



Da Vinci Code' chateau has real-life tangled past

VILLETTE, France (AP) -- Chateau de Villette, the sumptuous home of Sir Leigh Teabing, the sinfully wealthy character from "The Da Vinci Code," is not just a figment of author Dan Brown's imagination but a real-life chateau with a past as fascinating as its star-struck present.

Set on a sprawling, 185-acre estate northwest of Paris, the 17th-century chateau was once home to the noble French Marshal Gen. Emmanuel de Grouchy, exiled to Philadelphia after leading Napoleon's troops to defeat in the Battle of Waterloo.

Nearly two centuries and a host of aristocratic French owners later, American real estate mogul Olivia Hsu Decker bought the property in 1999 -- four years before "The Da Vinci Code" -- the book -- hit the shelves.

Today, "People come with the book in hand and they literally go through each paragraph," she said, adding that some even go so far as to recite the dialogue. Those visitors, Decker said, "don't like being reminded" of the thin line that separates fact from fiction.

Brown's descriptions of the property, headquarters of Sir Teabing's search for the Holy Grail, are almost eerily accurate. Even the barn, with its rickety ladder leading to the loft where Teabing hid his spy equipment, is true to Brown's description.

In real life, the barn houses something only slightly less curious than the British aristocrat's state-of-the-art gear: a towering wine press that looks like a giant pterodactyl and dates from the 12th century.

Decker, who has lived a drama of her own with a rags-to-riches background, said the chateau's new life as the set for "The Da Vinci Code" started with an e-mail from Brown's wife.

Upon learning that Sony Pictures had bought the rights to "The Da Vinci Code," Decker invited the production company to scope out her digs, and director Ron Howard went incognito, visiting with a tour group.

Like many of France's historic homes, Chateau de Villette had fallen into disrepair. Decker restored it, adding 15 more bathrooms in the process. She also outfitted a multitiered Poseidon fountain in the backyard with a remote control that allows her to regulate the flow of water from her sofa.

Decker was worried about damage during filming, but said the production -- which brought 87 trucks and trailers, hundreds of crew members and a helicopter to the property for nine days in the summer of 2005 -- went off without a hitch.

The crew shot at night by "moonlight" beamed through the chateau's picture windows by spotlights.

They transformed the sprawling ballroom into Teabing's study, replacing Decker's floral-print furniture with darker, heavier pieces meant to give the mansion a British flavor. Decker pointed to a marble staircase outfitted with a modern metal handrail -- needed by the handicapped Teabing to hoist himself to his upstairs bedroom.

For a scene in which police tear down the chateau gate, set designers replaced the massive, wrought-iron gate with a near-identical copy that fooled even Decker.

"I couldn't figure out why my key wouldn't work until someone on the crew came over and let me in," she said.

Decker was one of the rare outsiders permitted to pierce the shroud of secrecy that surrounded every aspect of production. Although she denies signing a confidentiality clause, Decker deflected questions about what exactly she saw.

She also declined to reveal her rental fee for the chateau, but insisted it was "much cheaper" than the movie's other French location, the Louvre Museum -- which has kept its fee strictly under wraps.

Today, Decker has parlayed the chateau's newfound fame into a profitable side business: luxury "Da Vinci Code" retreats with five-night stays at the chateau that include dinners by a five-star chef and in-depth "Code" lectures by a historian. The price tag: up to \$5,540.

It's the chateau's hidden details that most thrill eagle-eyed "Da Vinci Code" fans, Decker said, pointing to the metal handle of a picture window, emblazoned with a five-point star -- the symbol police find carved into the dead body of the Louvre curator.

"With all the other not-so-nice things going on in the world, this is a little escape for people," she said.

The owner of two chateaux in France as well as property in the San Francisco Bay area, Decker has plenty of little escapes of her own.

A native of Shanghai, she grew up in Taiwan, where her parents settled after fleeing communist China. The family shared a one-room flat with no running water outside Taipei,

Decker said. She worked her way out of poverty, first as a flight attendant and then -- after marrying an American and moving to California -- as manager of the Hyatt Hotel in San Francisco.

Asked if she would consider capitalizing on the wave of interest in her chateau and sell the property, Decker demurred.

"Right now, I'm pretty busy," she said. "But if the price is right ..."

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