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B SIGNATURE HOTELS & RESORTS OPERATES FIVE EXCLUSIVE HOTELS IN LUXURY RESORT ON THE CARIBBEAN ISLAND OF ST BARTS. TRICIA WELSH

THE HEART OF PARIS, A GOLF RESORT IN FRANCE'S LOIRE-ATLANTIQUE REGION AND A MEETS THE BORN-AGAIN HOTELIER IN CHARGE OF THE FAMILY-OWNED BUSINESS.

Thirteen years ago, Anne Jousse was an insurance broker in her family's Bessé Conseil en Assurances company in Nantes, western France.

Today, she is a hotelier and CEO of her family-owned company, B Signature Hotels & Resorts, operating five luxury hotels in the heart of Paris, a golf resort between Brittany and the Loire Valley and a luxury beach resort on St Barts in the Caribbean – with a combined staff of nearly 400.

Not only has she had to compete with the long-established international hotel brands in a city that must be one of the most competitive luxury hotel markets in the world, she has done it with great éclat and her own inimitable French style, creating her own unique brand of individual boutique accommodation that is the envy of many.

So how does one transition from insurer to luxury hotelier in such a short time and do it with such aplomb?

I meet the diminutive brunette – wife, mother of three and grandmother of four and always impeccably attired in either Christian Dior or Yves St Laurent – in the lounge bar of her home away from home in Paris, the Hôtel Bel Ami, on the Left Bank. On one of her weekly forays from Nantes, where she still lives, to Paris to catch up with her five all-female hotel managers, she tells me about her change of career, a move she appears to relish and one she seems to have been born to.

It all began in the French countryside when her father, Alain Bessé, used to play golf in the 1960s and 70s at La Bretesche, a golf course near his insurance company's head office in Nantes. When the course went bankrupt, her father bought it – later acquiring a small hotel near the course when the owner retired.

"Although my father knew nothing of being a hotelier, he took on the project, completely remodelling the historical 15th-century hotel, while keeping his main job as an insurance broker," says Anne. Today, the 40-room villa Domaine de la Bretesche is a Relais et Châteaux property with a fine dining restaurant and Le Club brasserie. An eponymous majestic 15th century castle adds a fairytale quality to the 200ha complex..

"Later," Anne explains, "my father handed the responsibility of the hotel over to me, even though I had no hospitality experience. I kept my principal job as an insurance broker while overseeing Domaine de la Bretesche."

In 2003, they sold part of the insurance company and were looking for new investments. "We decided to expand in the hospitality industry, but wanted something that wasn't seasonal. The only logical place to go in France was Paris," she reasons.



Anne Jousse, B Signature Hotels & Resorts CEO.



Hôtel de Sers, the 19th-century home of the Marquis de Sers.



Hôtel Bel Ami, Saint-Germain-des-Prés: ‘the place to be’.



The historic Café de Flore, close to Hôtel Bel Ami in Saint-Germain-des-Prés.



But where to start? Like many visitors to Paris, they took out a map and decided on three areas: Opéra, Champs-Élysées and Saint-Germain-des-Prés. “We then searched the real estate market,” says Anne.

But the choice of building was not ad hoc. It had to meet a specific brief. To make the cut the building had to be historic or have an interesting provenance. And, of course, it had to be in one of those three desirable areas.

“The first property we found was Hôtel Bel Ami in Saint-Germain-des-Prés,” Anne recalls. “Because of the economic crisis, Goldman Sachs had the hotel for a year. Nobody wanted to buy it, and I don’t know why. It’s perfectly located and has more than 100 rooms, which is huge for the area.”

Located one cobblestone street away from the celebrated church of the same name and just metres from fashion-chic Boulevard Saint-Germain, the hotel is housed in what was Paris’s first printing factory, where French author Guy de Maupassant’s novel *Bel Ami* was printed in 1885. Appropriately, a book depository in the reception area encourages guests to leave foreign books for distribution overseas by La Bibliothèque sans Frontières.

Today, the 108-room hotel, with its catch-phrase, ‘The Hôtel Bel-Ami is the place to be’, attracts creative

types and those who love being in the heart of the vibrant sixth arrondissement surrounded by fabulous boutiques, art galleries, bustling cafés, including the historic Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots, frequented by Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre and the literati and intelligentsia of the day. Its newly refurbished eatery Les Mots Passants was recently voted one of the top spots for brunch in Paris. Esteemed architect Pascal Allaman, who designed the original Bel Ami renovations, was recruited during the hotel’s forced pandemic closure to convert several first-floor rooms into quintessential très chic Parisian-style apartments.

