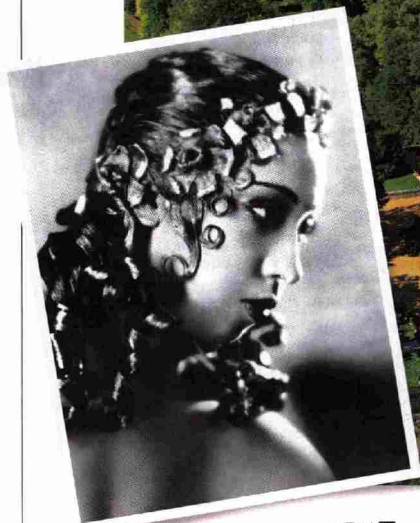


THE ULTIMATE SUMMER

BLACKBOOK

11  
 Places That Still Matter

Château des Milandes was Josephine Baker's Sleeping Beauty castle.



# Chez Josephine

Long before Mia, Madonna, and Angelina, Josephine Baker was the ultimate celebrity serial adopter, creating an idealistic—and eccentric—home for a dozen children at her beloved French château. **BY RICHARD B. WOODWARD**

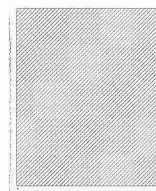
It's easy to see why Josephine Baker lost her heart and ultimately much of her life savings to the Château des Milandes. Perched on a craggy hill in France's Aquitaine region, overlooking the Dordogne River, the place is everything one would imagine a Renaissance castle to be. Built in 1489, the 24-room mansion features stained-glass windows, an ivy-covered turret, gargoyles,

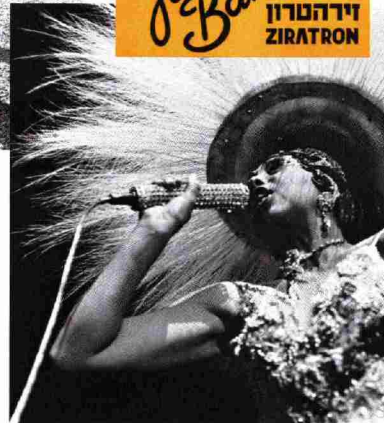
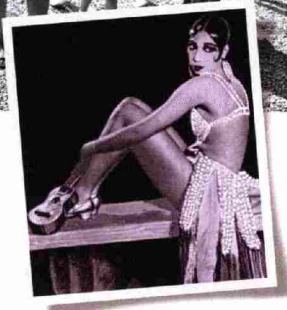
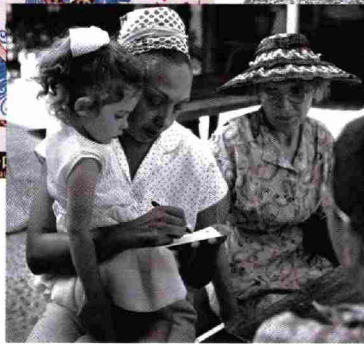
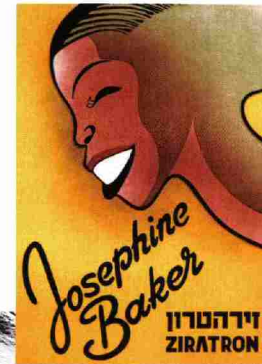
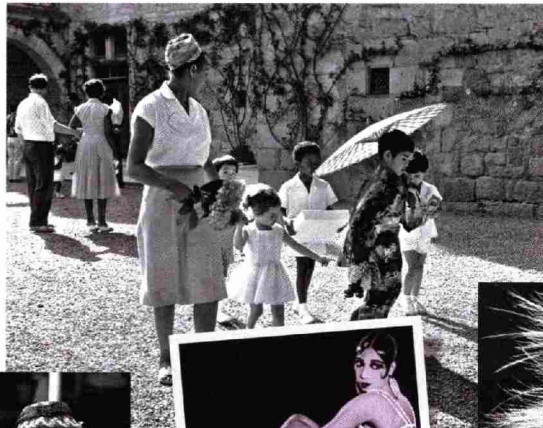
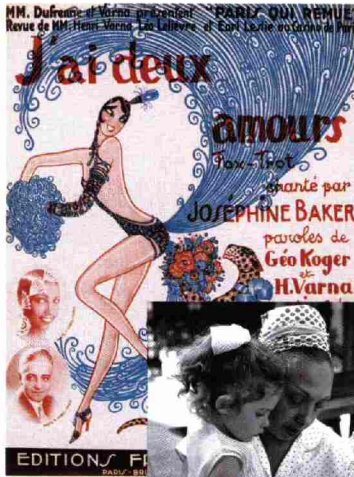
vaulted ceilings, mammoth fireplaces, and a grand circular staircase of stone. For a black child from the St. Louis slums, owning this Sleeping Beauty castle, as Baker called it, was the fulfillment of a dream. Today it houses a museum dedicated to her life and career, a monument to one of the 20th century's most revered entertainers.

