

HISTORY MAJOR

STAYING AT AVIGNON'S HOTEL

DE LA MIRANDE IS A JOURNEY BACK

THROUGH TWO CENTURIES OF

EXQUISITE FRENCH DECORATIVE ART

By Jean Bond Rafferty Photographs By Guy Hervais



WHENEVER he dreamed of heaven, Ernest Hemingway used to say, "the action always takes place in the Paris Ritz." In my own projection of paradise the scene is set in Avignon's Hôtel de la Mirande. A felicitous collaboration between art-loving owners Achim and Hannelore Stein, their son Martin, daughter Caroline, and brilliant Parisian decorator François-Joseph Graf has resulted in the resuscitation and transformation of a nearly 700-year-old townhouse into one of the most magical luxury hotels in France.

Located right behind the Palais des Papes—from which seven French popes ruled the Roman Catholic Church in the 14th century—La Mirande benefits from all the ecclesiastical vibes necessary to a heavenly retreat. One could spend exquisite eons lingering in the 18th-century Salon Chinois, its panels depicting pagodas and parrots, endless evenings being cosseted in the Salon Rouge, its walls striped in Rothschild red. Ancient chestnut trees offer blissful shade in a bucolic garden fragrant with honeysuckle and jasmine, color-splashed with oleanders, roses, and geraniums. The softly lit dining room, which has a painted double-coffered Renaissance ceiling and 17th-century Aubus-

son tapestry, is heaven-sent for romance. The patrician staircase, with its wrought-iron balustrade, is a contemporary replica of one in the nearby Château de Barbentane. It leads to the 19 guest rooms and single suite where, in a masterly display of counterpoint, Graf has orchestrated a multitude of patterned fabrics into a celestially harmonious music.

La Mirande was built as a palace in the 14th century by the cardinal-nephew of Pope Clement V; from many of its rooms there are striking views of the Pope's Palace, a bleached stone fortress silhouetted against Avignon's cerulean sky. But the dec-

THE DINING ROOM (OPPOSITE), VIEWED FROM THE CENTRAL COURTYARD, IS PART OF THE ORIGINAL BUILDING—HAVING SURVIVED A DEVASTATING FIRE IN 1411—AND HAS A 15TH-CENTURY COFFERED CEILING. ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: CHANDELIERS REFLECTED IN AN 18TH-CENTURY GENRE PAINTING IN THE SALON ROUGE; LA MIRANDE'S BEAUTIFULLY RESTRAINED FACADE—AN EXUBERANT LOUIS XIV SUNBURST ITS SOLE CONCESSION TO GRATUITOUS DECORATION—DESIGNED BY PIERRE MIGNARD IN 1688; CHANDELIERS, SCONCES, AND CANDELABRA ON THE MANTEL ILLUMINATING THE GRAND AND SPACIOUS SALON ROUGE; A BOLSTERED, TUFTED, AND BETASSELED NAPOLEON III SOFA IN THE SALON ROUGE.

orative opulence of today's hotel is true to its historical context. Papal pleasures were not of a monastic ilk: When in the early 1300s the cardinal entertained his uncle, the dining room was hung with tapestries and the feast comprised nine courses of three dishes each. The cardinal's palace—surrounded by gardens and a cloister—was three times the size of the present-day Mirande. It was destroyed by fire during a siege of the Pope's Palace in 1411: The *donjon* (the fortified heart of medieval buildings) was the only part to survive.

Seventy years later a silk and textile merchant bought the abandoned building and transformed it into his town residence. It was he who commissioned the painted coffered ceiling from a Carpentras craftsman. Then, in the late 17th century, the townhouse was given a stunning new facade—embellished with a Louis XIV sunburst—designed by Pierre Mignard (the son of the famous court painter Nicolas Mignard). From the French Revolution until 1987, when the Steins bought it, La Mirande was owned by the Pamards, a family of prominent surgeons. In the 19th century they gave Avignon a Haussmannian mayor, who cut a boulevard through the walled city, planting it with plane trees.

A native of Heidelberg but a globe-trotting civil engineer who worked throughout the world, Achim Stein had retired with his wife, Hannelore, to St.-Paul-de-Vence when they decided to find and restore a beautiful old house. "We were very impressed with the French patrimony," recalls Achim of their three-year search. "Impressed by the outsides," he adds, "but depressed by the insides."

