

See you at the palace

It's not every day you wake up to a gentleman in breeches bearing warm almond milk – but then again, Le Grand Contrôle is no ordinary hotel, says **NICK HENDRIX**



PHOTOGRAPHS by (Hall of Mirrors) Felicia Sisco

ATTENTION TO DETAIL is often considered the hallmark of true quality – the deftness of touch, the finesse of a finish, the care lavished on even the most inconspicuous elements. In today's world, anyone can hire an interior designer or invest in a top-tier mattress – but to elevate a guest's experience in a way that transcends the material is rarefied air. Air I was practically drowning in during a night's stay at the incomparable Airelles Château de Versailles, Le Grand Contrôle.

Airelles opened its debut hotel, Les Airelles Palace, in Courchevel in 1990. In the 35 years since, the group has curated a portfolio of small but astonishingly special properties – each steeped in history and humming with character. And when it comes to both those qualities, few places can hold a candle to the Château de Versailles. With 15 million visitors a year, it remains one of the most visited landmarks in the world. To lay claim as the only hotel within its fabled grounds? Quite the coup.

Airelles' Le Grand Contrôle, so-called as it was built in 1681 by Louis XIV's beloved architect, Jules Hardouin-Mansart, for his General Controller of Finances, is a five-star boutique hotel with 13 individual suites, a Michelin-starred Alain Ducasse restaurant, and a subterranean spa.

I had been angling to stay at this hotel for some time, and as I planned my 40th birthday, I thought there was no place better. Without wishing to sound too sentimental in my newfound antiquity, the experience will remain with me for the rest of my life.

On arrival, we pull up to a set of fairly unassuming gates. Unassuming, that is, until we were introduced to one of the core design aesthetics of this particular property – the staff uniforms. All of the team here are dressed as 17th-century gentlemen and women, complete with tailcoats, tricorne hats, heeled shoes, and knee-high white socks. It is something that, without the context, could seem gimmicky, but the backdrop makes it all seem to make sense.

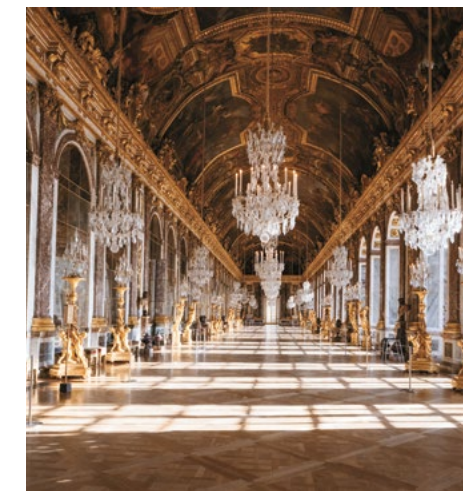
After a brief tour of the property, we eventually found our room, which was more of an apartment, really. Although

► **LE GRAND DESIGNS:** [near right] see the Palace of Versailles before the tourists arrive; [far right] Michelin-starred dining courtesy of Alain Ducasse.

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expecting four-poster opulence and high ceilings, we actually had a really charming suite with seemingly endless rooms – when a suite has corridors, you know it's big. We were greeted by a pile of branded goodies – water bottle, tote bag, eye mask, pyjamas even! And this is standard, not just to charm a journalist.

The bedroom itself was large and beautifully appointed, off which was a smart bathroom complete with free-standing roll-top bath, a little dressing area, and separate toilet. In what could be a second bedroom (but was our living room), was a small coffee table overflowing with an embarrassment of welcome chocolates and macarons. There are macarons everywhere in this hotel. Everywhere. As this can also be a bedroom, we were lucky enough to have a further bathroom and toilet, giving us all the choices possible when it came to our daily ablutions. Usually in hotels, we enjoy the luxury of a double sink; here we had a double bathroom. (If we played our cards right, we could avoid seeing each other at all.)