Born in 1906, Baker made her name as a vaudeville cutup and dancer at the

Plantation Club in Harlem. But it was her performances in Paris at the age of 19, when she appeared in *La Revue Nègre* as an exotic "sauvage"—topless and barefoot, dressed only in a skirt of feathers (the banana skirt came later)—that transformed Baker into a sensation. Describing her act, the French critic Pierre de Rénier wrote, "She is in constant motion, her body writhing like a snake or more precisely

FROM LEFT: © AISA/EVERETT COLLECTION; ANGÉLIQUE DE SAINT-EUPÉRY





Posters and images from Baker's performances as well as a pair of photographs of her with her adopted children at the château in 1959

## By the thirties Baker was a chanteuse, a movie star, and Europe's highest-paid entertainer.

like a dipping saxophone. Music seems to pour from her body."

By the thirties Baker, nicknamed the Black Pearl, was a chanteuse, a movie star, and the highest-paid performer in Europe. Forget the adulation that came with her celebrity, however. For Baker the real reward was the Château des Milandes, her home from 1937 to 1969. "She was like Marie Antoinette at Versailles," says Jean-Claude Baker, who was taken under her wing at the age of 14 and later coauthored the 1993 biography *Josephine: The Hungry Heart*. "It was incredible."

When Baker first drove through the iron gates of the château, it was boarded up and semi-inhabited. Initially she rented the property but during World War II was seldom there, as she devoted herself to raising money for De Gaulle's Free French forces and operating as a spy during her travels.

The castle nonetheless proved a convenient hiding place for both Jewish refugees and weapons for the Resistance. Baker emerged from the war a hero, only adding to her fame. In 1947, when she was 41, she used her fortune to buy the Château des Milandes and began transforming it into a magic kingdom, a virtual theme park with herself as the main attraction.

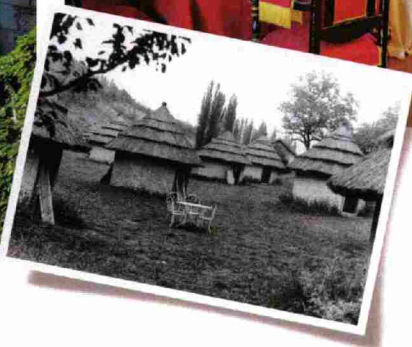
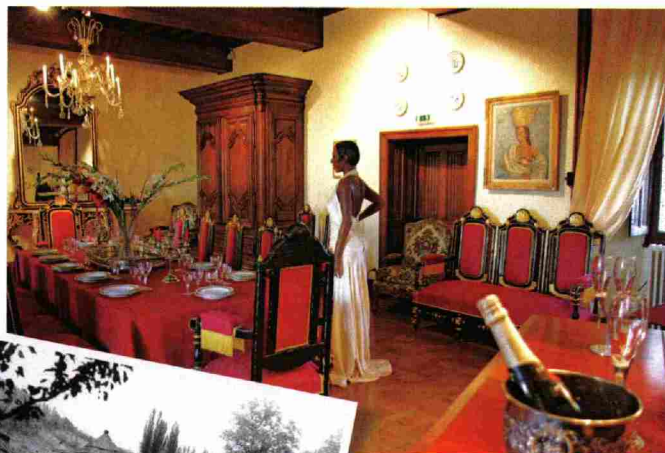
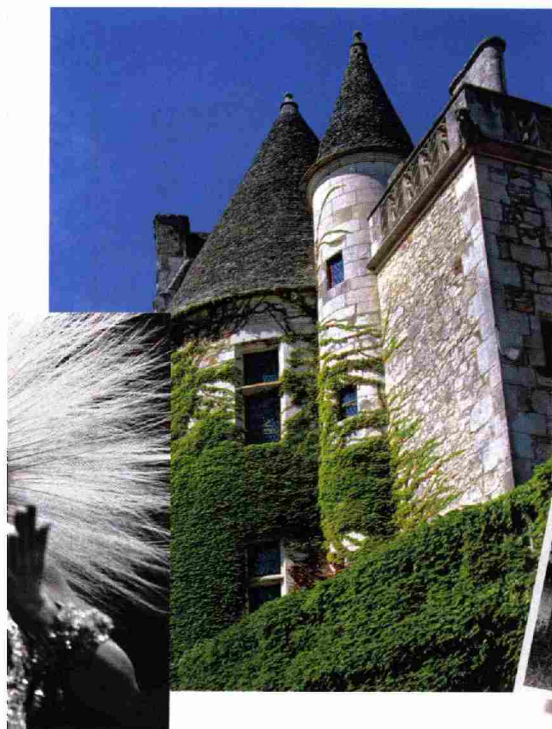
Baker commissioned a shrine, which she named the Jorama, replete with wax figurines re-creating scenes from her eventful life. Outside was a J-shaped swimming pool, an experimental farm, and a simulated African village with conical straw huts. To keep things running, she employed a staff of 120. In the early fifties more than 300,000 tourists visited each summer. Guests could stay in a luxurious hotel, La Chartreuse des Milandes, and, after enjoying a show in Baker's theater, could revel