The interiors of the Pamards' house were a case in point: Decorated in the neo-Gothic style of 19th-century architect Viollet-le-Duc, they boasted stained-glass windows and a heavy oakwood staircase. "It was so somber, it had the reputation of being sinister inside—the darkest house in Avignon," says Martin Stein.

Graf, who was behind the remarkable Art Nouveau decor of Le Télégraphe restaurant and the elegant tapestried interiors of the three-star L'Ambroisie, both in Paris, almost completely gutted the building and devised a new decorative scenario—one starting with the premise that Pierre Mignard had been asked to design the whole house and not just the facade.

"Our motto was: We want it to look like it's been here for three hundred years," says Martin. Furniture and decorative details span the intervening centuries: an amalgam of several Louis' and Napoléons—and in the bathrooms, Edwardian England—that evokes the milieu a well-traveled bourgeois family might have created over time as fashionable styles ebbed and flowed.

Every detail was meticulously researched, and by using vintage materials—parquet floors, tiles, handblown



MARTIN STEIN, CO-OWNER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF LA MIRANDE, WITH HIS MOTHER, HANNELORE (LEFT), WHO BOUGHT THE AVIGNON TOWNHOUSE WITH HER HUSBAND, ACHIM, IN 1987. A SIGNIFICANT COLLECTION OF VIEUX PARIS PORCELAIN IS HOUSED IN THE PRIVATE DINING ROOM (BELOW), WHICH CAN SEAT UP TO 14 PEOPLE.



THE SALON CHINOIS (OPPOSITE) FEATURES 15 HEADILY BEAUTIFUL PANELS OF 18TH-CENTURY CHINOISERIE WALLPAPER. THE FREY FABRIC USED TO UPHOLSTER THE ARMCHAIRS HAS BEEN REVERSED TO MAKE IT APPEAR SUN-FADED.





THE FABRICS IN ROOM 34 (TOP LEFT)—BRAQUENIE ON THE WALLS, FREY ON SOFA AND CHAIRS—COMBINE AND CONTRAST A SUBTLE PALETTE OF SUNNY YELLOWS; THOSE IN ROOM 38 (BOTTOM LEFT)—TOILE DE JOUY ON THE WALLS—FEATURE DUSTY ROSE PINK. OPPOSITE: THE CHAIRS IN ROOM 29 (TOP LEFT) HAVE VIOLET WOOL UPHOLSTERY, WHILE THE BATHROOM (TOP RIGHT), REplete WITH BRASS SHAVING STAND, OFFERS A DELIGHTFUL VIEW OF THE GARDEN AND PAPAL PALACE BEYOND. ROOM 25 (BOTTOM LEFT) BOASTS WALLS DECORATED WITH MULTICOLORED SERAPHIM—TO GUARD YOUR SLEEP, PERHAPS. IN ROOM 26 THE STately BATHROOM (BOTTOM RIGHT) IS A COMPARATIVELY SOBER ENSEMBLE OF EDWARDIAN FIXTURES AND MARBLE TILING.



old glass panes—painstakingly unearthed over the months from local sources, the illusion was deliciously achieved.

"I work on the decor so no one can tell it's new by making things look old and used," says Graf. In the Salon Chinois, for example, he reversed the Pierre Frey and Canovas upholstery fabrics on the sofas and chairs to make them look sun-faded. On the walls of the second floor corridor, the hand-blocked Mauny wallpaper was crumpled to make it look properly "distressed."

In the vestibule, five centuries after his predecessor, another carpenter from Carpentras constructed the intricately detailed boiseries from aged wood, glazing the plain gray paint with natural amber and a little sienna *glacis* to bring out the finesse. The curtains here demonstrate Graf's superb sleight-of-hand: The central floral motif of the fabric from Le Manache, one of France's oldest and finest silk houses, was cut out, and the two border panels sewn together, to set off the vintage hexagonal floor tiles.

The renovation, which cost 70 million francs (at the time over \$11 million) and took three years, became a family affair. Martin Stein had planned a career in medicine, but during the rebuilding, for which he served as coordinator, interpreting Graf's ideas to the legion of local artisans, he became, as he puts it, "a doctor of old houses." Today, as the hotel's artistic director, he explains expertly how the principle of symmetry was maintained throughout the high-ceilinged *enfilade* on the ground floor: By retaining the rooms' original volumes, he says, they "kept the soul of the house"; by adding a mirror and disguising a door in the wallcovering and boiserie of the Salon Rouge, for example, balance was maintained—as it was elsewhere by the construction and placement of faux doors and their frames.

