



# NOBLESSE OBLIGE

To stay at the Château de Canisy, in Normandy, France, is to live like a lord—only far more comfortably.

By Julian Sancton

**A**mong the hundreds of artworks and heirlooms displayed at the Château de Canisy, in lower Normandy, France, is an enormous family tree. Its branches are more numerous and its foliage more lush than any genealogical chart you've likely ever seen. Both Count Denis de Kergorlay and his wife, Marie Christine—the lord and lady of the house—can trace their

lineages to the Norsemen who came to the region (hence “Normandy”) from what is now Denmark and fought alongside William the Conqueror at the battle of Hastings in 1066. And for the past thousand years or so, Canisy has remained in the family.

But as any old European aristocrat will tell you, without the feudal system to keep its larders stocked, its hearth heated, and its taxes paid, the most

fairy-tale-worthy castle can quickly turn into a cold, lifeless liability. There are few good options for any family that wants to hold on to such a grand estate. You can shutter it when you're not around, but there's something creepy about a 56-room castle lying empty for much of the year, like *The Shining* written by the Brothers Grimm. You can rent it out for weddings and TV shoots (à la Highclere Castle of

Though elements of the Château de Canisy, above, date to the tenth century, the main structure was built centuries later.

*Downton Abbey* fame in Hampshire, England). Or you can lease it to a luxury hotel chain like Relais & Châteaux, which could keep it occupied and profitable but will likely standardize away all those beloved memories.

The de Kergorlays chose a hybrid approach, converting Canisy into a hotel that feels nothing like a hotel. There is no check-in desk or concierge service. Instead, there is the Jeeves-like general manager, Patrick Hilyer, a Francophile Brit with a gift for materializing only when you need him. There is no set menu, either. Instead you'll chat with Canisy's rotund, Rabelaisian chef, Christian Small, who will customize healthful riffs on classic French cuisine using ingredients drawn from the two-square-mile estate's farms. (Unlike the hydroponic roof gardens of so many hip boutique hotels these days, Canisy's three farms have been on the grounds for centuries.) And if she's not staying at her home in Paris, a three-hour drive to the southeast, Marie Christine may join you for dinner.

She'll tell you all about the paintings in the dining room, from the magnificent hunting tableau by Dutch Old Master Frans Snyders, to portraits of the young Marquis de Faudoas and his bride, residents of Canisy just before the French Revolution, who escaped the guillotine by the powder of their wigs. She'll say that Montaigne supposedly brokered a meeting at the château between the Catholic Henri III and the future Henri IV, a Protestant, which helped end the bloody wars of religion in the late 1500s. The celebrated 19th-century essayist Alexis de Tocqueville, a cousin of the de Kergorlays, was a Canisy regular.

"This is not a place for people who don't love history," says Marie Christine. In 1994, Canisy hosted American World War II veterans who had come for the 50th anniversary of D-day, returning to the beaches where they had fought. (Omaha Beach is an hour's drive away.) Some would have remembered when Canisy served as

General Omar Bradley's regional headquarters after U.S. troops ousted the Nazi officers who had commandeered the castle. Japan's Crown Princess Masako, who stayed at Canisy on her way back from seeing nearby

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Mont-Saint-Michel, shared an interest in sagas of succession. Chinese guests, meanwhile, tend to ask pointed questions about how a society recovers from revolution.

**M**arie Christine, petite and energetic, gets misty-eyed when she speaks of her ancestors, especially the trauma they suffered during the French Revolution. (Canisy legend has it that, during the Terror of the 1790s, a resourceful servant kept the sansculottes from seizing his absent masters' property by plying them with booze from the château's ample cellars.) Yet for a descendant of some of the most illustrious families in France—including that of Napoleon's first wife, Joséphine—Marie Christine exhibits few outward signs of aristocratic entitlement. After one aperitif, she switches from the formal *vous* pronoun to the friendly *tu*. And while she was to the manor born (to be clear, not this one), she's been working all her adult life. She started out assisting luxury magnate François Pinault, one of France's wealthiest men, and is now a lawyer for

the celebrity glossy *Paris Match*.

