

PART OF VERSAILLES PALACE TO BECOME LUXURY HOTEL

Preparations are underway for a Belgian company to turn part of the Chateau de Versailles into a luxury hotel. But the handing over of a chunk of treasured public heritage to a private operator is an unusual occurrence in France.

It's a sumptuous historical monument, a wildly popular tourist attraction, and a symbol of French monarchy and decadence. Now the Palace of Versailles is getting ready to add to its list of functions: preparations are underway for a Belgian company to turn The Hotel du Grand Controle, traditionally home to the palace's treasurers, into a luxury hotel.

The initiative is meant to spur a two-pronged plan to exploit the economic potential of certain valuable, but expensively maintained and often damaged buildings while simultaneously pursuing their renovation. But the handing over of a chunk of treasured public heritage to a private operator is an unusual occurrence in France.

A PIONEERING INITIATIVE

The project is expected to transform the Hotel du Grand Controle into a 23-bedroom hotel scheduled to open in late 2011. Some of those rooms will overlook the "Orangerie", an elaborate greenhouse featuring lemon trees and orange trees.



Jean-Jacques Aillagon, president of the Chateau de Versailles, has said that without the arrangement he would not have the budget necessary to renovate the building. Speaking to reporters, Aillagon called the creation of the

hotel "a pioneering initiative". He added that his mission was to save the building, which was "in a very dilapidated state".

According to the initiative, Belgian company Ivy International SA will renovate the 1,700





square-metre Hotel du Grand Contrôle — which was built in the 1680s by architect Jules Hardouin-Mansart. Ivy will lease the building from Versailles over the next 30 years. The renovation, headed by Frederic Didier, chief architect for historic monuments, is expected to cost roughly 5.5 million euros — or 7.3 million dollars.

Ivy will then pay back a percentage of the hotel's profits as "rent" to the Chateau de Versailles. The amount will vary in proportion to how much money the hotel makes.

The construction of the hotel is made possible by an agreement signed in 2009 between the French Culture Ministry and the Tourism

Department that was intended to boost the economic development of French historical and cultural landmarks.

To achieve that goal, the Centre for National Monuments has asked the Atout France agency, in charge of developing tourism, to consider a proposal to similarly convert 20 other listed heritage sites, including French royal palace Chateau de Fontainebleau.

French Senator Albéric de Montgolfier, of President Nicolas Sarkozy's centre-right UMP party, presented Sarkozy with a favourable report on the project. He pointed to what he framed as the economic necessity of the initiative, saying that in this context, plans to convert part of the Palace of Versailles into a hotel "must be supported".

Montgolfier concluded his report by recommending the creation in France of hotels located in converted monuments, inspired by the luxury "paradors" in Spain that are usually set up in monasteries or castles.

GAMBLING WITH A PUBLIC POSSESSION

But the financial motivation is not reason enough for everyone to justify entrusting one of France's most prized cultural possessions to a company. In an interview with France24.com, Philippe Revault, a professor at the Paris School of Architecture, expressed his indignation.



tion. "Once again, it's economic logic that wins out. In the name of profitability and lack of finances, they're gambling with a public possession, which by definition is inalienable and must remain accessible to all citizens", Revault said.

The Palace of Versailles, once a spectacular setting for French state affairs, is a particularly cherished cultural landmark beloved by visitors who flock to its famed Hall of Mirrors and lush gardens; the UNESCO World Heritage Centre has named it one of the greatest achievements of 18th-century French art.

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