Anne admits they cut their teeth with this, their first Parisian hotel, before buying a second one in 2007, Hôtel Édouard 7, the only four-star hotel in the five-star stable and located on Avenue de l’Opéra. The hotel was once the Paris residence of the Prince of Wales – Prince Edward VII, affectionately

“THE HOTEL BEL AMI ATTRACTS CREATIVE TYPES AND THOSE WHO LOVE BEING IN THE HEART OF THE VIBRANT SIXTH ARRONDISSEMENT SURROUNDED BY FABULOUS BOUTIQUES, ART, GALLERIES AND BUSTLING CAFÉS.”

The intimate, atmospheric bar at Hôtel Édouard 7.



known as Bertie – a bon vivant whose colourful life pursuing high-class courtesans in Paris led him to be known as Dirty Bertie. Housed in a classic Haussmann-style building, 70 per cent of the hotel's rooms have balconies, many with direct views to the Opéra Garnier, just two blocks away. Literally around the corner from the Place Vendôme with its plethora of jewellery stores, the décor on each floor pays homage to a different gemstone.

While Anne's husband, brother and her older son, Paul, continued in the family's insurance company, Anne left in 2009 to become "fully dedicated to hospitality", more recently recruiting her daughter, Agathe, to become sales director for B Signature. A younger son, Henri, has his own live music business in Paris.

Hôtel de Sers was the former home of the Marquis de Sers at the end of the 19th century. This petit palais is classically French in style, with panoramic views over Paris to the Eiffel Tower from two sumptuous rooftop suites. While the floor in the foyer is actually built over the original worn cobblestone carriageway where coaches used to pull up, its 45 rooms and seven suites are equipped with the most modern technology. Many of the portraits that grace its walls originally belonged to the de Sers family, giving it the air of an antique hotel particulier. The hotel is favoured by business guests and many in the entertainment industry.

Nearby, the Hôtel Vernet was built in 1913. The Haussmann-style building features an impressive verrière, or glass dome, in the dining room designed by Gustav Eiffel and a wonderful modern artwork on the salon ceiling reflects the designer carpet on the floor. Renowned interior designer François Champsaur has judiciously used wood and marble to great effect in its 50 rooms over five floors – many walls comprising curved wooden panels that contrast with bespoke tailored carpet and plush textures.

The fifth property was the 50-room Hôtel Montalembert in the 7th arrondissement. Built more than 90 years ago, this five-star hotel on

"EVERY TWO YEARS, THE GROUP WOULD ADD ANOTHER PROPERTY. THE NEXT TWO WERE LOCATED IN THE HEART OF THE 'GOLDEN TRIANGLE', JUST METRES FROM THE CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES."

But there was a pattern forming here. Every two years, the group would add another property. The next two were located in the heart of the 'Golden Triangle', just metres from the Champs-Élysées.



ABOVE: Hôtel Édouard 7, on Avenue de l'Opéra, once the Paris residence of the Prince of Wales. BELOW: Gemstone-themed rooms at Hôtel Édouard 7.





“HÔTEL VERNET WAS BUILT IN 1913. THE HAUSSMANN-STYLE BUILDING FEATURES AN IMPRESSIVE VERRIÈRE, OR GLASS DOME, IN THE DINING ROOM DESIGNED BY GUSTAV EIFFEL.”

The discreet five-star Hôtel Montalembert in the 7th arrondissement, favoured by Paris' literati, writers, politicians and actors.




the Left Bank is recognised as the very first boutique hotel in Paris and hoteliers around the world have tried to model their properties on the *très elegant* Hôtel Montalembert. With its discreet address, it attracts the Parisian literati, writers, politicians and actors who come to sign contracts and discuss matters in private. It's only a five-minute walk from the more contemporary Bel Ami, yet is worlds away in character.

“THIS FIVE-STAR HOTEL ON THE LEFT BANK IS RECOGNISED AS THE VERY FIRST BOUTIQUE HOTEL IN PARIS AND HOTELIERS AROUND THE WORLD HAVE TRIED TO MODEL THEIR PROPERTIES ON THE *TRÈS ELEGANT* HÔTEL MONTALEMBERT.”

