

Parisian style

By AMY LAUGHINGHOUSE
For the Journal-Constitution

Paris — Traveling in Paris is not the time to pinch pennies — or euros, as the case may be. “Paree,” mon chéri, is a city made for decadence. Here, it’s all about food, fashion and très chic accommodations.

A perfect day in Paris begins with a post-croissant shopping spree. There are plenty of stores to set your credit card smoking in the heart of Paris, particularly along the golden (or better make that platinum) triangle formed by the Champs-Élysées, Avenue George V and Avenue Montaigne. These tree-lined boulevards are flanked by imposing boutiques where doormen greet you with a “Bonjour, madame” and price tags have more numbers than your monthly mortgage statement.

Clustered at the corner of Avenue Montaigne and Rue Clément Marot, for instance, you’ll find Harry Winston jewelers, Max Mara, Louis Vuitton and Armani. The parade of couture marquees continues with Jimmy Choo, Pucci, Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana and Chanel — not to mention an entire block of Dior stores, including one shop devoted to toddlers and infant fashionistas. Need a fur coat for your 5-year-old? It’s yours for 2,185 euros (\$2,922), although if you don’t want to spoil your kid, let them slum it with a glittery “I Love Paris” wee T for a mere 143 euros (\$195).

Feeling a bit intimidated by the sophisticated shop assistants, who

▶ Please see **PARIS, L8**

Château de Villette: A fairy tale experience

By AMY LAUGHINGHOUSE
For the Journal-Constitution

Villette, France — When Voltaire and Lafayette dined within the honeyed stone walls of Château de Villette, they probably didn’t scarf down tomato and brie sandwiches off the paper they were wrapped in. But my humble sack lunch doesn’t detract from the silly thrill of sitting beneath a crystal chandelier



AMY LAUGHINGHOUSE / Special Sleep like royalty at Château de Villette, where some rooms have gilded headboards and overlook luxurious gardens.

lier amid the elaborate friezes of one of the first dedicated dining rooms in France.

The chateau’s owner, San Francisco-based real estate

▶ Please see **CHATEAU, L6**

U.S. Virgin Islands resorts

Where you won’t lift a finger

By TERESE LOEB KREUZER
Travel Arts Syndicate

Charlotte Amalie, Virgin Island — Sometimes, what a person needs most is to have a bellman whisk away heavy luggage while someone with a big smile offers a cool, moist towel and a glass of cold rum punch.

With some variations, that’s the welcome at both the Ritz-Carlton and the

are in the five-star luxury category, they are very different, and people who love one may not love the other.

Caneel Bay

The resort’s welcome begins in Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas at the dock where one of Caneel’s private boats waits to take guests to St. John. The luggage disappears. The drinks appear, and the

sailboat and walked on Caneel Beach’s soft white sand for the first time. They fell in love with the island’s steep slopes covered with lush tropical vegetation and its warm, turquoise blue seas ringed by beautiful beaches.

Rockefeller bought the 18th-century sugar plantation at Caneel Bay and then bought up around 5,000 acres of the 19-square-mile island. On Dec. 1,



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Château: Realize your elegant dreams

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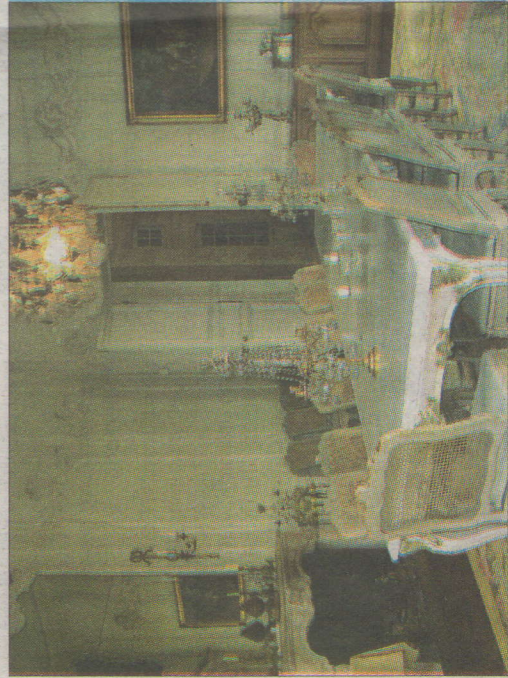
back until this evening. So for the moment, my husband and I have this sprawling 17th-century manse entirely to ourselves, and we're feeling like the super-rich who might think nothing of paying \$9,800 to have the château to themselves for three days. In fact, Decker has invited us for one night to her 18-bedroom, 18-bathroom country castle.

