



OPT/K. VAN LIDTH

A royal meander

Châteaux-hopping through the Meuse valley, novelist **Alice Jolly** discovers drama, romance, neglect and some little visited monumental splendour

I've lived in Brussels for almost 10 years and yet I can number on the fingers of one hand the trips I've made to the Ardennes, and I find that hard to explain. I know that the Ardennes is only an hour away, and is equally accessible by road and rail. And I know that it's beautiful.

But two weeks ago, guide books were gathered together, husband and five-year-old son were bundled into the car and we set off to visit the chateaux of the

Meuse Valley. In order to get into the spirit of the trip, we'd booked to stay at the Château de Jannée.

Even in the dark, it turns out to be easy to find – just off the N4 motorway. As we rumble along the long, dark drive, the headlights shine on something large which blocks our path. The animal is crested, bristly, tusked. We stare at the wild boar and it stares at us. I begin to understand that we've arrived in another world.

We come to a gateway and drive into

a vast courtyard. The chateau is ahead of us – a symmetrical facade of grey stone topped by turrets. We are shown to our room. It's clear that this is not a hotel but a private house. The beds are wonderfully creaky, the furniture is heavy mahogany, the wardrobe is so tall that it's fitted with its own special elongated hangers to enable one to lift one's clothes into it. The bath is big enough to swim in. Vast toast rack radiators pump out warmth.



OPT/J. MONFORT

Full of surprises: Château de Modave, left, is perched on the edge of a cliff; right, the fantastical Château de Vêves

We have a whole apartment to ourselves. Double doors open from one room to the next like the set of a bedroom farce. Here there is nothing as vulgar as a mini bar or a phone in the room. In fact, there isn't even a key to the door. Why would you need one in a place so remote? In the absolute silence we soon fall soundly asleep.

The next morning we wake to a day of bronze autumn light and look out the window to see a dozen peacocks strutting across the courtyard. We are served breakfast in an elegant vaulted room which turns out to be a converted stable. Looking through guide books, we decide on castles. The Ardennes has always

been a frontier region, a contested land, and so every village has its château and many are open to the public. Nothing is more than 20 minutes drive away.

A picture catches my eye. It shows a magnificent Disney-like castle that surely doesn't actually exist? We set off to find it. As it turns out, the photograph doesn't do it justice. The Châteaux de Vêves is built into the rock, high above a wooded valley near the village of Celles. A miniature castle with a cluster of cone-shaped towers, it provides all that the Gothic imagination could require: arrow slits, fluttering flags and walls of stern grey stone, 1.8 metres thick. An archery team are practising on the ramparts.

But this is a castle with two faces. Although the Ardennes has long been a region of conflict, it has often known periods of peace and prosperity. And so

it is that we discover, inside the courtyard, a perfect 17th-century house built of warm pink stone with twisted wooden balconies. Inside everything is domestic charm. We walk through salons crammed full of Sèvres porcelain and fragile furniture. Out of every window we see forests alight with autumn colours – gold, crimson, russet and amber.

After seeing the Château of Vêves, I feel we should quit while we're ahead. Surely there can't be a better castle in the Ardennes? But, consulting our guidebook, we set off for Dinant to see its citadel. It is reached by a cable car that takes us from the centre of town to the towering rocks overhead. Block-like and windowless, the citadel is almost indistinguishable from the outcrop of rock on which it is built. Here war has nothing to do with the romance of knights with bows and arrows. The citadel of Dinant looks like a nuclear bunker. And any excitement the visitor might feel about the size of the canon balls at the gate is quickly quenched by the proximity of endless rows of graves in the French war cemetery nearby. This is a fortress which saw fierce fighting in both world wars.

But if the citadel fails to capture our imagination, the view more than makes up for it. From here we can see the entire town of Dinant, with its deep, red-brick streets and its strangely Alpine feel. We can also see the river Meuse. Wide and slow moving, it runs through the town, sparkling in the autumn light, so entrancing that we head down on the cable car and find a café on its banks. The lunch is delicious. It is hard to find a bad meal in the Ardennes. Hard also to find a light meal. We stagger away an hour later having eaten far more than we intended.

At this point my husband and I fancy heading back to the Château de Jannée for an afternoon nap. But by this time our son has got castles on the brain and so we pick another from the book – the Château of Lavaux Sainte-Anne. It's only a few kilometres away but part of a very different landscape. Flat and mellow, the area of the Famenne was once wetlands and marsh. And the château of Lavaux Sainte-Anne – low-lying and surrounded by a moat – seems to float peacefully on this watery landscape.

We enter through a gate into a courtyard which contains a parterre-type garden with topiary hedges. This courtyard was once part of the farm which was built to supply the château. Walking on through the courtyard, we look out over the deer park, and cross a stone causeway which leads to the castle itself. Where Vêves was dramatically vertical,

this castle is horizontal.

Once again the fortified walls hide a very different interior. The internal courtyard is elegant, rose-coloured, 17th century with a stone arcade leading down to the water's edge. The feeling is strangely Venetian. Lavaux Sainte-Anne feels like a place for elegant costumes, formal ceremonies, theatrical performances. Fittingly, a wedding is taking place. The main hall contains one of those Scarlett O'Hara-type stair cases which divide half way up.

