

BACK TO VERSAILLES

It's time to renew your acquaintance with the "château des châteaux"

You know that, even as you stand on the steps and focus, you're doomed to failure. There's no way your trusty digital camera can do justice to the superlatives of Versailles. Take some 550,000 square feet of palace set in 1,900 acres of grounds. Add twenty-nine miles of trellises, fifty fountains and an army of stone nymphs and satyrs, and it's clear that what you really need is a film crew. Preferably one primed to tell a story of irresistible drama, and one under the direction of one of Hollywood's sharpest talents.

And, lo, your wish has been granted. Last spring, Sofia Coppola ("Lost in Translation") began shooting her latest movie, "Marie Antoinette," on location in Versailles. The access granted was unrivaled and, for a brief moment, "empty" interiors came alive again with powdered wigs and rustling silks. Set to be released in October (U.S.), the movie stars Kirsten Dunst as the Austrian princess in her salad days. Arguably, though, the real star of the piece will be Versailles itself. For, as this grand old dame of 300-odd years embarks on a multi-million dollar makeover, the improbable has become fact. Versailles has become cool.

Don't take my word; a glance back at last year's diary confirms the fact. For starters, there was the one-off live hosting of the Fête de la Musique. Next came the Fête du Cinéma; then there was Live 8, with Bartabas' equestrian extravaganza hot on its heels. October saw Versailles still scintillating into the small hours for the Nuit Blanche festivities. Spanning high aesthetics and popular culture, the place hasn't dazzled so much in centuries. And, though this year's program may be a little less frenetic, the many developments within the estate itself will be enough to keep Versailles in the limelight for a while to come.

So which came first, homegrown cool, or Coppola? Christine Albanel, Presidente de l'Établissement Public de Versailles, is best placed to answer that. "Let's say 'Marie Antoinette' was a very welcome factor for us," she confirms. "We saw it as a real stroke of luck, an opportunity to be able to project some of what is to be seen at Versailles."

Therein lies the conundrum Madame Albanel inherited when she took over the helm of Versailles in July 2003. In a typical year, around three million visitors flock to the château, some seventy per cent of them from overseas. Traditionally, that has meant that the principal attractions such as the State Apartments have suffered from visitor bottlenecks during high summer, while other parts of the huge estate have languished, out of bounds, unexploited or unknown save to the relative few.

The answer is "L Grand Versailles," a rolling program of renovation, modification and re-organization that will run through to 2010. "It will transform the aspect of the château and the way in which we welcome visitors," says Madame Albanel. "The result will be a visit that is richer, more interesting, altogether more pleasant."

The exciting news is that it's already underway, and on several fronts. In March this year, the statue of Louis XIV on horseback was winched away for restoration, enabling the necessary overhaul of the ankle-turning cobblestones at the entrance. In due course, the Royal Gate will be replaced, and the enclosed courtyard will look much as it did in the days of the Ancien Régime. That, in turn, will pave the way for the kind of re-think needed to cater to twenty-first-



century visitor numbers. An appropriately sized ticketing area is in the cards and ultimately, maybe, a restaurant in the north wing (because even culture-vultures get hungry).

In the meantime, other projects are already coming to fruition. Last December, along with many others, I was lured back to the Hall of Mirrors—my first visit in years—to see it returned to its former glory. Part of a 12E million restoration sponsored by the construction company Vinci, it has taken eighteen months and a team of sixty restorers to reach this halfway mark.

Already, the result is gratifyingly splendid. Freshly applied gold leaf gleams from ornate stucco, and the famously high mirrors have gotten their period luster back. The highlight is the freshness of Le Brun's painted ceiling, a triumph of vibrancy and propaganda celebrating the Sun King's brightest moments. Look out for the intense blue hue of lapis lazuli. It was the most expensive of pigments, and it seems its lavish use here was almost as symbolic as it was artistic.

At the far end of the grounds, however, a quiet revolution is taking place. This was where the last real queen of Versailles escaped the

stifling rigors of court protocol, where she could entertain company of her own choosing and follow the dictates of her own taste. And whatever Marie Antoinette's shortcomings, taste was something she didn't lack. (It's also where she gained her reputation for excessive spending—and we all know how that ended.)

