

Le B&B with its own Count and Countess

...and a macaw called Cacou

By Sarah Lucas

IF I OWNED a chateau, I'd want one like Chateau de la Barre, set in 100 acres of parkland on the borders of France's Loir-et-Cher and Sarthe. As aristocratic and elegant as its owners, the Count and Countess de Vanssay, the pale-yellow chateau has a surprising family history involving royals and revolutionaries. That's not unexpected, given that it has been passed from father to son since 1404. Each owner has left their mark. Now it's a B&B, but not as we know it.

Guy, the current Count, is a writer and wine connoisseur and does the flowers. Marnie, the American-born Countess, a former model, psychologist and headhunter, reminded me of legendary beauty Catherine Deneuve. Guy corrected me. Marnie's looks were far superior.

Together they run the 11-bedroom chateau at Conflans-sur-Anille on a bed-and-breakfast basis, but will occasionally serve a crystal-and-chandelier dinner. You can improve your French, learn the art of gold leafing or discover the local wine and cheeses during an evening in the vaulted cellars. Let the Countess know your requirements and she will efficiently fix things.

My daughter Flora and I came to stay for a weekend. After a courteous greeting from the Count and Countess, we were welcomed into the vestibule, with its 18th Century-inspired wall covering reflecting the days when gentlemen first travelled abroad and their discoveries appeared in sketches and on wallpaper – parrots, native peoples and superior-looking Western women.

An enormous vase, overflowing with

creamy gladioli, solidago and flaming chrysanthemums from the chateau garden, dominated a circular table. Behind, an Italian sedan chair rested to one side of a double door, a very sturdy bird cage to the other. Inside, Cacou, a turquoise and yellow macaw, noisily demanded: 'Look at me!'

It has taken about four years to create a home that feels cosily British but uses an audacious French palette. The Chambre Marin, with canopied bed and bath the size of the Thames, is in blue and gold. All the furniture is period and closely linked to the Vanssay family history.

In the Grand Salon, we sat on chairs made for the wedding of the Marquis de Vanssay in 1784, shortly before the French Revolution. The seats look newly embroidered, with their fantastic mix of original pinks, ochres and mauves. His bride's childhood toys, from the French Indies of the 1770s, are on display in another room.

One of the wonderful things about driving in France is how empty the roads are, even in the height of summer. Quite a relief, as the Countess had arranged for us to go for a spin in a Maitret car. For the Clarksons of this world, that would be a 1956 Citroen Traction. This iconic brand had appealed to both the Germans and the French Resistance. Flora and I were very taken by the spacious interior and stylish, navy paintwork. Information on the dashboard was sensibly kept to a minimum: off/on, petrol, speed. The car will travel happily at just over 50mph, though, due to the absence of synchromesh gears, power-assisted steering and hydraulic brakes, I can't say I had my usual touch.

Fortunately Olivier, the owner, took over as chauffeur for the Chateau de Valmer, near Amboise, where the Countess had organised a ride in a hot-air balloon.

The only thing she hadn't been able to fix was the weather. So Countess Alix de Saint Venant, whose husband produces an extremely palatable Vouvray, showed us round Valmer's 400-year-old garden instead. We could only imagine what the rows of white salvia, planted for her daughter's wedding, and surrounding vineyards would have looked like from the air.

The gentle, unassuming landscape of the Loir valley (the Loir is a tributary of France's longest river, the Loire) is relatively undiscovered. True, you won't find the grand symbols of royal rule that line the Loire – Chambord and Chenonceaux



GETTING THERE

Chateau de la Barre is available through www.frenchconnections.co.uk (01580 819303), specialists in holiday rentals, gites and hotels in France (Property ID 5244). Breaks are from £995 for two people, which includes two nights' accommodation, champagne welcome, candlelit dinner for two with wine, English breakfast and a one-hour balloon flight or two days' hire of a vintage Citroen car. Exclusive use of the chateau for three days, for up to 16 people, costs £1,900 a day. **Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) offers direct flights from Stansted or Dublin to Tours, 35 miles away.

JOIE DE VIVRE: The Countess de Vanssay with Cacou the macaw and her chateau

them, in the grand Salle à Manger. The aristocracy part was the sheer size of the room and a table a mile long. And the family? Marnie and Guy cooked themselves. It was fantastic and formally

being two of the greatest – but there are more modest chateaux and gardens that are equally pleasing, minus the crowds. We were overwhelmed by the scent of roses in the Renaissance gardens at La Possoniere, birthplace of Ronsard, France's revered 'prince of poets'.

Sasnières lived up to its soubriquet 'The most English of the French Gardens'. A perfect lawn surrounded a spring-fed pond, and the walled garden offered an exuberant outpouring of favourites such as lavender, campanula and potentilla.

In 1516, King Francis I brought that great Renaissance genius

Leonardo da Vinci to Amboise. He gave Leonardo the Chateau du Clos Luce and a pension, and asked little more of him than the pleasure of hearing him talk.

The house is bursting with invention. Leonardo's thoughts on ideal cities, the human body, painting and warfare are all there, in model form. It's a Renaissance theme park with Renaissance food. We enjoyed lemon-fattened pullet and potted pear and spice cake.

The Count and Countess de Vanssay managed to make us feel both like members of the aristocracy and their family. We had a candlelit dinner with

informal. Crayfish, deep purple beef and chocolate mousse.

During dinner Guy disappeared, concerned about a couple who'd gone cycling and not yet come back. But they were all right. Later he and Marnie waited up for a party of music lovers who finally got in at 3am.

The de Vanssays were up, polite and immaculately turned out, for breakfast next day. 'It's so unusual,' observed Flora, 'and not a bit like a hotel.'

Take a pinch of easy English aristocracy, add French bombast, a vintage Citroen and stunning chateau and you have the perfect recipe for joie de vivre.

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LATE DEALS OF THE WEEK

BARGAIN BEST SHORT BREAK
THE four-star Royal Lancaster Hotel overlooking London's Hyde Park has superior double rooms from £100 a night until April 26 and is giving away a £100 voucher per couple to spend on food and beverages in the hotel. Call 020 7262 6737 quoting '£100 for £100'.

BARGAIN BEST FERRY
LD LINES (0844 576 8830, www.ldlines.com) has cut-price short breaks until June on its cross-Channel ferries. Prices start at £28 return for car plus four on its Dover-Boulogne route.

BARGAIN BEST HOTEL
A WEEK at the four-star royal Kenz Hotel in the Tunisian resort of Port El Kantaoui costs from £259 half-board if you book online at www.portlanddirect.co.uk. The deal includes return flights from Gatwick departing April 15 and transfers.

BARGAIN BEST SELF-CATERING
BOOK by April 1 and you can spend two weeks in Florida this June from £469 per person. You will stay in a four-bedroom Classic Home with its own pool in Orlando, a 20-minute

drive from Walt Disney World Resort. The price includes return flights from Manchester or Gatwick and minivan rental. Visit www.travelcitydirect.com.

BARGAIN BEST CAMPING
TAKE the children to Brittany in April from £199 per family if you book by April 2. You will stay in a two-bedroom mobile home at Camping Ty-Nadan at Arzano and the deal includes return ferry crossings from Dover to Calais for car and passengers. Activities include canoeing and archery. Visit www.canvas.holidays.co.uk or call 0870 192 1159.