The Château is undergoing restoration and contains three museums – one explaining the rural life of the area, one dedicated to the lives of the *seigneurs* of the Château, and one about the Fammene.

Due to the restoration we never quite sort these museums out, but we do see a vast collection of stuffed animals. Dusty, glass-eyed and balding, they include ducks, boars, buzzards, foxes, rabbits, hares, badgers, vultures and a she-wolf. Some were so odd-looking that I longed for an English dictionary so that I could look them up. What is *un mouflon*? And *une buse*? (Answers at the end).

It's clear from the text accompanying the exhibition that the hunters of the Ardennes are busy re-inventing themselves as conservationists. You can buy that line or not – but the collection serves as an interesting reminder of the important role that hunting has always played in the region.

Time to find supper and head back to the Château de Janée. Our second night there is as pleasant as the first and the next morning we wander through the grounds. In the autumn mist we watch the swans on the lake and admire the château's red-ivy covered front façade. I have the strange feeling that no one has been to this place for a long time and that, after we leave, no one will ever come here again. I could happily spend the whole day just walking around the lake and forests but more châteaux await.

Just as we are leaving, the owner, Baron de Woot, emerges and shows us some of the private rooms. The hall is magnificent, with endless stags staring balefully down from the walls. The Baron explains to us how difficult it is to maintain the château. Belgium doesn't have an equivalent to the British National Trust, so historic buildings are often left to the care of local volunteers. Often – as at Vêves and Lavaux Sainte-Anne – they do a wonderful job but still it is difficult to make ends meet. Opening a castle to the public generates some income but not enough to pay the vast maintenance bills. In Belgium, the Baron says, people are not as interested in visiting historic houses as they are in Britain. The Meuse is not the Loire. No tour buses pass this way.

I can see the difficulty but can't help but be glad that there are no tour buses at the Château de Janée. Its unique atmosphere is partly to do with the fact that it seems to be impervious to the passing of time. I'm very sorry to say good bye to its silence and peace but, at the Baron's suggestion, we set off to see the Château of Modave.

It turns out to be more like the grand châteaux of the Loire rather than the small and charming châteaux we've seen so far. Surrounded by out-buildings and vast formal gardens, the entrance is palatial with acres of gravel and fountains that leap and splash. The ceiling of the main hall is decorated with a family tree so ornate it's hard to understand why gravity has not bought it crashing down. We are provided with excellent audio guides which explain every detail. Endless state rooms are weighed down by a mass of tapestries and paintings. I decide that, despite its Versailles-like grandeur, I don't like this château nearly as much as the smaller and more intimate ones of Vêves and Lavaux Sainte-Anne.

Then I open an unobtrusive-looking door, step out onto a terrace, and realise that I've misunderstood completely. The terrace appears to be suspended in the air. It turns out that the Château of



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Hidden charms: the pretty village of Celles

Modave is perched on the edge of a cliff but you can't see that as you approach it from the front. Below the terrace is a vertical drop down to a lush green valley with a river running through it. The view from this terrace is reason enough to visit the château and it's all the more enjoyable because it comes as a total surprise.

The Château of Modave is owned by

'There are many castles, but the Meuse is not the Loire. No tour buses pass this way.'

Vivaqua which bought it in the 1940s due to the particularly high quality of the water from the springs around it. Even today the water collected from these springs still falls by gravity to Brussels. To its credit, Vivaqua has been responsible for turning the château and the grounds into a protected area – thus guar-

anteeing the purity of the water and protection of the environment. They are also responsible for the amazingly high standard of the restoration and maintenance.

After the splendours of Modave, our trip ends on a lower note. On our way back to Brussels we decide to stop at Spontin. The picture in the guidebook looks inviting and the château is described as being open to the public. But when we get there, it isn't. Spontin is a lovely little village on a bend in the river with a park and railway station. And you can see the château there – Gothic and ghostly – surrounded by its moat.

But a sign at the gate announces that it is closed and, on closer inspection, it is apparent that it's in very poor repair. Some of the windows don't even have glass in them. It's sad to see a beautiful building in such a poor state. Also, since it's at the centre of the village, it makes Spontin seem like a place with its heart missing. Standing staring across the moat at the derelict building, I start to take seriously the Baron's fears about the future of the châteaux of the Meuse.

If you want to know a country you usually have to venture out of the capital city and discover rural areas. And certainly

if you visit the Ardennes you find aspects of Belgian culture and history very generously displayed. The Ardennes is a distinct region with its own unique history, identity and architecture. And the châteaux of the Meuse are numerous, accessible and varied. Don't take as long to get there as I did. (Answers: *Une buse* is a buzzard and a mouflon is the same word in French and English and means wild sheep.) ■

Alice Jolly is a Brussels-based British writer. Her most recent novel, *If Only You Knew*, is published by Simon & Shuster.

Addresses

Château de Janée, tel

0476.68.68.48,

www.chateaudejane.be

To find out more about visiting the

Meuse châteaux contact Tourisme

Wallonie, tel 07.022.10.21,

www.wallonie-tourisme.be

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