The Petit Trianon (shown) was a gift from her husband in 1774. "Madame, vous aimez les fleurs," Louis XVI is reported to have said. "Je vous offre un bouquet." What girl could resist? Not Marie Antoinette, who set about furnishing it to the latest standards of fashion and convenience; witness her graceful, duck-egg-blue salon with its ingenious moving mirrors designed to render tête-à-têtes all the more cozy.

Now, with funding from Swiss watchmakers Breguet (whose founder, as it happens, was patronized by the queen), the Petit Trianon's interiors are at last being treated to the TLC they deserve. Tapestries, colors and décor are being reinstated, and if the work lives up to its promise, visitors won't just be offered cool authenticity but something more, a sense of the original personality that lay behind it.

The story doesn't end there. Close by, Marie Antoinette's cherished Jardin Anglais has been neglected over the centuries, and it suffered still more during the terrible storm of 1999. At present, the dandelions still sprout, but their days are numbered. This summer, the garden will open to the public along the same artfully rustic lines as its original concept. Picture a landscape-in-miniature; winding streams, cascades, lakes, the colonnaded Temple d'Amour. If it was a queen's elegant rebellion against the regimented lines favored by her predecessors, it was also the very last word in late-eighteenth-century garden design.

It's part of an ambitious restoration project embracing the Pavillon Français, the Belvedere and Grotto, even the Queen's Theater, where Marie Antoinette indulged her acting talents with the Troupe des Seigneurs. You need no excuse for a stroll around the Queen's Hamlet, her über-fantasy village with its thatched roofs and whisky carp, but soon you'll be able to enjoy it as part of a wider picture of Versailles' past. The Domaine de Marie-Antoinette opens this July. "Together, the whole ensemble will give a sense of her affections, her privacy, her life as an individual," Madame Albanel sums up.

I suggest Versailles is getting in touch with its feminine side again. She agrees: "On one side, you have the Versailles of kings. On the other, there's a more charming experience, reflecting the quality of daily life." Vive la difference, I say.

—By Amanda MacKenzie

•Château de Versailles: open daily except Mon, 9:00am-6:30pm (5:30pm in winter). Gardens, Grand and Petit Trianon: open daily. Tel: 1-30-83-78-00. Site: www.chateauversailles.fr. Advance transport and tickets available from SNCF train stations.

BACK TO FONTAINEBLEAU

Great French châteaux never get old; they just get better

"What's new?" You might think that's a strange question to put to the curator of one of France's great châteaux. ("What's old?" is more in his line of business, surely?) It's just that I can't seem to help myself. I asked the question this summer at Versailles, and now here I am doing the same all over again at Fontainebleau. There is, though, some method in my madness. For behind the venerable facades, it's the constant cycle of effort—the renovations, the re-interpretations, the insights, the discoveries—that keeps such remarkable places fresh and accessible. It's what keeps us coming back; rather like meeting up with the sort of friend who just gets better as the years roll on.

Journalistic impertinence or no, Yves Carlier takes my question in his stride. In his office he ushers me over to a photo album to show me the startling before-and-after images of what is to be the centerpiece of "Le Boudoir de Marie-Antoinette." Running from November 7th to February 5th, the exhibition focuses on two pieces of furniture executed by Jean-Henri Riesener for the queen, and judged so exquisite that the entire room was decorated to suit.

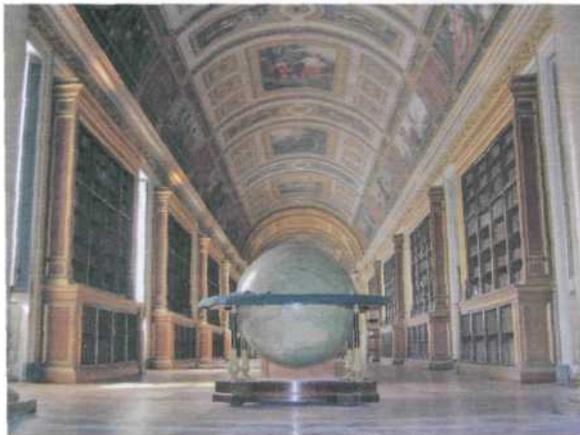
For years, the pieces have languished under layers of grime, their mother-of-pearl inlay gray and lusterless, the gold and silver-plated beading tarnished to black. Recently, a painstaking clean-up operation has restored their dazzle. "They are quite extraordinary," says Carlier, with the expert's gift for understatement. For the first time, visitors will have the chance to examine them close up as never before, and then have the same privileged view of the décor designed to accommodate them, in all its extreme delicacy. It promises to be a jewel of an exhibition.

