

Un Sérénipité



Magnifique!



Tucked away in beautiful French countryside, about 100 miles from Paris and only 30 miles from the hallowed Le Mans 24 Hours circuit, is a truly magnificent secret.

Rick Wilson had the great honour of being invited by the Count and Countess de Vanssay to their delightfully aristocratic Chateau and sampled the most incredible hospitality....



Just prior to the preliminary testing weekend in May 2003 for the following month's Le Mans 24 Hours car race, an email came completely out of the blue. The Count is passionately enthusiastic about the Le Mans event and had been a fan of this 'magazine' for many years prior to getting in touch, wondering if I would like to write an article for them.

The Chateau de la Barre has been in the hands of the Vanssay family since 1404 and is situated right on the route of the very first 'Grand Prix' held near Le Mans in 1906 on what is now the "D1" road between St.Calais and La Ferté Bernard.

The Chateau has history stretching back many centuries, surviving the French Revolution intact, and the period feel continues on the interior too.

But the Chateau is so much more than a snapshot of history, Guy and Marnie de Vanssay have turned this splendid family residence into the ultimate place to stay too. With 100 acres of stunning walks and woodland, this is surely the perfect way to escape from the pressures of modern life and sample one of luxury, elegance and relaxation of years gone by instead.

Described by 'The Times' as "a taste of life as a pre-Revolutionary aristocrat", this is just one of a string of compliments by representatives of many prestigious publications who have been as fortunate as I to taste the "perfect recipe for joie de vivre".

Henri Pescarolo, four-time winner of the famous 24 hour event and now eponymous racing team owner, has even been known to visit and experience the exquisite cuisine and unsurpassable array of wines. Guy is not only a Le Mans enthusiast of epic proportions he is also the most knowledgeable person on wines that I have ever met.



My hosts' attention to detail was superb, the food without equal and the surroundings outstanding. I felt more than welcome, to the extent that by the end of my all too brief stay, it felt like I had known my hosts for years, not hours.

I have since revisited many times and now consider Guy and Marnie not as hosts but as friends, and the Chateau as my occasional country home!

So now onto those all important first impressions and that wonderful May weekend in 2003....

From the moment you turn off the main road, you pass "La Barre" itself, which is a small toll house (la barre, hence the name).

As you wind down the narrow track towards the Chateau, it is almost as if any sense of time is pleasantly fading away. You could almost be travelling by real horse power, not the mechanical variety, as without your modern reference point you could be at any moment in the last few hundred years, such is the beauty with which the Chateau has been lovingly restored and maintained.

After a long day in the pit lane and with another strenuous one to follow, I had finally arrived at the Chateau ready for relaxation and was greeted by my hosts. I was already in awe at my surroundings.

Showing me to my incredible room, Guy did offer the comforting words "don't worry, all the ghosts are friendly"!

Everything about the room was just perfect, the atmosphere, the décor and the facilities. The room was filled with stunning period furniture; the bed was apparently genuine 18th century; Guy assured me that the mattress was somewhat newer!



Histoire de la Famille

Originally from Brittany, as the family coat of arms indicates, the Vanssay family settled in Vancé, in the county of Maine, Pays de La Loire, during the 9th century, and remained there for 5 centuries.



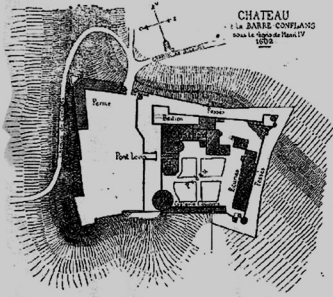
Members of this family accompanied William the Conqueror to Hastings, as mentioned in the Domesday Book.

During the early part of the 19th century, some of the Vanssays followed Napoleon as far as Russia. Later, around 1870, the Count de Vanssay was private secretary to the Count de Chambord, the last legitimate heir to the French throne.



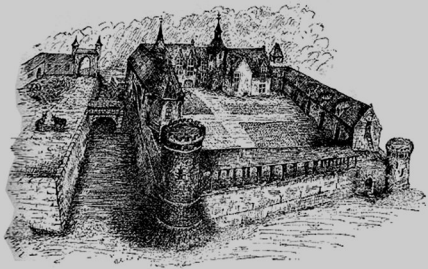
Histoire du Château

In 1404 the Manoir de La Barre came into the Vanssay family by marriage. The château was originally a court of justice and a toll collection centre, hence its name "La Barre".



During the 16th century, Marin de Vanssay fortified and expanded his chateau. A wing was added during the 17th century and the interior refurbished in the 18th century.

Throughout the French revolution, Chateau de La Barre remained intact.



Thereafter, Chateau de La Barre was substantially restored, blending centuries of architectural changes.



All the bedrooms and suites give a fantastic glimpse into the past but with just the right concessions to modern living. So much so that many of the top racing teams have chosen the Chateau de la Barre for their stay during race week, including Mercedes, Ascari, Cadillac and Audi UK to name just a few in recent years.

Once settled in and having availed myself of the wonderfully powerful shower (one of those modern concessions that I just can't live without), I then embarked on a pre-dinner stroll around the grounds, discovering remains of ancient fortification and a wonderful freshness in the air that only comes from being away from the hustle and bustle. The gardens include four simply beautiful quadrants surrounding a fountain - Italian, Japanese, American and Inca - and are lovingly maintained.



I could have carried on walking for hours, but an earlier promise of a glass of Scotland's finest drew me back to the Chateau.

Guy's English is far, far better than my French (I do try though!) but thankfully our wonderful Countess is Anglo-American so no language barriers prevailed!

Given our common passion for the car event, we had plenty to talk about but I get the impression this would have been the case anyway even if we didn't share a love of 'Le Mans'!

After a dining experience the likes of which I have rarely experienced, with each course accompanied by its own perfectly complementing wine from the impressive cellars of the Chateau, our hosts, fellow guests and I retired to the sitting room; very spacious and comfortable, and filled with heirlooms and huge portraits of family members of ages past. I really did feel like a member of the aristocracy for a night!

When finally we did retire, I bid my fellows farewell as I knew I would be away to the circuit too early for them and returned to my room, mindful that even friendly ghosts might prevent my much-needed slumber. Thankfully, the days exertions coupled with the fine wines, food and malt, not to mention the fresh air, all gently eased me off into a wonderfully relaxing sleep to awaken refreshed and ready for a full day's track action the following day.

To Guy and Marnie, I would like to say a huge "thank you" and to anyone reading this and contemplating a special place to stay in the heart of France, I cannot recommend highly enough what an experience staying at the Chateau de la Barre is.

As I slowly drove up the driveway that morning, I had a real feeling of regret that I would not be returning later that day, but vowed to return again many times in the future and I have!



For more on the Chateau de la Barre, including history, details of rooms, many more photos & surprisingly affordable pricing, visit the website at <http://www.chateaudelabarre.com>

Or Guy and Marnie can be contacted direct:
via e-mail at info@chateaudelabarre.com
or by telephone on 00 33 (0)2 43 35 00 17

Château de la Barre