We had a fairly full schedule that afternoon, and after a quick refresh with the in-room toiletries (more on that later), we popped on our fluffy gowns and made our way to the spa for a massage. The spa is sponsored by Valmont (a suitably aristocratic Swiss skincare brand founded in 1905) and was fittingly tranquil; we felt like the only people there. A couple's room was supplied for us, and we lay down on our respective heated massage tables for an hour of deep tissue relaxation.

Now, it's not normal practice to jump up from a massage and head off for, well, anything really – but when a hotel offers you a private, after-hours tour of the Palace of Versailles, one is happy to make an exception. With freshly loosened muscles, we gathered in the hotel lobby before being taken to meet our private guide, who was full of knowledge and insight – it was an unbelievably privileged tour of one of world history's great destinations. But the real magic came from standing in the iconic Hall of Mirrors without hordes of tourists craning for the right selfie. I'm now the proud owner of a picture of me standing dead centre like it was my own house – now *that's* VIP access.

A quick(ish) stroll back to our bedroom, and it was time to get ready for dinner. There is just one restaurant here – but who needs more when that restaurant has a Michelin star and wears Alain Ducasse's name. Less, meet more. For Airelles, a place of history, class, and quality, there is no more fitting accompaniment. ►



► My wife and I managed to find our way from our rambling aristocratic apartment down to meet in the lobby. What followed was another taste of Airelles' love of the theatrical – and as an actor, it was like milk to a baby. We were first handed a wax-sealed envelope inside which were our characters for the evening, the Duke and Duchess of Lorraine – the Duke was Louis XIV's father-in-law, so the envelope informed me. A part to play and a decent backstory? I had less to work with than this when I was at RADA.

We were then guided through an eight-course taster menu where each course had some connection to Louis XIV's court and the dietary social habits of the late 17th century. This was another chance to justify the period costumes, but it was also seven chances to be addressed as 'my Duke and Duchess....' which didn't get old.

After witnessing butter quenelles carved from a veritable mountain, dishes enveloped in cascading dry ice, and a glass coffee machine brewing a beverage from the bean's shell rather than the bean itself, the Duke and Duchess retired to their elaborately wallpapered room.

The following morning brought a unique experience: the 'Royal Awakening.' At precisely 9 o'clock, our bedroom door opened to the sound of classical music as a gentleman, dressed in period attire, entered with a small tray holding a speaker playing the music and two petite cups. He greeted us with, "Good morning, my King and Queen," before opening our curtains and offering a warm almond milk infused with orange and cinnamon – a nod to Marie Antoinette's favourite drink. He then departed, though I understand he could also prepare a bath upon request, which, in this setting, seems perfectly normal.

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▲ BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT: [top left] the indoor pool at the Spa Airelles by Valmont; [top right] the terrace of the Alain Ducasse restaurant; [above] pulling up at the gates, you will be greeted by staff dressed in character.

Following a gourmet in-room breakfast, we ventured to the spa for a swim. Despite the hotel's intimate size, it boasts a stunning 15-metre indoor pool. We swam beneath the hand-painted ceiling, traversed the Carrara marble from sauna to steam room, before preparing for a final treat: a golf buggy ride to explore the extensive grounds – spanning eight square kilometres. Accessing the gardens through a side gate, we enjoyed unfettered exploration of the highlights without queues or crowds. It was truly special.

Traditionally, this is where I would summarise my experience, but I tread cautiously to avoid sycophancy or giving the impression that the hotel has settled my mortgage. However, when you combine the property's quality, the staff's charm, the

theatrical flair, and the unbelievably well-stocked minibar, it's challenging to think of a better hotel anywhere – and it needs to be to justify its toppy room rate.

With rooms starting from €2,000, this place isn't cheap – but honestly, when you tally all the personalised gifts, bespoke toiletries, and gourmet snacks, the room itself seems a bit of a steal. We'll be back (once I've invented the next Apple or discovered oil beneath my garden). **H**
Rates at Le Grand Contrôle start from: €2,000 (approx. £1708) including a dedicated butler; daily tours of Château de Versailles and the Trianon; access to the Palace grounds - including use of boats and golf carts and breakfast, afternoon tea and minibar. Rates exclude a 14% destination fee. For more information, go to airelles.com