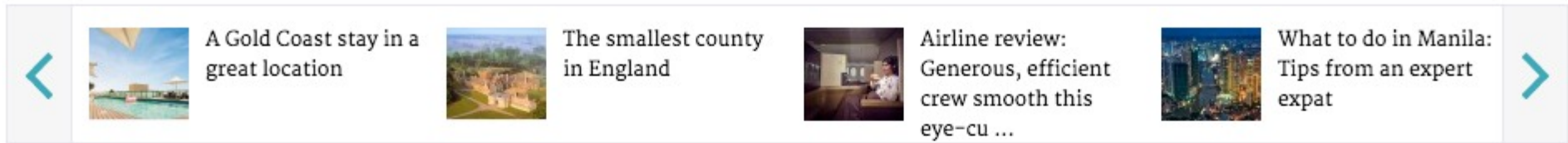


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France, Champillon: The Champagne region has a new star hotel attraction

Ellen Connolly



Hotel room overlooking vineyards and countryside at Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa. Photo: Supplied

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Among the many quotable quotes about champagne, Napoleon Bonaparte's – "In victory, you deserve champagne; in defeat, you need it" – is one most of us would concur with. The famed emperor is said to have embraced this maxim during his frequent stopovers in the French region of Champagne on his way to battle or coronations.

At that time, his favourite place to bed down was a coach inn, which offered magical views of the vineyards that produced the sparkling drop he quaffed. Centuries on, the historical landmark is a grand luxury hotel, whose aim is to treat guests like the royalty who came before them.

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While few remnants of the property's previous life remain, there are small nods to its bygone days, including a bust of Bonaparte, and restaurant dinner plates inscribed with love letters the renowned womaniser wrote to his mistresses.



Royal Champagne & Spa Hotel. Photo: Supplied

New owners of the Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa spent four years and a reported €30 million (\$48 million) overhauling it, demolishing the entire structure, bar two walls. The refurbishment is spectacular. The hotel has 47 rooms and suites as well as a spa, indoor and outdoor lap pools, two restaurants, a terrace bar, champagne tasting room and library.

Before the hotel's rebirth, the region of Champagne, which is 35 minutes from Paris by train, lacked a contemporary-designed luxury hotel. Bed and breakfasts are aplenty and there are a few five-star traditional hotels, but they brought a stuffy formality, with floral bedspreads and chintzy wallpaper from an era long gone.

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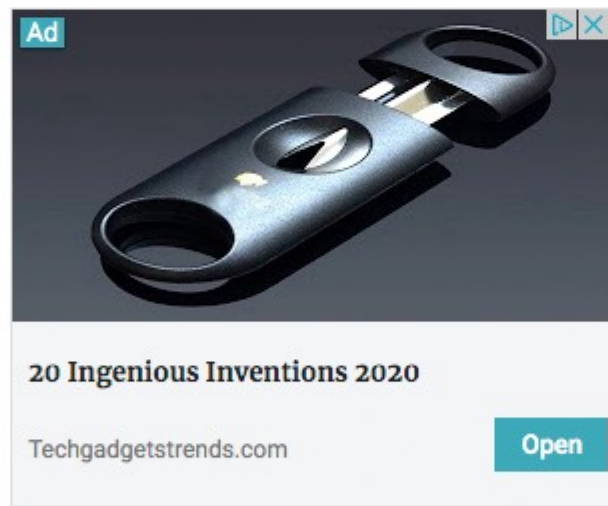
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Our room, aptly named the Champagne Room, is anything but. Contemporary and sophisticated with a champagne-and-gold colour scheme on the walls, it has a lovely view of the verdant countryside. We feel cocooned in luxury: the free mini-bar, organic cotton sheets, luscious bath robes (in two sizes) and lily espresso machine help. The bathroom has a double shower, freestanding bath and Hermes products.

Much like a good bottle of champagne, the rooms are refined and uplifting, but what tempted us was the hotel's piece de resistance: the same view once enjoyed by Bonaparte and other French kings. It sits on a hilltop in Champillon, a five-minute drive to Epernay, which has plenty of restaurants, bars and shops. But it's hard to leave the hotel, especially after an aperitif at the spacious terrace bar overlooking the World Heritage-listed site.

With champagne in hand and the sun setting, we take in the view: workers in the vineyards, then Epernay (where Moët & Chandon has its cellars) and further on to Hautvillers, the resting place of the French Benedictine monk Dom Perignon.

Once the sun has disappeared there is Le Bellevue Restaurant which has the same wonderful vista. Here, the brasserie-style menu is uncomplicated and includes locally-sourced chicken, beef and fish dishes. It is also where breakfast is served. For a high-end "gastronomique" experience there is the elegant Le Royal. Small and intimate, Michelin-starred chef Jean-Denis Rieubland is at the helm.