We arrived via taxi from Paris, just 30 miles away, catching our first glimpse of the château reflected in the placid waters of a lake as we wound our way through the narrow curving streets of the village of Villette. As our cab came to a halt before a pair of iron gates, they parted to reveal the château presiding over a sloping expanse of lawn framed by an allée of trees. I half expected a bewigged footman wearing epaulets and silken knee socks to unfurl a red carpet at my feet. We were greeted instead by the capable young caretaker and gardener, Sebastien Deubel, minus the white wig and livery but wearing a friendly smile that put us immediately at ease.

Deubel escorted us into the entrance hall, a soaring rotunda with a stone staircase worn smooth by centuries of slipped feet. Somehow, our battered canvas suitcases looked out of place among the gilded sconces and busts that gazed down from their stone pillars. But our attention was distracted by the grand salon



Photos by AMY LAUGHINGHOUSE / Special
San Francisco real estate agent Olivia Decker spent three years restoring and finding just the right furnishings for Château de Villette, about 30 miles from Paris. The property, which dates to the 17th century, features 18 bedrooms and 18 bathrooms.



IF YOU GO

Getting there

Château de Villette is about 30 miles from Paris. A one-way taxi ride is about \$95. We hired Abalys Taxi; phone: 06 08 50 21 75.

About the château

Group rental for the entire Château de Villette, which can accommodate up to 30 people, is 7,200 euro (about \$9,800) per night with a three-night minimum, or 49,000 euro (about \$67,622) per week; individuals cannot book a single room as you might do in a hotel. "Da Vinci Code" tours include six days and five nights at the château, shopping and visits to "Da Vinci Code" sites in Paris, at \$4,900 per person. A culinary program, which features seven days and six nights' lodging at the château, all meals, sightseeing tours, cooking classes and local transportation, costs \$6,900 per person. (A second culinary program includes five nights at Château de Villette, plus four nights at Château de Grimaldi in Aix-en-Provence, including lodging at both châteaux, meals and ground transportation at \$7,500 per person). www.frenchvacation.com, 415-435-1600.

beyond where tall french doors opened to a wide terrace overlooking a fountain featuring a bronze figure of Neptune.

The grounds, which encompass more than 180 acres of lakes, woods and gardens, were designed by André Le Nôtre, the mastermind behind the intricate gardens at Versailles. The château has been dubbed "le petite Versailles," because in addition to Le Nôtre's contribution, the home itself was constructed by a leading architect of King Louis XIV, Jules Hardouin-Mansart, who designed Versailles' famous Hall of Mirrors, the Queen's Staircase and Le Grand Trianon.

At first, it all feels too precious. I carefully wipe my shoes, skirt the carpets and keep my hands dutifully in my pockets, though I long to stroke the old stones. But as Deubel shows us around, from the 15th-century foundations below (complete with an "oubliette," or dungeon, which could come in handy for guests who skip out on their bill) to the sunlit dining room, the wood-paneled library and music room, we find that Château de Villette feels more like a home than a palace.

"Versailles is monumental in size. It was built to impress," notes Deubel. "But here, you have human dimensions. You feel comfortable."

Sure, the music room is furnished with silk-upholstered chairs and glittering fixtures that wouldn't have looked out of place two centuries ago, but a pair of flashy red maracas resting on a marble-top table and a songbook by the Beatles splayed atop the grand piano engender visions of boisterous sing-alongs. And in the salon where Sophie de Grouchy, an 18th-century beauty and one-time lover of Lafayette, entertained the greatest minds of her day, there are two comfortable sofas, a basket of fashion magazines and piles of books laden with sticky notes marking the pages where the famous château has earned a bit of ink.