But you mean to say you didn't know Marie-Antoinette had a boudoir at Fontainebleau? Such a feature, explains Carlier, was a necessity in a royal palace, a private sanctuary in an otherwise relentless drill of public exposure. I picture her flippantly kicking off satin slippers. Carlier is more circumspect. "There aren't many witness accounts at Fontainebleau, though at Versailles we know the boudoir was where she received Mme Vigée-LeBrun, her portraitist, her fashion advisers, her hairdresser," he explains. "And at that time, there was a staircase connecting these rooms with her children's, so this was really a place where the family could retreat and be together."

This glimpse into the domestic, the familial comes as a surprise to me, and yet it shouldn't, because it goes to the heart of Fontainebleau. It was a right royal palace, to be sure. In its eight centuries of existence, births, marriages, intrigue—even an emperor's abdication—have

taken place here. But more than that, it was a royal home. François 1er thought of it as just that. Napoleon loved the place, recalling it with a mixture of pride and affection as "the true home of kings, the house of the centuries," from his exile on St Helena. "What is special about Fontainebleau is its extraordinary continuity of occupancy," comments Carlier. "It's one of the rare places where you have an impression of how life went on in a royal palace. We're also among one of France's best furnished châteaux."

Although the keep dates back to the 12th century, the château as we know it really took form in the 1530s, under François 1er. Thanks to his patronage of Italian renaissance artists, Fontainebleau lent its name to an artistic movement in its own right. It also helped establish his



reputation as a royal style-setter (so much so, that an envious Henry VIII of England sent over his spy, Sir Thomas Wallop, to take notes). The grand gallery, with its coffered walnut ceiling and captivating frescos, bears his stamp. You'll find him elsewhere, too: in the ballroom, for example, though it is his son Henri II's monogram (along with those of his wife and his mistress) that's entwined here in bronze and gilt.

From then until the end of the Ancien Régime, Fontainebleau stayed firmly on the royal circuit, springing into life every autumn, when kings and courtiers came to indulge their passion for hunting in the forest. In between entertainments, ladies would stroll around the elegant stuary and the lake, where the sight of jostling carp still fascinates parties of school kids today. But unlike, say, Versailles, where the royal chapter came to a sharp end in 1789, successive sovereigns returned to Fontainebleau, continuing to adapt it to their taste until well into the 19th century.

The result is a heady combination of pomp and intimacy. Leaving Bourbon "délicatesse" behind, you're plunged into the gaudy opulence of the Bonapartes. Here's Napoleon's throne

room, symbolic in bleu-de-France drapes, plumed, gilt and chandelier-ed up to the hilt. And here's his sober bathroom, where he bathed at dawn, even though he might have preferred Joséphine not to. This long, barrel-vaulted library was built by Napoleon III, to house his Uncle Boney's volumes—and that happens to be his super-sized globe, too, rescued from the Tuileries Palace. This silken bedchamber belonged to Fontainebleau's last resident, the Empress Eugénie. If you're sharp-eyed, you might just spot style features favored by no less than five of her predecessors (though I confess, I've never made it past a couple).

Bewildered? You're not alone. Whereas other châteaux have the brand fortune to be associated with a single monarch or era, Fontainebleau remains tantalizingly, if delightfully, hard to pin down. Ironically, its location also limits visitor numbers. Perceived as remote, it actually takes little more than an hour from Paris by public transport. And for those who think that Ile-de-France is too near to justify an overnight stay, it's worth considering the 65 square miles of wild countryside that beckon impressively around Fontainebleau.

With its weird rock formations and sandy valleys, the Forest of Fontainebleau was a magnet for the artists who ushered in the Impressionist movement, among them Millet and Corot. (Enthusiasts should head for the Auberge de Ganne museum, in the nearby village of Barbizon.) Today, around 185 miles of marked walking trails make it still more popular with weekenders who have come to shake off the dust of the city.

