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History and hysteria, the good life and the gross—it's open house at the castle.

A Royal Haunt: Sudeley Castle, England

J LIKE A little glamour in my castles—it's where the princess lives, right? One glimpse of Sudeley, in the heart of the Cotswolds—of its crenellated towers and honey-colored stone walls, the rolling lawn and reflecting pool, the centenary oaks and white peacock—and I knew this castle would match my hopelessly American expectations.

Perched on the rise of an undulating counterpane of Gloucestershire hills and dales, Sudeley is still occupied by the Dent-Brocklehursts, who have spent much of the past two centuries furnishing and restoring the castle in keeping with its 15th-century origins and eminent past. Lady Elizabeth (Dent-Brocklehurst) Ashcombe pursued the last round of refurbishing with such successful zeal that Sudeley was featured in *Architectural Digest*. Her son, Henry Dent-Brocklehurst, captures it perfectly when he says, "In a way, Sudeley has been a mirror of English history."

This history is subtly evident throughout the castle. I mount a narrow staircase to a corridor of furnished rooms, one featuring a heavily carved, fur-draped oak bed that belonged to King Charles I; the bed in another room is draped with floral hangings once owned by Marie Antoinette. There is a jewel of a room at the end of the hall used by Catherine Parr, the first Protestant queen of England and sixth wife of the Tudor King Henry VIII. Her portrait is here along with those of Henry and his ambitious courtier, Sir Thomas Seymour.

King Henry had inherited Sudeley and stayed there with his unhappy and short-lived wife Anne Boleyn in 1535. A mantle she made while awaiting her execution is displayed in the castle's lace

Crowned Beds of Europe

Sudeley Castle, England

Linderhof Castle, Germany

Champchevrier, France

Scone Palace, Scotland

collections. After Henry's death in 1547, Sudeley was given to Seymour—who six weeks later married Parr, the king's widow. A marble effigy of this six-foot beauty covers her tomb in the Chapel of Saint Mary. Her prayer book and letters are displayed in a glass case. But they may not be all that she left behind. In her dressing room, the temperature has been known to drop precipitously for no apparent reason in the sweltering summer heat. Evidence of a ghost, I'm told.

Downstairs in the vast North Hall hangs Van Dyke's portrait of King Charles I, who stayed at Sudeley during the English Civil War. A Royalist stronghold, the castle was all but destroyed by Oliver Cromwell's army in the late 17th century. (The ruins of the Tithe Barn and Banqueting Hall now serve as crumbling stone backdrops for glorious flower gardens.)

The dusky library proves so inviting that I consider curling up in a chair with one of the leather-bound volumes by famed art critic John Ruskin. One wall is nearly covered by a 16th-century tapestry portraying the expulsion from paradise. A massive carved stone fireplace and a couple of Chinese-looking French commodes flank a gathering of Dutch paintings. Sudeley is such an exemplar of comfortable aristocratic life that P.G. Wodehouse used it as the model for Blandings Castle in his books about the eccentric Lord Emsworth.

Castles are only as grand as their owners, and Sudeley was fortunate to have some swells, from King Richard III to the Victorian grande dame Emma Dent, who in the late 19th century added a wing to the castle—but only after seeking design advice from her neighbor, the brilliant aesthete William Morris. It was Dent who planted the double yew hedges that embrace the Queen's Garden, with its hundreds of English roses. There are other gardens as well, with cuttings and seeds for sale at the plant center. High tea is available at the outdoor café, and there are regular readings of Shakespeare and concerts throughout the season. It is all quite civilized and glamorous. As I think a castle should be.

—Hunter Drohejowska-Philp

Sudeley Castle, about eight miles outside the spa town of Cheltenham, is open daily from April 1 through October 31. (In March, only the grounds, plant center, and restaurant are open.) Admission fee charged. For information, phone 44-124-260-2308. Holiday cottages on the grounds can be booked through Blakes Country Cottages; phone 44-128-244-5225. There are also bed-and-breakfast inns in the neighboring village of Winchcomb.

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Cuckoo's Nest: Linderhof Castle, Germany

SEEN FROM the tour bus window, the Bavarian forest in midwinter was like a series of hand-tinted woodcut illustrations in a beautiful storybook. We drove a two-lane road that curved through snowy slopes covered with pine woods, the boughs of the trees bending picturesquely under their white burdens. In tiny villages, guild poles evoked medieval tradition, and the onion domes of German baroque steeples pierced the cold mist that was settling into the valleys. Between forested areas, cross-country skiers glided over snow-covered fields and pastures.

Deeper and deeper into the highlands we went, until we reached Linderhof, a *schloss*, or castle, built in 1869 by Ludwig II of Bavaria. Disregarding the parking lot and wurst stand (not hard to do—they're nondescript), Linderhof is, in itself, an astonishing aggregate of fairy-tale images. Built along with several other elaborate castles in the area by a king called Mad, Linderhof was a golden cage for a royal cuckoo. On the snowy day we visited, the cold isolation of the site underlined the lonely poignancy of mad Ludwig's tale, as did the phony Frenchness of the decor (rococo being the over-the-top ornamental style of the themed chambers) and the fierce partisanship of our guide, an English-speaking Bavarian, well insulated in his loden coat.

"The Moorish gazebo with the peacock throne is closed for the winter, as is the Grotto of Venus," the guide told us. "All you have today is the miserable weather and me."

Our group was standing outside the two-story castle, a building no larger than your average Holmby Hills mansion, but situated on an impressive rise. We gazed out at the dormant formal gardens and watched swans plying the dark waters that punctuated the whitened lawns.

As we followed the guide inside for our tour, I heard several people gasp from the cold—even more penetrating within the stone walls of the schloss than it had been outside.

As we filed through small, excessively decorated rooms (carved, gold-leafed panels, statues in niches, tapestries, a hall of mirrors, a room of shiny black marble and lacquered furniture, rooms with frescoed ceilings), our guide assured us that Ludwig had been a great sovereign much beloved by