Not only was it named in Dan Brown's runaway best-seller "The Da Vinci Code" as the home of Sir Leigh Teabing, but it also features prominently in the film star-

though its rooms are sumptuously appointed, owner Decker encourages guests to feel at home. Chefs, maids and butlers can be hired, or you might end up helping with dinner yourself.

here in this room.

Perhaps it's the normalcy of vegging in front of the television, but within hours of our arrival, we've gone from our "look, don't touch" mentality to foraging for a snack in one of the château's three kitchens. It's an intimate little hub, sandwiched between the dining room and the library, furnished with ancient brown appliances and a long slab of a country table. Not fancy, but delightfully cozy and warm.

Decker is quite happy for her guests to make themselves at home. When she

sweeps in a few hours later, casually tossing her purse on the stone table in the rotunda and kicking off her sandals beneath a sideboard in the dining room, she includes me in the dinner preparations. I set the table with gold chargers and her Versailles china (no more paper wrappers for us!) and light candles in the crystal candelabras.

Guests can hire a full complement of chefs, maids and butlers. But tonight, Decker, who teaches French, Italian and Chinese cooking classes at the château, whips up dinner herself. We linger for

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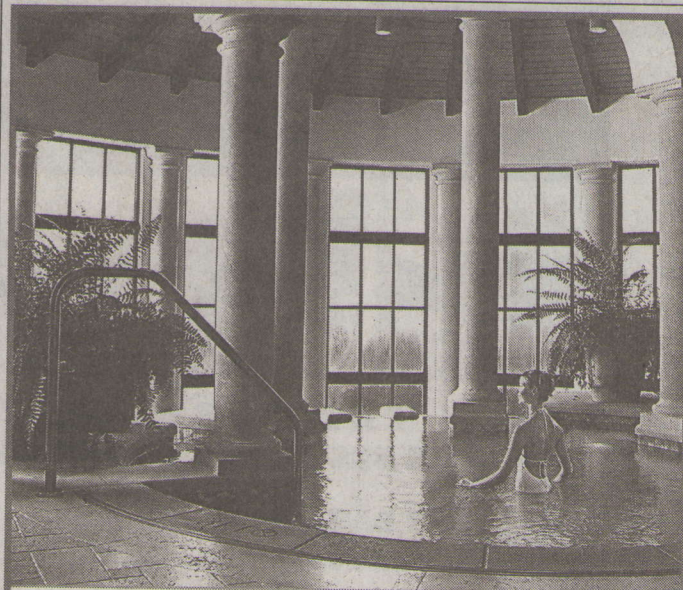
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Scenes from "The Da Vinci Code" were shot at the chateau. Guests can peruse the book or watch the film.

hours at the table, savoring prosciutto-wrapped melon, ginger-and-garlic beef stir-fry and Decker's mouth-watering chocolate mousse as she explains what led her to purchase the chateau in 1999 after visiting more than 30 properties around France.

Decker already owned the Chateau de Grimaldi in Aix-en-Provence, but she was looking for another one closer to Paris. "I wanted something light, bright and happy — no dark narrow staircases and hallways. And I didn't want a moat," she adds decisively, "which would breed mosqui-

toes in the summertime."

She spent three years restoring and furnishing the chateau, searching for period pieces and reproductions that befit the surroundings without making it feel stuffy. "It's elegant and beautiful, but I don't want you to feel like you're in a museum and can't put your feet up," she insists.

As the candles wax low and the feast dwindles in the wee hours of the morning, my husband and I climb the stone staircase to the second floor, where a long gallery gives way to bedrooms on

either side. "Choose any one you want," Decker says. So I make a beeline for a spacious boudoir overlooking the moonlit gardens below.

Tomorrow, my husband (Prince Charming) and I will return to Paris in our taxi, which I can't help but believe will turn into a pumpkin as we leave the gates. But tonight, slipping between the sheets of the vast bed with its gilded headboard, I feel like a princess, minus the pea beneath my comfy mattress. OK, so I'm mixing my fairy tale metaphors, but as guests here inevitably discover, Chateau de Villette is the realization of all those childhood fantasies rendered in silk tapes-tries and stone.

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