

Marin woman's chateau stars in 'Da Vinci Code'
By Paul Liberatore, IJ reporter Sunday, February 06, 2005

The Chateau de Villette was already well known in France when star Marin real estate agent Olivia Hsu Decker bought the historic 17th-century estate in 1999. But she could not have imagined just how famous it was about to become.

Over the last two years, Decker's lavish chateau 35 miles northwest of Paris has gained international celebrity as a glamorous and mysterious setting in Dan Brown's runaway bestseller, "The Da Vinci Code."

This summer, director Ron Howard is set to begin shooting scenes on the 185-acre property for "The Da Vinci Code" movie, starring Tom Hanks and French actress Audrey Tautou ("Amelie," "A Very Long Engagement").

In the novel, the chateau is the home of the fictional British historian Sir Leigh Teabing and his villainous manservant, two characters entangled in the plot's controversial quest for the Holy Grail.

The protagonists, Harvard professor Robert Langdon, who will be portrayed by Hanks, and Parisian police agent Sophie Neveu, Tautou's character, seek refuge at the chateau as they desperately elude French authorities.

Because of the phenomenal success of "The Da Vinci Code," the palatial mansion is a popular destination for literary tourists from around the world. After the movie comes out, the legions of "Code-heads," as fans of the book are called, can only get larger and more intense.

"It's crazy," Decker said one afternoon in the dining room of her Belvedere home. "The chateau was actually quite famous in France. It has been mentioned in chateau books many times. And yet, outside of France, it was relatively unknown until the stupid little 'Da Vinci Code' came out. Now the whole world wants to come. It's amazing."

The whole world is certainly welcome, if the whole world can afford it. Decker is offering a Da Vinci Code package tour that includes five nights at the chateau, excursions to the Louvre, the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris and other locales in the book as well as a discussion with historians and various experts on art history and religion. Cost is 3,900 to 4,300 Euros per person (about \$5,000 to \$5,500).

"We don't want to become a cheap tourist spot," Decker said as a pale winter sun cast a silvery gleam on the bay outside her floor-to-ceiling windows. "We don't want tour buses and people with cameras. Even before 'The Da Vinci Code,' the chateau was an exclusive, deluxe accommodation. We want it to stay that way, very exclusive and high end, with good taste."

An international socialite, Decker is herself a paragon of good taste. One of her friends says that she has never seen her in casual clothing. "Even when she's grubbing around, she's in Armani," an acquaintance remarked. On this day, she was dressed in an elegant pants suit, matching heels and understated jewelry.

Born in Shanghai, Decker came to the Bay Area in 1975 via Tokyo, where she was the young, giggly "sidekick," as she describes it, on a Japanese comedy/variety show.



NICE DIGS: Olivia Hsu Decker, on the terrace of her Belvedere home, also owns a chateau outside Paris that will be featured in the 'The Da Vinci Code' movie. Special to the IJ/Alan Dep

Over the last 25 years, she has gotten rich catering to the discriminating tastes of the wealthy, specializing in multimillion-dollar Marin County and San Francisco houses.

In 1999, the same year she bought the Chateau de Villette, she sold a home in Ross for \$20 million. Cher, Sharon Stone, Eddie Murphy and British movie director Alan Parker have been among her clients. Her business partner is currently handling the sale of Andre Agassi's Tiburon spread, listed at \$24.5 million. And she has been the listing agent for a Belvedere manse priced at a gaudy \$65 million.

Frequently mentioned in the society columns, Decker collects antiques, sings opera and has been on the board of the San Francisco Opera Guild for 14 years. Divorced, with no children, she was the first single woman to join the tony Corinthian Yacht Club in Tiburon.

This month, she will celebrate her 54th birthday with friends in Vail, Colo., and she enjoys a luxurious lifestyle on a par with her moneyed clients, splitting her time between Belvedere and France.

"She's a Renaissance woman," says fellow real estate agent Karen Plastiras of Tiburon. "She's glamorous. She can cook. She can entertain. She's a genius at marketing. She's a delightful hostess, and she's running a business while she's doing it."