While all B Signature hotels have in-house restaurants, the savvy hotelier realises many guests wish to discover the plethora of Parisian cafés and bistros that abound in the City of Light. However, lunch or dinner at Hôtel Vernet's Le V and Restaurant de Sers at the Hôtel de Sers are worth staying in for. At Le V, chef Richard Robe creates traditional dishes using fresh seasonal produce such as his signature carpaccio of langoustine and the V pie of slow-cooked sweetbreads with prawns. Anne is the first to acknowledge that not all the hotels appeal to the same guests. “Clients at the Hotel de Sers and Hotel Vernet are not so different and they do swap between the two,” she says. But guests who like Hôtel Montalembert do not especially like the Bel Ami and vice-versa. “One US client had been coming to the Hôtel Montalembert for 20 years. When we closed it a few years ago to refurbish

it, she was anxious that the hotel would be transformed. “We had to tell her: ‘Please do not panic.’” The hotel was certainly refurbished but retained its familiar feel.

Anne says she has learnt to “look up” when she walks around Paris – because that's where the ‘For Sale’ signs are. She says on average she receives about one offer a month from property owners wanting her to buy. However, having bought the last property nearly two years ago – Hotel Manapany in St Barts (it made *Condé Nast Traveller's* Hot List in its first year), staff and guests are trying to predict when and where the next property might be. At the moment, it seems London is the favourite choice – even according to Anne. But where? And when?  www.bsignaturehotels.com

B SIGNATURE'S *Parisian Hotels*

HOTEL BEL AMI

7/11 rue Saint-Benoît, 75006

www.hotelbelami-paris.com

HEAD CONCIERGE: Christophe Caruso

WHAT'S NEARBY: Saint Germain-des-Prés church, Boulevard Saint Germain.

WHERE TO EAT: Mordu, with modern French cuisine; and Semilla: modern, creative cuisine with open kitchen.

WHERE TO DRINK: Bar Joséphine in the Lutetia Hotel; La Compagne des Vins Surnaturels.

HÔTEL MONTALEMBERT PARIS

3 rue Montalembert, 7th Arrondissement

www.hotelmontalembert-paris.fr

HEAD CONCIERGE: Hugo Veyssie

WHAT'S NEARBY: Musée d'Orsay, Le Bon Marché

WHERE TO EAT: Le Basilic, a true Parisian brasserie; and modern néo-bistro Racine des Prés.

WHERE TO DRINK: trendy Coya; La Cave des Climats, with serious wines.

HÔTEL DE SERS

41 avenue Pierre 1er de Serbie, 8th Arrondissement

www.hoteldesers-paris.com

HEAD CONCIERGE: Cedric Gazou

WHAT'S NEARBY: The Eiffel Tower is a 20-minute walk; the Seine and its river boats.

WHERE TO EAT: Substance gastronomic restaurant in a relaxed atmosphere; Girafe seafood restaurant with grandstand views to the Eiffel Tower.

WHERE TO DRINK: Le Bar du Plaza Athénée; the hidden secret speakeasy bar at the Jacopo bistro.

HÔTEL VERNET PARIS

25 rue Vernet, 8th Arrondissement

www.hotelvernet-paris.fr

HEAD CONCIERGE Assistant: Angelo Bonsegna

WHAT'S NEARBY: L'Arc de Triomphe; the bijou Musée Jacquemart André is a two-minute walk.

WHERE TO EAT: Chez Francis for great seafood; L'Écluse François 1er.

WHERE TO DRINK: The cocktail bar at the French-Peruvian Manko restaurant; Le Rooftop bar at The Peninsula with views over Paris.

HÔTEL ÉDOUARD 7

39 Avenue de l'Opéra, 2nd Arrondissement

www.hoteledouard7-paris.com

HEAD CONCIERGE: Renaud Cauvin

WHAT'S NEARBY: L'Opéra Garnier;

La Comédie Française.

WHERE TO EAT: Chez Georges, traditional restaurant for food and wine-lovers; Le Louis, a cosy place with excellent French cuisine, live pianist.

WHERE TO DRINK: Le Lavomatic, hidden bar in an atmospheric old laundromat; L'Epicier, secret bar in a former grocery shop with top cocktails for night owls.