in any luxury hotel, from his feather-light foie gras terrine with red-pepper chutney to his multilayered pistachio and apricot Opéra cake. We were the only guests at the château, so the meal was set up on a table outside, under the light of the moon and accompanied by singing cicadas, the house towering behind us and the formal gardens stretching out to the front. Spoilt, moi? Oh yes. For ever.