A generous contributor to the Marin community, Decker donated the first Da Vinci Code tour to Reed School in Tiburon for a fund-raising auction. Plastiras and her lawyer husband, Basil, were among the seven couples who bought the trip for \$15,000.

"Everyone in my family read 'The Da Vinci Code' and loved it, so this was very exciting," he said, adding that the experience was all the more memorable because he and his wife stayed in the same bedroom once occupied by Nicole Kidman and rock star Lenny Kravitz, a friend of Decker. "Talk about living high," Mrs. Plastiras said.

Decker knows a thing or two about the high life. She actually owns two chateaux in France. She already had an 11-bedroom manor in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France when she decided to buy the even grander Chateau de Villette for \$6 million from the widow of a French baron because, as she explained, "I wanted something closer to Paris."

In "The Da Vinci Code," Brown offers this description of the chateau, located near Versailles: "Designed by Francois Mansart in 1668 for the Count of Auffyay, it was one of Paris's most significant historical chateaux. Complete with two rectangular lakes and gardens designed by Le Notre, Chateau Villette was more of a modest castle than a mansion. The estate fondly had become known as 'la Petite Versailles.'"

Despite its past grandeur, the property had been sadly neglected and had seen better days when Decker took it over. With her considerable energy and financial wherewithal, she poured millions more into extensive renovation, remodeling and redecorating the 20-bedroom, 21-bath chateau, picking the furnishings and doing the interior design herself.

Early on, she gave Dan Brown's art historian wife, Blythe, permission to visit the chateau to do research for a novel her husband was writing. That book turned out to be "The Da Vinci Code." When it came out in the spring of 2003, it caused a sensation.

And yet Decker hardly gave it a second thought until it became apparent to its millions of readers that the chateau in Brown's thriller was not a fictional creation, that it actually existed, and that a Chinese/American woman from Marin County owned it.

"After that, it snowballed into a big event," she said in something of an understatement.

Since then, she has done more than two dozen interviews for newspapers, magazines and TV shows in Europe, Asia and the U.S., including CNN and the New York Times.

Decker is herself a fan of Brown's page-turner, which mixes fact and fiction about the "shadow history" of early Christianity. Its premise is the notion that the Catholic Church has been covering up the true nature of the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, that they were actually lovers, if not husband and wife, and had a daughter, who founded a bloodline to French royalty.

Among other things, the book examines the theory that in Leonardo Da Vinci's "Last Supper," Mary Magdalene is sitting at the right hand of Jesus, not the disciple John, as is commonly believed.

While the novel has raised hackles among critics of its "pseudo-academic disguise," Decker sees it as a defense of the role of women in the history of the church. For centuries, she points out, Mary Magdalene was falsely portrayed as a prostitute, a smear campaign to suppress what the book calls "the sacred feminine."

"Although this story (of Jesus and Mary Magdalene) has been around for 2,000 years, it took this book to bring it out to the whole world," she said.

In a strange coincidence, Decker's estate in Provence, Chateau de Grimaldi, is located near the Basilica de la Magdalene, where Mary Magdalene is said to be buried. Among its many activities, the chateau offers a Mary Magdalene tour that traces the 30 years that she reputedly lived in Provence after the death of Jesus.

While all of this has been the subject of heated scholarly argument and debate, there is no question that "The Da Vinci Code" has been a boon for the French tourist industry, which had taken a hit since the Iraq war.

As part of Decker's Da Vinci tour, visitors to Chateau de Villette can peek in the stone barn with its secret hayloft, sit in the drawing room where the coveted keystone at the center of the mystery was hidden under a divan and marvel at the curving marble staircase where the chateau's fictional owner makes his first grand entrance.

This is just one of dozens of tours for curious Code-heads eager to see the sites in Paris, London and Scotland described in the book.

"There are 15,000 more tourists a month coming to Paris because of 'The Da Vinci Code,'" Decker said. "This book has put Paris back on the American mind."

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