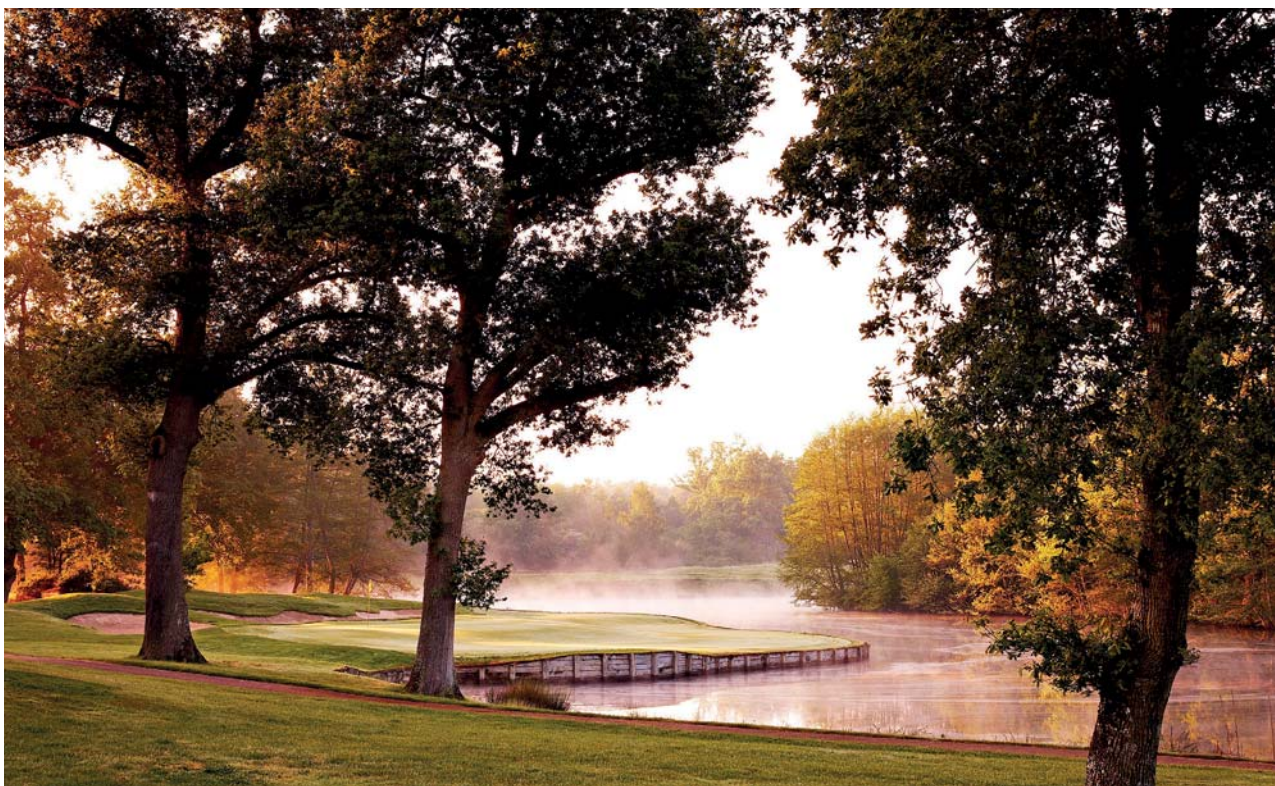




THE NEW LUXURY

(Clockwise from left) Le Baron golf course; French marketplace Le Village; Les Bordes five-bedroom Les Residences du Plein Air



PHOTOS: LES BORDES

Old country pleasures

A hunting estate in the historic Loire Valley is entering a new era that will see it transformed into a gated development of luxury homes



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FOR a French nobleman living in the 15th century, weekends would be spent at the Loire Valley, almost certainly filled with debauchery. Murder, intrigue, adultery and romance, all played out within the walls of the valley's elegant châteaux and medieval towns.

Today, the "Valley of Kings" is a rare place that has resisted centuries of modernisation. Wander through ancient forests where light dapples the rising mists, following the footsteps of former kings and queens, and you can quite believe you are in a bygone time.

Although it's one of France's best-loved tourist spots, the Loire Valley has rarely been considered a holiday home destination. Until now.

Enter Les Bordes, a 1,400-acre (566-hectare) hunting estate formerly owned by the late Baron Marcel Bich, founder of Bic ballpoint pens. For centuries it's been one of the finest domains in the country, forming a "golden triangle" with its neighbouring hunting estates occupied by the Vuitton and Guerlain fashion and cosmetics families. But now Les Bordes is entering a new era that will see it transformed into a gated development of 600 luxury homes with an iconic golf club, equestrian centre and five-star hotel and spa.