Furniture throughout La Mirande is either antique—such as the breakfast room's 18th-century painted-wood console bedecked with garlands of ribbons and pastel roses—or has been copied to fit the period. Many pieces, like the 17th-century writing desk in the Salon Chinois, come from the Steins' own collection.

Following La Mirande's make-believe-family scenario, much stiff 18th-century furniture would have been replaced in the 19th century by comfortable plump sofas and armchairs. And so it has been in the Salon Rouge, which is at its most luminous in the evening. Another 19th-century phenomenon, the winter garden, was created by glassing over the central courtyard, filling it with plants and wicker furniture. It is equally seductive as a place to meet for tea or pre-dinner drinks, or to indulge one's curiosity about the other guests passing through.





THE TERRACE GARDEN (LEFT) IN THE BACK OF LA MIRANDE, A PRIVATE HAVEN OF COOL GREEN AGAINST THE FIERCE SOUTHERN SUN, IS AN ENCHANTING SPOT FOR OUTDOOR DINING. REGIONAL FRUITS (BELOW) INCLUDE FIGS AND PRICKLY PEAR. OPPOSITE: BY GLASSING OVER THE CENTRAL COURTYARD, THE STEINS CREATED A WINTER GARDEN. SITUATED JUST OFF THE SALON ROUGE, IT IS THE PERFECT SETTING FOR AFTERNOON TEA: SILVER TEAPOTS, WICKER FURNITURE, AND POTTED PALMS CONSPIRE IN A MARVELOUS EVOCATION OF 19TH-CENTURY PRIVILEGED LEISURE.

Graf's fabric fantasies take full flight in the bedrooms. In the best room, number 20, overlooking the garden and Pope's Palace, he plays an arpeggio of sunny yellows. But each room is a virtuoso demonstration of how to marry up to 15 patterns in a single space! There is a compensatory balcony or terrace in two of the smaller rooms, 37 and 38, which offer respectively a panorama of Provençal rooftops and a view of the Pope's Tower. Practical comforts are assured. There is air-conditioning and 24-hour room service; the bathrooms feature giant tubs and Edwardian-style fittings that bespeak a more leisured age.

In the afterlife I will be happily free of the logjam of luggage that burdens my earthly sojourns, so my one reproach to La Mirande—its cupboard space is minuscule—won't matter. Martin Stein does say they are looking into reorganizing and expanding the closets.

Dining at La Mirande is as festive as in the cardinal's day. In the summer one can have every meal outdoors. Breakfast is on a small terrace graced by a weeping wil-



La Mirande, a designated historical monument, has 19 double rooms—15 with a view of the Palais des Papes, some better than others—and one suite, each with bath and shower, direct-dial telephone, cable television, and air-conditioning. There is a Michelin one-star restaurant with terrace dining in fine weather, a bar, tearoom, conservatory, private garden, boutique, private garage, and gym with Jacuzzi, sauna, and solarium. The hotel is open year-round. Doubles: \$265–\$397; suites: \$530; garage: \$15; pet: \$15. For reservations: Hôtel de la Mirande, 4 Place de la Mirande, 84000 Avignon, France; 33-90-85-93-93; fax 33-90-86-26-85.

low. Lunch and dinner are served on a large terrace at tables shaded by parasols amid potted lemon trees. The food is as *raffiné* as the decor. Chef Eric Coisel serves such dishes as hot smoked salmon à la minute with tomatoes and basil, lobster and leek ravioli in bisque, and a melting mille-feuille of raspberries and vanilla cream.

With its narrow, serpentine cobbled streets, Avignon is a walker's city. The must-see Pope's Palace is only a few steps up a small lane from La Mirande; to get there by car you'd have to circle for hours. After a hot morning spent in the palace, going back to one of the small tables brushed by a breeze in the hotel garden was heaven, light years from the bustle of Avignon in season.

Even in July, when the renowned Avignon theater festival is in full swing in the courtyard of the Pope's Palace, La Mirande is a haven of calm (though it's heavily booked by festival lovers). June, September, and October are the other favorite months.

But La Mirande casts its spell whatever the season. One comes for the night, stays a weekend, and it's not long enough. Only eternity will do.

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