

NOBLE CLASS

A renovated 18th century château-turned-boutique hotel in France's Loire Valley sets a soaring new standard in unapologetic luxury.

By Laura Eckstein Jones

Picture a majestic estate, set on countless acres dotted with formal French gardens, a meandering white oak forest, orchards and priceless sculptures. Room after room is filled with rich layers of portraiture, antiques, handpainted custom wallpaper and period-appropriate decor. There are cavernous hallways, intimate dining rooms and thoughtful touches around every corner. And, it's quiet: You can hear footsteps and the rustling breeze.

This may sound like a French period-drama fantasy, and, in the best possible way, it kind of is. Luckily for us, Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé is a living, breathing place that combines the nostalgia and fantasy of the French countryside with impeccable, intuitive service and the contemporary comforts of today. Located southwest of Paris in quaint Le Grand-Lucé—the town is situated just outside the château gates, rather than miles away, which is unusual for the Loire Valley—the hotel is about 30 minutes from Le Mans, its closest city.

When my husband and I pull up to the perfectly symmetrical neoclassical estate, our jaws drop. In a word, the château is regal, with its history affirming that description. Commissioned by Baron Jacques Pineau de Viennay and completed in 1764, the extravagant summer palace represented the most audacious designs of the time. Exact replicas of statues at Versailles—a gift from King Louis XV—dot the



From top: Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé's restaurant is helmed by French-born executive chef Maxime Thomas, who serves everything from simple omelets to exquisite coursed meals; the impressive main staircase, covered in Manuel Canovas' Jardin du Luxembourg print, the quintessentially French King Suite Village View makes a major statement: The walls, windows and furniture don the delicious blue toile pattern.



grounds. During the Age of Enlightenment, luminaries such as Voltaire, Rousseau and Mozart were guests. The property served as a hospital for wounded British officers during World War I, and, during World War II, it housed paintings from the Louvre—they were hidden in a secret space that still exists under the former stables (now a ballroom).

Over time, the château was taken over by the French government, which restored the gardens beautifully, and was then sold to Los Angeles-based interior designer Timothy Corrigan, who masterfully renovated it for

use as his private home. In 2017, Corrigan sold the 45,000-square-foot property to Marcy Holthus, founder and CEO of Pilot Hotels.

Before opening the 17-room property this past June, San Diego-based Holthus was faced with the challenge of transforming a private residence into a hotel while also bringing her unique vision to life. Over the span of two years, Holthus and her team—including Paul Allen Design—succeeded in imbuing the pomp, authenticity and attention to detail that's expected in the manor of a nobleman, but with a refreshing twist. Think bespoke de Gournay wallpaper depicting a hunting scene behind benches covered in green mohair, or jewel-toned Pierre Frey wallpaper illustrating the first hot air balloon rides in France. Not only is the walkovering visually stunning, it's authentic: Hot air ballooning is—and was—a popular leisure activity in the area.

Our days at the property are peaceful. We spend time luxuriating in our large room, the oft-requested Le Grand-Lucé Suite (from \$1,097 per night)—a blue-and-white Cinderella dream that overlooks the vast grounds. Bonus: The well-appointed bathroom is stocked with Buly 1803 products; Hotel Château du Grand-Lucé is one of the only hotels besides Hôtel de Crillon in Paris that carries them. Plus, we enjoy the gardens, relax by the pool and eat some incredible meals.

Executive chef Maxime Thomas serves exquisite multicourse menus, including a roasted duck breast with cherries and turnips dish that I still dream about. Breakfast can be anything from a plate of fresh fruit and a still-warm croissant to an omelet. And if you want a simple burger, that's fine too.

The staff—who wear Stan Smith sneakers and a variety of vintage Louis Vuitton Pochettes—are both French and American, and all speak English. No request is too large. While there, our clothes are laundered; a zippy Volvo is procured so we can explore the area; and little notes and treats are left in our room every night. We even get to check out the impressive Baron Suite (high season rates from \$16,451 per night), a multiroom spread on the



first floor that includes a library, a salon chinois (handpainted by artist Jean-Baptiste Pillement in the chinoiserie style) and a marble-clad bathroom with its own garden view. We ask too many questions about how best to discover the Loire Valley and are so delighted with the generous suggestions—visiting magical Château de Chenonceau and the fairy-tale town that is Le Mans' old city are only a few. The whole experience feels intimate, personalized and truly exceptional. While we thought four nights might be too long, we could stay forever. Was it a dream? If so, I'm not ready to wake up. *Room rates from \$521 per night, buyouts upon request, chateaugrandluce.com* ■



Clockwise from top: With a remarkable view of the parterre in the formal garden, the King Room Garden View's walls have been covered in a Pierre Frey archival print, *Les Muses et le Lion*, which was originally created by Jean-Baptiste Huet around 1803; the King Room Garden View's bathroom features a grand casement window, *point de Hongrie* wood flooring, a marble shower, a claw-foot tub and loads of Buly 1803 bath and beauty products; the dining room is painted in a delightful pink shade; the hotel was designed by architect Mathieu de Bayeux and built from 1760 to 1764. Inspired by Versailles, the gardens were designed on a north-south axis.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PHOTOS COURTESY OF HOTEL CHÂTEAU DU GRAND-LUCÉ; BY ADAM LYNK; BY RIJAN PHOTOGRAPHY; BY ADAM LYNK