into the wee hours at her nightclub—all on the grounds of the estate.

In 1953 Baker and her fourth husband, French orchestra leader Jo Bouillon, decided to adopt poor children of various races and religions. In the spirit of the United Nations and "The Family of Man" exhibition—internationalist symbols of the age—Baker wanted to prove that people from anywhere could live together in what she dubbed her Village du Monde. The couple's first adoptee was a Japanese boy whom Baker met while on tour. Her Rainbow Tribe, as she called it, eventually numbered ten boys and two girls.

"When she came back from a show, she would always wake all of us up," says Jerry Bouillon-Baker, one of her adopted sons. "It could be three or four in the morning. She didn't care about that. She wanted us to know she missed us."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: © SWIM INK 2, LLC/CORBIS; © 1959, 2008 STARS AND STRIPES; KEYSTONE/EVERETT COLLECTION; COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION; © 1959, 2008 STARS AND STRIPES



The African village Baker created (left) is long gone, but visitors can tour the château's grounds and several rooms, including the dining hall (above), presided over by a wax figure of the entertainer wearing one of her dresses.

Alas, Baker's idealism was no match for her extravagance. Bouillon left for Argentina in 1964, having failed to rein in her spending. Her numerous creditors were not impressed by her celebrity or her Croix de Guerre. Even a television campaign Brigitte Bardot organized to save Les Milandes and protect the Rainbow Tribe may have done as much damage as good. The press fiercely debated whether Baker deserved special treatment from the state. The verdict came when a court evicted her and the children in 1969.

"We knew what to expect," Bouillon-Baker says. "We had lived with these difficulties for years. She told us, 'If we lose everything, we can go somewhere else.'"

To pay down her debts and support herself and her family, the sixtiesomething entertainer continued to tour the world. And on April 12, 1975—a few days after her retrospective revue opened to raves in Paris, with Princess Grace and Mick Jagger in the audience—she died of a brain hemorrhage. Her funeral procession attracted some 20,000 mourners.

After Baker's death, the château passed through several owners' hands, falling into decline before it was bought in 2001 by Henry and Claude de Labarre (an architect and a viticulturist, respectively), who had owned a house outside the property's gates since the early seventies. Their daughter, Angélique de Saint-Exupéry, 33, whose husband is a distant cousin of the author of *The Little Prince*, manages the day-to-day operations. Over the past several years the family has restored the grounds in the spirit of Baker's exotic themes, adding a mews with caged falcons and other birds of prey and planting thousands of flowers in the formal gardens. "We wanted to pay homage to Josephine Baker," says Saint-Exupéry. "*Trop vite oubliée*—too quickly forgotten."

The modest museum they created tells Baker's extraordinary story through photographs, recordings, film clips, and artifacts such as stage costumes, including the famous banana belt from her show at the Folies Bergère. Posters from her revues decorate the walls along with documents of her decades-long struggle for racial jus-

tice, among them photographs of her with Martin Luther King Jr. and participating in the 1963 March on Washington.

Tours of the château, which often include visits to one of the children's bedrooms and to Jo Bouillon's office, inevitably end in Baker's decadent bathroom. Designed in the colors of Arpège, her favorite perfume, it has black walls, gold-plated fixtures, and a gold-leaf ceiling. It's one of the few rooms that truly showcase her outrageous style.

Long gone are the Jorama, the African village, and the J-shaped pool (now belonging to a separate property). But in this remote corner of southwestern France, a family of modest means is keeping intact Josephine Baker's castle fantasy and the memory of her remarkable life. ■

*Château des Milandes is open from early April to early November. In addition to tours of the castle (with its exhibits on Josephine Baker's life and career) there are regular falconry displays. The café serves salads and traditional brasserie dishes for lunch. For information, visit milandes.com.*