

# Good Housekeeping

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# All that jazz in the Dordogne

**Teresa Levonian Cole** visits Château des Milandes, former home of legendary performer Josephine Baker, to see her most iconic costumes

Josephine Baker was a woman so ahead of her time that it's hard to believe she died 50 years ago this summer. An exotic dancer, singer and actress, as well as a spy for the French Resistance, Josephine was the embodiment of the Jazz Age. She loved both men and women – from Le Corbusier to Frida Kahlo – and famously walked her pet cheetah, Chiquita, along the streets of Paris.

Born in St Louis, Missouri, in 1906, Josephine fled poverty and began performing at 13. Twice married and divorced by 19, she sailed to Paris in 1925 to perform at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. The show, *La Revue Nègre*, and her erotic, near-naked dancing, caused a sensation and made her an icon.

The story of this Black female trailblazer has always fascinated me, and the only museum dedicated to it is the Château des Milandes (milandes.com, entrance around £12), her former home in the Dordogne. Josephine fell in love with its Gothic-Renaissance style in 1938 and bought it in 1947. This fairy-tale property, where she lived for 22 years, is in a region known for truffles, cassoulet and confit de canard. Easily reached from Bergerac, nearby attractions include the medieval town of Sarlat, La Roque-Gageac and the

Lascaux caves. While some come for the château's gardens and falconry, the real treasures are inside. There you'll find hundreds of exhibits celebrating Josephine's life, as well as her famous costumes acquired by the de Labarre family, the château's current owners.

I gasped when I saw the golden banana skirt she wore for her Folies Bergère debut in 1926, a jewelled swan headdress, still in perfect condition, and couture outfits created for her by Patou, Nina Ricci, Balmain and Dior. An excellent audio tour leads you through rooms dedicated to different aspects of her life and two bathrooms that she'd decorated to match her favourite perfumes.

Behind the glamour lay a passionate advocate for racial equality. Josephine also adopted 12 children from various countries and backgrounds, calling them her 'rainbow tribe'. Most moving is how the château highlights her wartime heroism. A French citizen through marriage in 1937, she joined the Resistance, passing messages in sheet music and sheltering Jews. Her medals and Free French uniform are also on display.

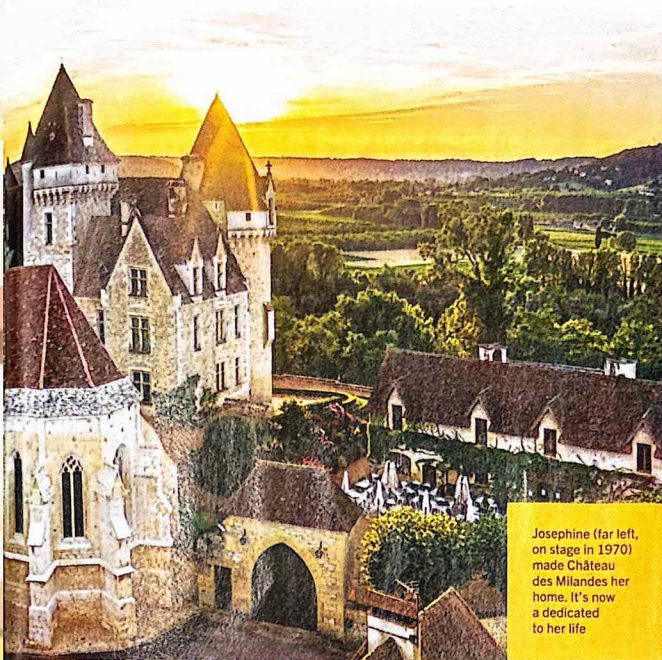
The tour culminates in the kitchen, with more than a touch of sadness. In 1968, her debts forced the sale of the château, along with its contents. Refusing to leave, she barricaded



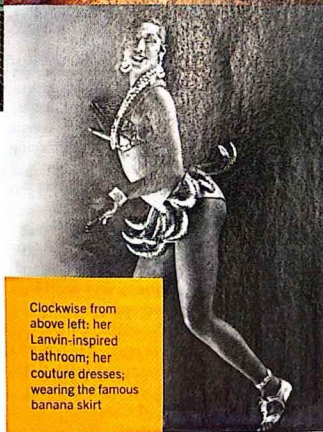
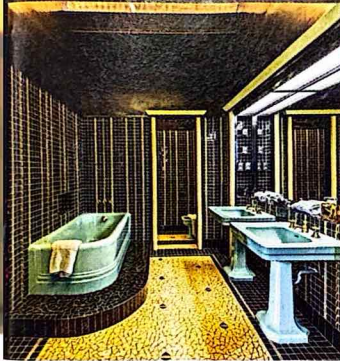
herself inside until evicted the following year. Princess Grace, a close friend, then offered her and the children refuge in Monaco.

But perhaps the most poignant exhibit is the dress she wore for her final performance at the Théâtre Bobino on 8 April 1975. Four days later, she died





Josephine (far left, on stage in 1970) made Château des Milandes her home. It's now a dedicated to her life

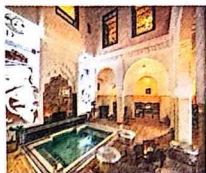


Clockwise from above left: her Lanvin-inspired bathroom; her couture dresses; wearing the famous banana skirt

of a brain haemorrhage, her funeral procession passing the very same theatre. I left the exhibition full of admiration for Josephine's courage and, amid the boxwood hedges of the gardens of Marquessy, raised a glass of local chestnut liqueur to the woman who so loved this pretty corner of France. ■

**GET THERE:** Double rooms at Domaine de Rochebois ([domaine-rochebois.com](http://domaine-rochebois.com)) start from £299 a night. Easyjet ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)) offers return flights from London Stansted to Bergerac from £225pp.

## WHERE ELSE TO FOLLOW IN JOSEPHINE'S FOOTSTEPS



■ The Riad Star (above) in Marrakech ([marrakech-riad.co.uk](http://marrakech-riad.co.uk), double rooms from £115 a night) was Josephine's Moroccan home in the early 1940s. It's attached to the former palace of the Pasha of Marrakech.

■ Josephine stayed at the Pera Palace Hotel in Istanbul ([perapalace.com](http://perapalace.com), double rooms from £162 a night) in 1934. Once the terminus of the Orient Express, it's also where Agatha Christie wrote *Murder On The Orient Express*.



■ Popular with writers and artists, the five-star Hotel Napoléon ([hotel-napoleon.com](http://hotel-napoleon.com), double rooms from £373 a night) was where Josephine liked to stay when performing in Paris. Still owned by descendants of the original proprietors, the hotel (above) reflects the glamorous Art Deco era.

■ Josephine was also a frequent guest at the Hotel El Palace in Barcelona ([hotelpalacebarcelona.com](http://hotelpalacebarcelona.com), double rooms from £322) in the 1950s and you can stay in a bright floral suite that's named after her.