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The best (and worst) of France in 2014

Le Rosbif Writes: As the year ends, our Brit in a beret reflects on glasses clinked, châteaux explored, folk dancers endured – and Monet's little secret

French château of the year

Renaissance châteaux show up around every bend in France, but only one tells a story of topless dancing, a micro-skirt made of bananas, espionage, and a dozen children.

The story is, of course, Josephine Baker's. Post-war, the music-hall mega-star bought the Château des Milandes, overlooking the Dordogne, near Sarlat. She had the money. After a tough start in the United States, Miss Baker crossed the Atlantic to become an exotic-dancing, bill-topper in Paris. The château has the photos, the micro-skirt and a great many other, more substantial costumes and gowns. This beats looking at 16th-century mouldings and mullioned windows by a factor too high to compute.

During the war, while contemporary Parisian personalities (Maurice Chevalier, Coco Chanel, Arletty, Sacha Guitry, even Edith Piaf) evinced, let us say, ambiguous attitudes to the Fascist occupier, Miss Baker worked with the Resistance. Inter alia, she delivered messages coded as sheet music. This tale, too, is covered in the château. So is the star's post-war adoption of 12 kids of all nations, her stab at multiculturalism. She installed them in her château, which, through the Fifties, she also developed as a leisure resort. Way ahead of its time, this grew to engulf the surrounding hamlet. The public came in waves – but Miss Baker was a starry-eyed, hopeless administrator. Money haemorrhaged from the place. By the Sixties, it was deep in debt, finally being sold for peanuts. Miss Baker was thrown out. There is, in the château kitchen, a 1969 photo of one of the 20th century's most alluring stage performers huddled on her château steps like a bag lady.