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The hotel's other big drawcard is its enormous spa and wellness centre, which comprises nine treatment rooms, eucalyptus-infused sauna, hammam, yoga studio and two whirlpools. French women are renowned for their attention to skincare, and the spa uses the hard-to-find Biologique Recherche products, which I later learn have developed a cult following. You quickly learn why. Book a custom facial or massage well in advance as they are in high demand. If you miss out, adjourn to what is possibly one of the best hotel pools with a view in the world. Floor-to-ceiling windows provide swimmers and those on deckchairs a transcendent vista of the rolling valley and vineyards below.

The hotel, located 10 minutes from many of the wineries, also offers champagne tasting with its sommelier in the Salon Fines Bulles, which stocks 257 varieties of the local drop. It can also facilitate a visit to a nearby cellar, Champagne Leclerc Briant, owned by the hotel, where the charming winemaker Herve Jestin is producing some of France's most impressive biodynamic champagnes.

Of course there was one challenge to staying at the hotel: the difficult task of deciding where exactly to drink in that commanding view.

TRIP NOTES

Ellen Connolly travelled with the assistance of Champagne-Ardenne Tourism.

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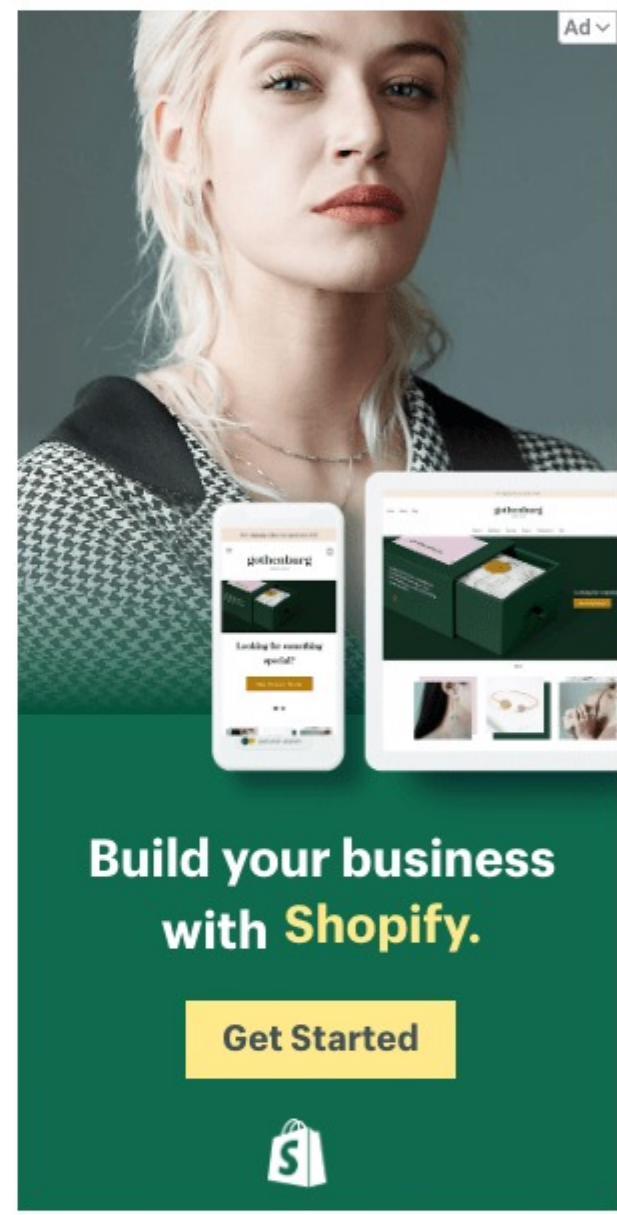
FLY

Qantas, Virgin Australia and Emirates fly from Sydney to Paris daily. By train the hotel is 30-minutes from Charles De Gaulle airport and then a 15-minute taxi ride. Or take a 40-minute TGV train from Gare de L'Est, Paris and then taxi.

See qantas.com/au/en; virginaustralia.com/au; emirates.com/au

STAY

Rates at Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa start from €385 a night. See royalchampagne.com



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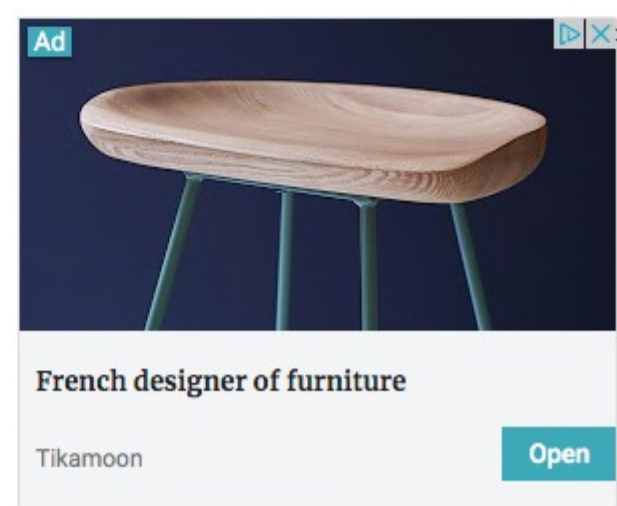
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