



# IN BED WITH WALLIS SIMPSON

Rent the French weekend retreat once owned by star-crossed lovers King Edward VIII and his American commoner, whose story lives on care of Britain's Landmark Trust heritage charity

*by Georgina Scott*

Nothing whets the British appetite for intrigue quite like a royal wedding, especially when it involves a commoner. But while Prince William and Kate Middleton may be the current talk of the town it's hard to imagine their romance scaling the dizzy highs - and lows - of their forebears Edward and Wallis. For sheer rip, rancour and raciness, no regal yarn surpasses the exploits of King Edward VIII and twice-divorced American commoner Wallis Simpson, whose union forced Edward (later the Duke of Windsor) to abdicate in 1936 after less than a year on the throne. He remains the only British monarch to have done so. In relinquishing duty for his wife-to-be, Edward's actions and the narrative that followed are often referred to as "the greatest love story of the 20th century".

And now the 21st. Their union has been brought to the fore by filmmakers, writers and even Madonna - all hoping to cash in on the 75th anniversary of the abdication this year. Director Tom Hooper's film *The King's Speech* featuring Colin Firth set the tone with a comely Oscar quartet, and Madonna - ever the aspirant Wallis despite her Madgesterial pop stature - has produced, directed and written *W.E.*, a Wallis Simpson biopic, slated for release later this year.

However compelling the cinematic stories, nothing gets to the concrete truth quite like Britain's Landmark Trust offering; the chance to rent Le Moulin de Tuilerie in the French town of Gif-sur-Yvette, the mill complex frequented and owned by the Duke and Duchess, which was sold one year after Edward's death in 1973. Le Moulin can feel like a love story still living. Whilst interiors have been modified and updated, original framed photographs of the star-crossed lovers dress walls and desks and their spirit still courses through the mill, as though they'd never left.

Exiled though they were at Second World War's end, the pair crossed the English Channel and settled in a 19th-century villa in Paris's Bois de Boulogne. But feeling like "animals in a gilded zoo", as Wallis described the post-abdication spotlight, they sought weekend sanctu-



ary - and sensuality - outside the capital's environs at Le Moulin, the only property they ever owned, from 1952 to 1972.

What transpired there has been much written about and guessed at. Wallis was portrayed as the matron-cum-headmistress-cum-Mata Hari, whose discipline, aesthetic intensity and supposed erotic prowess beguiled and captivated the schoolboy-like Duke, rendering him her supplicant. She would wrap his knuckles as if in class and he would lavish her with jewels, when he wasn't on all fours begging for cigarettes, buckling Wallis's shoes or painting her toenails, as servants later recalled. Most potent weapon in her erotic armoury was the "Shanghai Squeeze" - enabling her to contract the walls of her womanhood, thereby making "a matchstick feel like a Havana cigar". Simpson allegedly

learned the technique on trips to Hong Kong, China and Singapore during her first marriage. A one-time resident of Shanghai's International Settlement, Simpson's exploits in the city are detailed by the municipal police department as opium smoking, heroin peddling, visiting upscale brothels and posing naked for saucy postcards. British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin famously said at the time: "If she were what I call a respectable whore, I wouldn't mind."

When the Duke and Duchess weren't making merry together at Le Moulin, the Windsors were leading lights of international café society, and entertained the glitterati of the 1950's and 60's at their French retreat. Maria Callas, Marlene Dietrich, Hollywood heavyweights Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, and even Cecil Beaton were regular visitors.

PHOTOGRAPHS: THE LANDMARK TRUST

Given the high-class standing of the social crowding, the Windsor's expanded the guest accommodation into the mill's outbuildings. The 'cottages' as they called them, retain a sense of their simple utilitarian space, but now with an overlay of elegant living. One, 'La Célibataire' (or bachelor's quarters) is where iconic British photographer Cecil Beaton stayed when he visited. Beaton was a particular friend of the Duchess, and she sat for him often; his portraits of Wallis for *Vogue* magazine still adorn the walls. Beaton's pad is the perfect hideaway for two, one of the bathrooms still complete with a 1950's hip bath. The ground floor boasts a sun-filled sitting area overlooking the gardens, and the large bedroom is tucked under the timbers above.

The property's horticultural potential captivated the green-fingered Duke who commissioned English landscape designer Russell Page - Badminton Park and Longleat - to enhance its aspect. The grounds that Edward tended remain much the same today, open to views of the valley beyond. The buildings at Le Moulin are set around a courtyard behind huge oak gates. Each property has a private terrace, and guests can wander the grounds full of birdsong, where the Windsor's buried their beloved dogs.

The mini marvel of history that is Le Moulin is what you make of it: a space to play host to many, or none, or the one. A calming retreat as the city yields to the countryside, where the gilded zoo softens into the sylvan glade, and a former king prioritised his will to love a commoner over his duty to rule a country. Leave, and there's not a dry eye in the house.

*Cardinal Points*: Le Moulin starts at £1,925 per week; La Célibataire, £539. ([www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)); or telephone the Trust's Booking Office: (+44) 1628 825925