When Denis inherited Canisy, in 1976, the 29-year-old count was, in Marie Christine's words, a "baba-cool." A hippie. He wore his hair long and traveled to Cambodia to protest human rights abuses. He showed little interest in his ancestral fortune. After the death of his father, he instituted an open-door policy with all of his baba-cool buddies (including frequent guest Joan Baez), hosting lavish weekends and never charging anyone a centime.

He and Marie Christine married in 1989. With more of a concern for sustainability, she realized before he did that they would need to make major adjustments, including charging guests, if they planned on passing Canisy on to their children. To paraphrase *The Leopard*: For things to remain the same, everything had to change. Beginning with the castle itself.

The property, as she first encountered it, was a cold place in every sense of the word, ill adapted to modern standards of comfort and hospitality. There were only four bathrooms in the entire château. During the winter, the family would be confined to the dark medieval wing, where rooms were smaller and cheaper to heat.

"We had to do a maximum of construction and improvements not only to be able to host but also to allow future generations to have something

that met the norms," says Marie Christine. Starting in 2000, she undertook the most dramatic renovation Canisy had seen since the Renaissance. The estate is listed as a national landmark, so Marie Christine couldn't modify the exterior. And indeed, the core of the château, including the dining halls and circular chamber-music room, remains as it has for generations, the same furniture on the floor and paintings on the wall. But in the wings and upper floors she added mirrors and brightened the color scheme to allow light to bounce around

**ACCESS**  
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Rooms from \$310 to \$610. "We want to keep it a family home, which means we can't let in just anyone," says Marie Christine de Kergorlay. To reserve, email her at [marie@chateaudecanisy.com](mailto:marie@chateaudecanisy.com) and mention CENTURION.

COURTESY CHÂTEAU DE CANISY



and sweep away the mustiness.

All 27 bedrooms were beautifully redone in styles ranging from Baroque to Art Deco. Each room is named after a page of family history—Joséphine, Tocqueville, Marie Antoinette—and decorated with period-appropriate artwork from the de Kergorlays' museum-worthy collection. Marie Christine fitted each room with amenities that Denis's austere parents would have considered frivolous luxuries, such as bathtubs. These, it turns out, offer one of the most indulgent pleasures at Canisy: a bath overlooking the majestic gardens. Several are forged in copper by local artisans who also make some the most refined kitchenware you can find.

Marie Christine's next order of business was creating spaces in which to have fun, a concept that seemed foreign to Canisy's previous occupiers. These included a bar, a billiard room,

and a nightclub complete with a *Saturday Night Fever* light-up dance floor. One of the reception halls became a stage on which the de Kergorlays' children, Marie-Victoire and Henry-Louis, performed plays by Beaumarchais and Anouilh, sometimes directed by prestigious friends from the theater world.

One has the sense that the de Kergorlays made these changes as much for their children (now in their mid-20s) as for their future guests. As a result, staying at Canisy feels like visiting a long-lost aristocratic branch of your family; like being viscount for a weekend, except with the benefit of heating and double-paned windows.

"This doesn't exist anywhere else in France," Marie Christine says of Canisy's ambience. "In the châteaux that I know, you have to wear four sweaters and socks to bed or you're shivering. That's how I sleep when I visit friends."

**O**n my last day, after a long walk through the sprawling gardens, I returned to my room to pack. I heard a knock at the door. It was Marie-Victoire, the de Kergorlays' beautiful daughter, who had just arrived from London, where she works as a marketer for a Chinese hotel consultancy firm. (She also helps manage what little publicity Canisy seeks out.) Her cheeks were flushed, and she was out of breath: She had been running around the property to say hello and goodbye. (Only Patrick seems to know exactly where you are at all times.)

She returns to Canisy about once a month. Each time she's home, she says, it feels the same as when she was a child. "To ensure that the château stays in the family," she says, "it would have been better for us to close the château and open it whenever we're here. But a castle in which nobody lives is so sad—we did this so that the castle lives." ♦

Above: A family tree on display at Canisy. The de Kergorlays can track their lineage back to the Vikings.