As one of them, I'm surprised to learn that I'm part of a phenomenon that developed around 150 years ago, before which all forays into the woods were made on horseback or in a carriage. Indeed, Fontainebleau has some claim to being the birthplace of hiking, thanks to the pioneering work of Claude-François Denecourt. A Napoleonic veteran known locally as "Le Sylvain" (the Woodlander), he spent years, armed with his pot of blue paint and lantern, marking out paths and then popularizing them with printed maps.

Next year, the Château de Fontainebleau will be hosting an exhibition on that heritage. "The forest is our real garden, after all," points out Carlier, adding that it's part of an initiative to make the most of the multiple appeal of the region. In the meantime, I ask him for one compelling reason why visitors should make time to come to the Château de Fontainebleau. "It's beautiful," he sums up simply. "And, if people leave here with the idea that it's rich and it's lovely, I'll be the happiest of all curators."

—Amanda MacKenzie

•Château de Fontainebleau: Fontainebleau (45 mins by train from Gare de Lyon then 15-min bus ride). Open: Wed-Mon, 9:30am-5pm (6pm summer). Site: www.musee-chateau-fontainebleau.fr.

Vincennes Donjon

By Amanda MacKenzie

"It might have taken them only 10 years to build, but we still needed 12 to restore it," observes our guide wryly. Gazing up at the newly renovated 14th-century royal keep ("donjon" in French), I have to admit it's been worth the wait. This stronghold is the stuff of superlatives. At 165 feet high, the keep is the tallest medieval fortified tower in Europe, and probably the best preserved too. And, if all that isn't enough, here it is on the city's doorstep, minutes away to the southeast by Métro. History lovers have never had it so good.

For first-time visitors, the Vincennes experience can be bewildering. As you emerge from the Métro, just outside of Paris' eastern edge, the sight of Charles V's stupendous curtain wall stops you in your tracks: there's no mistaking its medieval credentials. Inside the cobbled courtyard, you begin to take stock of how mightily the château enclosure has been tinkered with over the centuries. Here's the pavilion built for Marie de Medici. Over there is the arch added by the young Louis XIV. That leveled-off tower was where Napoleon installed his canon, and the yawning breach in the curtain wall was a parting gift from the Nazis. Add to that a sprinkling of bland buildings still in use by the Defense Ministry (hence the husky types in combat fatigues you may see milling about). In the midst of it all is the soaring presence of the Sainte-Chapelle, a rival to its more famous counterpart on the Ile de la Cité. (It is tantalizingly off-limits; restoration will be completed in 2008.)

For now, all eyes are on the keep—or rather, on the long, nettle-bedded drop on either side of the drawbridge we're clattering over. "Forget Merlin the wizard," says our guide, gently reeling in the children on the tour. "This moat was filled with water—but not drinking water. That was far too precious." (Grimaces all around.) Outside the Châtelet, we pause to squint up at the "meutrières," designed for raining stones and arrows

on the heads of would-be invaders. Charles V's defenses didn't stop there. Only when we've trooped up the spiral steps inside the Châtelet can we cross to the five-story keep beyond, via a vertiginous drawbridge, replaced for the benefit of peaceful invaders like ourselves. No medieval enemy—not even those rogues, the English—ever made it this far.

For months at a time, Charles the Wise governed the whole kingdom from this unassailable château by the forest. But, explains our guide, he was not just smart about defense matters. He was also unusually cultivated, surrounding himself with books and beauty. Nowhere is that more evident than in the King's bedchamber. The vaulted ceiling radiates out from a superb, single column. Carved Evangelists bugle the Good News from the room's corner. Geometric details are still picked out in rich color thanks to the use of oil-based paint, the last word in 14th-century interior design. Elsewhere, some rooms still boast their 700-year-old timber paneling. Tapestries and roaring log fires would have completed the luxury (be sure to dress warmly when visiting).

Later, when the château waned in importance, the massive doors and bolts as long as your forearm served it well as a prison. Famous "guests" included Fouquet, Sade, Diderot and Mirabeau. But spare a thought for those anonymous inmates who eked out their sentences tracing arabesques on the walls, or scratching graffiti with their penknives. "Cool!" pipes up the youngster who has so far failed to fall under the spell. "That's the best!"

•Château de Vincennes Donjon: Vincennes. Access: No. 1 Métro, Château de Vincennes stop. Open: daily, 10am-5pm. Site: www.chateau-vincennes.fr.

