

WISH

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Castle keep

Serenity meets history in a chateau transformed to offer the delights of a luxury resort within a working estate

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ew things are as compelling as when something very old is made new again in a way that convincingly honours its past and beautifully celebrates its evolution. In the world of travel, not many truly successful examples exist. Domaine des Etangs, a remarkable exercise in cultural, architectural and agricultural preservation, is one of them – a place that deserves to be known well beyond the borders of the rather hidden and uncelebrated French *department* in which it's secreted.

A word about that *department*. Charente is east of Bordeaux, north-west of the Dordogne, and don't feel bad if you've never heard of it. For reasons to do with regional politics, a high-speed train service from Paris to Limoges (across the border, in Limousin) was never built, so much of Charente – a gentle, rolling green landscape – remains largely off travellers' radar. This has been all to the good. It is relatively unchanged from what it was 70 or 80 years ago: uninterrupted miles of fallow fields, pastureland, ash and birch forest, and villages that are little more than neat groupings of a few crossroads, their houses clad in milky-blue shutters and capped with lichen-coated tiles.

Hidden away in the woods near the market town of Massignac, Domaine des Etangs comprises 1000ha punctuated by several small lakes, across which animals both domesticated (elegant Limousin cattle) and wild (deer, fox, otter, beaver, wild boar) roam. At its physical and spiritual centre is a small but perfectly formed chateau, some of whose elements date from medieval times. For centuries it was the ancestral home of the knights of Chasteigner de la Roche-Posay, but in the 1980s it was acquired by Didier Primat, a descendant of the Schlumberger family (billionaires by the mid-20th century, thanks to their invention of pioneering oilfield technology) and one of the wealthiest men in France. Primat set about restoring several of the *métairies* (the various farm buildings) scattered across the estate, some of them with foundations almost as old as the chateau, installing mezzanines to accommodate airy bedrooms, and adding indulgent bathrooms and sleek kitchens with hand-worked joinery and flagstone floors.

When Primat died in 2008, his daughter Garance Primat inherited the Domaine. The triumph it is today – equal parts working farm estate, luxury resort, Michelin-starred culinary destination and repository of world-class art – is down to her vision. That these elements work together beautifully to tell a unique story speaks to her eye for talent, in everything from designers to chefs and gardeners, but also to her abiding passion for the place.

The Domaine has 29 "keys": seven suites in the chateau, four in the neighbouring *longère* – a traditional farm building, long and low, that also houses the breakfast room and lovely Dyades restaurant, as well as a small concept store – and 18 more in the six cottages across the estate, which are catered to by the Domaine's kitchens. All the elements of an ultra-exclusive resort are present: spa and fitness centre, fine- and casual-dining venues, indoor and outdoor pools, a tennis court, and extensive kids' zones. The rooms are vast, with indulgent bathrooms cast in golden stone and warm local woods. The grounds are kept without being manicured; from a chaise in front of the spa, across the lake you might spot beavers tinkering industriously, or a clutch of Primat's prized Limousin cattle (kept for breeding, not food), their shaggy coats glowing copper in the sun.

What sets Domaine des Etangs apart from – and above – most of the competition is the thoughtfulness with which these conventional resort elements have been interpreted. As Primat herself is wont to say, no one there is looking to reinvent the wheel; the goal is to manifest a quintessence of the surroundings, in all their bounty and history – flora and fauna, land and sky. The key to success was conscripting one of the finest designers in France – Isabelle Stanislas, whom Macron tapped to reinvigorate the Elysée Palace – and the world-class craftsmen to match.

In the chateau itself, the seven suites are named after the planets of our solar system, with jaw-dropping art curated and arranged in each to reference, overtly or obliquely, this celestial theme throughout the building's two sitting rooms, library and smoking



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Opening page: **View of the chateau across the lake at dawn.** Clockwise from opposite: **the entrance hall; the attic playground; sample fare; farmhouse cottage; pool; the 'floating' tennis court**



room. Works range from photographs by Thomas Ruff and Dieter Appelt, to exquisite planetary and constellation studies by the French artist Caroline Corbasson – with, in between, vintage *Star Wars* posters and Picassos, and even original Hergé-signed *Tin Tin* cartoons. Turrets have been hollowed and beds placed strategically beneath so guests can look straight up into the intricate cross-bracing patterns of the beams as they circle up. The entire top floor of the chateau is a playroom of utter fantasy, calibrated to delight all ages – giant flat screens and foosball, a billiards table and chests filled with extravagant dress-up kit, and enough space to roller skate if you wanted to.

The spa, next to a whispering stream, is in the estate's former mill, which for centuries produced walnut oil; at the centre of the couples' suite are the original mill stone and workings, encased in glass. The relaxation area boasts a mural, rendered in gold filament, of flowering vines trailing up the walls and across the ceiling, bowering the space in peace and glinting in the rippling light reflected from the water's edge. The gym is in a conservatory, its treadmills and ellipticals set between lush arrangements of potted plants. The tennis court is built over the lake – "floating", as it were, with a view back over the chateau's lawns, where works by Richard Long and Ugo Rondinone punctuate the landscape.

This is Domaine des Etangs's unique selling point: how ably refinement and delight are kept in constant dialogue, inside and outside. In the Laiterie, Primat's beautiful art exhibition space, are two libraries, built on mezzanines at either end of the cavernous space. One is a library of the "past" (featuring antique bookcases and a clubby vibe, and lined with tomes about nature); the other, a library of the "future" (showcasing an altogether sleeker aesthetic and a catalogue with an art-culture bent). It's impressive and beautiful, but no more so than the forest across the lake, just outside, at dawn – delicate fingers of mist reaching between the ash trees, the water reflecting the sky's rosy-pink, the egrets calling. The magic is in the place itself: an old castle in a hidden corner of central France, with intriguing new stories to tell. ☺