The new owners are the family of UK real-estate tycoon Kevin Cash and Cypriot-

based sports businessman Tony Jimenez. During the soft-launch phase, visitors are strictly invitation-only. Donald Trump wanted to bring an entourage of 40 and was recently turned away. It's the kind of exclusivity that Les Bordes hopes to stand for. "We are extremely happy and proud of what the team has managed to achieve over the past years," says Mr Cash. "It's a miraculous setting and location."

The concept, says Colin Kingsmill, a director at Les Bordes, is for families to be together, and yet apart. As a father of five, Mr Cash was inspired by his own family. When your children have diverse interests it's almost impossible to please everyone, he points out. "Families can all do different things at Les Bordes, horse-back riding, hiking, golf, a spa or shopping, in a secure environment," explains Mr Kingsmill.

"The idea is to turn the estate into a country club for like-minded individuals and families. It's the antidote to the south of France. It's not about showing off, there's nowhere to pull up your yacht," he added. "It's understated, elegant and old country."

But if you've already heard of Les Bordes, it's probably because of its legendary golf course. Created in the 1980s by the late Texan designer Robert von Hagge, the course has been consistently voted the number-one course in continental Europe, drawing golfing greats such as Jean van de Velde, who holds the course record of 71.

Before Mr Von Hagge died in 2010, he returned to Les Bordes to design a second course. He bet one million euros (\$\$1.5 million) – against the owners of the estate – that the new course would outrank the old one to become the best in Europe. Mr Von Hagge passed away before his final masterpiece was complete but the construction of

the new course is in progress, and likely to be ready to play in two years.

Two world-famous golf courses on one estate are likely to be a major draw for buyers, says Mr Kingsmill. But there will be many others, not least the food. Golf clubs are not known for culinary brilliance, but here the fare is Michelin-star standard. Expect melt-in-your-mouth aged game and exquisite desserts, and a wine cellar rivaling Château Margaux.

The mature forests will be free for residents to roam in and spot red deer and pheasants. Around 200 acres of the estate will be developed into a children's adventure playground, with walls to climb, pools to swim in, and teepees to camp in. Zip lines and bridges will be suspended in the canopy.

And for those who crave a bit of civilisation, there will be a "quintessentially French marketplace" called Le Village, built in the grounds of a 300-year-old priory and styled on nearby village Beaugency. Among the cobblestone alleys and ancient trees will be shops and luxury boutiques (you can bet the neighbouring Vuitton family will have a store there) and a regular market day.

Within the grounds is the fairy-tale Château Bel-Air that is to become a luxury hotel managed by a venerated hospitality group. The 1920s building is beautiful, verging on ethereal – honeymooners and wedding planners take note. There will be eight suites, a restaurant and glass orangery, and a cigar, whisky and wine bar. The plan is to create a further 72 suites in the forest, as well as some residential units. Under the canopy of trees, you will find an indoor and outdoor swimming pool, spa and wellness centre, tennis courts and gym.

As for the residences, the development

footprint will only comprise 5 per cent of the estate, so "you will get that feeling of seclusion, wherever you are", says Mr Kingsmill. Buyers can choose between bespoke open-air houses or residences ensconced in the forest. Individual properties can be built in contemporary style (think architect Philip Johnson-inspired glass house) or a more traditional French château. Plots run from one-and-a-half acres to five, and the total costs, including building will range from approximately 3.8 million euros to 8.9 million euros.

Some properties are already built – five large ones are reserved by British, Swedish and US buyers – and most can be completed within a year. Storage for art, wine, cars and clothes is available, as is a rental programme for owners. For those looking for more of a pied-à-terre, there will also be around 400 one, two and three-bedroom condominiums and branded residences for sale in the village, from around 700,000 euros, measuring about 65 square metres.

And the clincher? The first 30 buyers will receive a custom-made pair of Berluti golf shoes, which are so perfectly made it will require three trips to Paris to have them fitted.

"Living in Les Bordes will be about going back to a different time, when generations played together," explains Mr Kingsmill. "Kids can build dams and go fishing, and grandparents can enjoy spending time with their family. Simple pleasures and time spent together. It's the new luxury." **W**

Billionaire is the global luxury lifestyle website and magazine for ultra high net worth and affluent individuals pursuing the good life