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IN A SOULFUL ESCAPE LIKE NO OTHER





ESCAPE TO A WONDERLAND

Lince Lodge, in the grounds of the Blenheim Palace Estate, has been transformed into a luxurious retreat by entrepreneurial couple Sue and Bernard Fontannaz

WORDS: CAROL DRIVER PHOTOS: STUART COX



Some homes are simply beautiful, while others have soul. Or there are those properties like Lince Lodge, nestled in the ancient parklands of Blenheim Palace Estate, which are lucky enough to have both.

This 18th-century former hunting lodge dating back to 1767 isn't just a weekend retreat for its current residents, Sue and Bernard Fontannaz, it's an enchanting escape where nature, heritage and design come together in an effortless way.

As founders of Wonderland Escapes, a growing portfolio of exceptional homes around the world, they've transformed this historic gem into a soulful sanctuary set within the grounds, just outside Oxford.

'We're renting Lince Lodge from Blenheim Palace Estate – you can't actually own property within the estate,' Sue explains.

'It's close to where we live in Oxford and is the ideal place to escape to on weekends. The park grounds are magnificent and Blenheim Palace itself was Sir Winston Churchill's childhood home.'

Blenheim, of course, needs little introduction. Spanning over 2,000 acres, the estate is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of England's most iconic stately homes.

Designed by Sir John Vanbrugh, the baroque



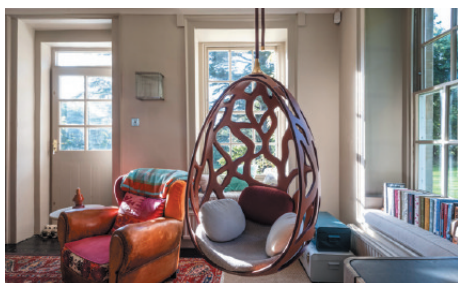
masterpiece and its Capability Brown-landscaped parklands create a setting of both historical weight and natural beauty. Leasing any building within the estate is a rare privilege, and one that comes with a responsibility to preserve its legacy.

For the Fontannazes, the decision to take on the lodge was love at first sight.

'We fell in love immediately,' Sue recalls. 'We felt such a deep-rooted sense of peace, it felt like coming home. The trees reminded us so much of the grand ones at Le Grand Jardin, our home in Stellenbosch near Cape Town.'

And while the visual charm was instant, actually securing the lease took a little longer – seven years, in fact.

'It's an old building, and the maintenance is constant,' Sue laughs. 'But it's worth every effort.' ➔



The couple began light renovations in 2023, refreshing the interiors and updating the upstairs bathroom to include a shower. That same year, they added an orangery and outdoor barbecue area.

By 2024, the project expanded into something more whimsical and bold: an original brass outdoor shower from the 1830s Paris Exposition, a Japanese copper plunge bath, sauna, outdoor cinema screen, and, most strikingly, a glasshouse that houses a fully-equipped Cashmere Caveman outdoor kitchen.

'We're mostly inspired by our travels,' says Sue. 'There's definitely a playful, intuitive style that runs through both properties. Argentina, Europe, Africa - they've all had an influence on how we decorate and live.'

'We found kelims on Vinterior, Mason's Regency pieces on eBay, and the most beautiful Louis Vuitton steamer trunk in South Africa, which still has 'Cape Town' etched on the side. Our plates are from Anthropologie, found during a rowing trip in Cambridge.'

In the kitchen, a hand-painted wall mural was inspired by Bemelmans Bar at The Carlyle in New York, a special nod to a wedding anniversary the couple spent there.

The bedrooms are rooted in English charm.

Sue explains: 'We kept to the integrity of the lodge and the Englishness of the countryside. I love interior design magazines and these rooms are layered in a way that's playful and warm, not too studied.'

The couple often entertain friends and family, with help from friend and chef Tom Taylor, who once cooked for Guy Ritchie.



'He creates beautiful meals using the Harrison oven. Ottolenghi swears by it,' Sue says. 'We use the fire pit, a multi-level barbecue, and sit surrounded by trees. There's a sense of ease, fun and joy that people really feel here.'

'We love the lounge in winter, snuggled with a book and the fire going. The kitchen is for cosy suppers, and the glasshouse is our most social space.'

One of the more unexpected elements of the glasshouse is the antique locomotive parked inside. This playful gesture is part of a recurring theme in their lives - big ideas rooted in love, nature and a touch of magic.

'Bernard is obsessed with trains,' Sue laughs. 'I found an old engine in Buenos Aires and had it shipped here as a surprise anniversary gift. We didn't know where to put it, so Bernard decided to build the glasshouse around it.'

'We also have a glasshouse overlooking a lake in the beautiful gardens of Le Grand Jardin in the Stellenbosch Winelands near Cape Town, so it was a lovely link to the two homes. He said it was an anniversary present, but personally I think it was for the train!'

It's no surprise to find their Stellenbosch estate, Le Grand Jardin, in their collection. This ➔







isn't a typical rental portfolio, it's a collection of story-rich properties where the design is personal.

'Each one is different, but they're all designed to spark joy and reconnection,' Sue says. 'They're homes where people come to remember how to slow down, laugh and just be.'

Set within a private botanical garden filled with guava trees, sculptures, and free-roaming peacocks, Le Grand Jardin shares the same design energy.

'We wanted each space to evoke wonder,' Sue says. 'There's an outdoor cinema under the stars and a hammock grove in the orchard. It's all about rediscovering your sense of play.'

Bernard, a 'wine explorer', founded Origin Wine in 2002 – a global business exporting more than 100 million litres of wine each year across South Africa, Argentina, Switzerland and Europe.

Sue, a former senior executive turned leadership coach, now works with clients across the world.

'I've learned that nature and play bring you back to yourself,' Sue says. 'That's something I explore a lot in my coaching work, and it definitely influences how we design and live. These homes aren't just places to sleep, they're spaces to connect and feel grounded again.'

That philosophy is clear throughout Lince Lodge. Every corner invites curiosity. From the Hästens mattresses to the plunge bath overlooking the trees, every detail is designed to evoke comfort and calm.

As for what's next for the couple?

'Hopefully more family, friends, fun, and travel,' Sue smiles. 'And more time in both of our Wonderlands.'

They welcome guests to experience Lince Lodge for themselves, exclusively through Perfect Hideaways.

'You'll live like a Duke in one of the original buildings forming part of the Blenheim Palace Estate,' Sue says. 'Expect Hästens beds, high-thread-count cotton sheets, fluffy white towels, and a welcome hamper.'

And what makes it truly unforgettable?

'I think it's the feeling people take away – a sense of peace, joy, and space to play.'



To book Lince Lodge, exclusively through Perfect Hideaways, contact belita@perfecthideaways.co.za