

Realtor cracks the code to luxury living
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By Glenn Roberts Jr.
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Olivia Hsu Decker

Olivia Hsu Decker lives a life of luxury. A Realtor who works in the megabucks market of Marin County, Calif., Decker drops names like Andre Agassi, Cher, Eddie Murphy and Sharon Stone when she discusses past clients.

An international socialite, Decker, 53, has achieved celebrity status herself. In the past decade, Decker bought two chateaus in France one in the Provence region near Aix-en-Provence and the other about a 35-minute drive northwest of Paris.

One of these palatial properties, the Chateau de Villette near Paris, was featured prominently in "The Da Vinci Code," a bestselling book that has inspired heated religious debate and discussion since its release last year.

"I have the kind of lifestyle like the luxury home buyers and sellers," Decker said. Born in Shanghai and raised in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan, she now splits her time between her home in Belvedere, Calif., and her chateaus in France.

"I collect antiques. I have traveled to the best spots in Switzerland, Italy and France. I sing opera." She has served on the San Francisco Opera Guild Board of Directors. In 1979, she was one of the first women to join the Corinthian Yacht Club, an elite bayside boating and social club in Tiburon, Calif., that was founded in 1886.

She hosts and supports charity events, and she donated the proceeds from the first "Da Vinci Code Tour" to a school in Marin County. She has been the subject of numerous magazine and newspaper articles, both in the United States and abroad.

"The Da Vinci Code" author Dan Brown

Decker said she has invited Dan Brown, author of "The Da Vinci Code," to stay at Villette. And a few years ago she provided some information about the chateau to Brown's wife, Blythe, an art historian and painter who assisted Brown's research for the book.

Last month, Decker was busy hosting guests at the Chateau de Villette who paid thousands of dollars to stay at the chateau while participating in tours that included numerous French sites featured in "The Da Vinci Code." She met with droves of reporters from giant media outlets, including The New York Times, CNN and CBS.

Since Decker purchased the Villette mansion and grounds, it has been featured in several films, including "Le Comte de Monte Cristo," starring French heartthrob Gerard Depardieu and "Happiness is better than life," a not-yet-released film by Claude Lelouch.

Chateau de Villette

Also, the cinematic version of the "The Da Vinci Code" is in the works, and will likely include some filming at Chateau de Villette, Decker said. Ron Howard will direct the film and the leading roles are rumored to belong to Russell Crowe and Kate Beckinsale.

Decker is captivated by the storyline in "The Da Vinci Code." She said she has read the book several times and has listened to an audio version as well. "There are many things accurate and many things fictional" in the book, she said.

"Whether Dan Brown's book is true or not, it is a good thing that Americans and French are now healing the wounds of a bitter breakup over the Iraqi war by a spiritual, historical story," she said. "I joked that the mending of the relationship of the U.S. and France required 'an act of God' and 'The Da Vinci Code' provided a good reason for Americans to visit France again."

As a Realtor, Decker specializes in marketing homes that are valued from \$2 million to \$10 million. She leapt into a career as a Marin County real estate agent in 1979, aggressively pursuing the luxury homes market. She quickly rose to become a top agent nationally.

Even before she launched her career as an agent, Decker bought homes, fixed them up and rented them out or sold them for a profit. By the time she launched her career as an agent, she owned five properties.

After living in Tokyo, one of the most pricey real estate markets in the world, Decker set her sights very high as a newcomer to the industry.

"I remember when I announced that I wouldn't touch any homes less than \$1 million, which was a lot of money in 1979," she said. "I was used to very high prices and I thought that selling the most expensive homes would be the most rewarding and fun job."

She learned some tough lessons early in her career when a client walked out of a deal at the last moment it would have been her first real estate transaction.

"He had his pen in his hand and just before he signed the closing paper he decided that he changed his mind about buying the house," she recalled. "(He) ended up walking away from the deal and lost his deposit and I lost the sale after very hard work. I learned the lesson that no deal is a done deal until the deal is closed, and that buyers often have extreme remorse."

Chateau de Villette

Her skills in the art of the deal are coupled with a knack for style and decor.

"I am a Pisces and Pisces are very artistic and creative people. I think I was born with good eyes and tastes. I am constantly changing design and rearranging furniture. I am never completely happy with one decoration," she said. "I try to improve all the time. When I was decorating my chateaus, I would go shopping for antiques all day long with my girlfriends. We got home after 8 p.m. to have dinner and they would be exhausted and go to bed.

"I stayed up half the night rearranging furniture with what I bought that day and in the morning when they got up the chateau looked different from the night before." As a real estate agent, Decker often takes it upon herself to decorate the homes that she is selling. "I love to decorate homes. I stage my listings quite often."

Kathryn Copeland, who first met Decker at a private party in San Francisco in 1998, said, "She has a great deal of style. She always dresses beautifully." Copeland said she has never glimpsed Decker in casual clothing. "She told me that when she was a little girl she told her parents that she was French she was sure she had gotten mixed up. Her whole life she's had a French soul.

"She amazed herself when she bought (Chateau de Villette). She's so petite and tiny, and I remember standing with her in the courtyard, looking at Villette. And it was so massive. She sounded like a little girl: 'I own this.' But it suits her. She's very at home there. She loves entertaining. She loves having a big group of people there."

Decker bought Chateau de Villette in 1999, four years after her purchase of the chateau in Provence. Decker said of her decision, "I have no idea what compelled me to buy it. I needed another chateau like I needed a hole in my head. I guess I couldn't resist buying a 20-bedroom chateau on 200 acres that was only a half-hour from Paris it is like owning 200 acres in Belvedere-Tiburon."

Copeland said after her chance meeting with Decker at a party, they struck up a conversation about Paris. Copeland was leaving on a trip for Paris, and Decker invited her to stay at the chateau in Provence. That chance meeting led Copeland to leave the corporate world to pursue a business venture with Decker.

Now Copeland contracts with Decker to rent out the French chateaus for specialty tours that feature culinary, language or photography training in a luxury setting. She also lines up tours at another French chateau and a sprawling Tuscan mansion in Italy.

Chateau de Villette

Decker, who is divorced and without children, is a very busy woman, and her social and business calendar is frequently booked. She has a global satellite phone that works in 174 countries. She frequently conducts business via e-mail and fax. Decker said, "I always get

things done, even if I have to stay up all night to do it. President Truman once said, 'If you want to get the job done, hire a busy man.'"

While dining with Decker late one night in Paris, Copeland said Decker received a phone call from the United States. "(The caller) had no idea she was at a restaurant in Paris at 1 a.m. Her phone is usually on."

The typically erratic schedule of a real estate agent is further complicated by Decker's globetrotting. "Clients expect me to work evenings, weekends, 24-7 all year-round," Decker said.

But she seems to thrive in this on-the-go, mile-a-minute lifestyle. "I can't stand sitting around doing nothing," she said. "I socialize with my clients most of the time so there is no line between business and personal life. I work all hours of the day. But I don't mind."

She squeezes in time for her hobbies, too: cooking, listening to music, entertaining guests, antique shopping, writing, reading and traveling.

And she is never bored. "I never get tired of looking at beautiful homes."

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