

An arty break at France's quirkiest new hotel

The surrealist Maison Heler, designed by Philippe Starck, is just one reason to visit Metz, says Carolyn Boyd

As I gaze from the window of my sixth-floor hotel room in Metz, in eastern France, I spy three people in the car park below looking up at the building, transfixed as if under a spell. I'm looking down at them from an otherwise nondescript concrete tower block. But above me, on the ninth-floor rooftop, stands a 19th-century-style zinc-turreted mansion, complete with trees, a veranda and some bold stained-glass windows. No wonder people are staring at the Maison Heler, a hotel with a concept as bonkers as its appearance.

The rooftop house is based on Villa Salomon, a golden-stone mansion at 22 Avenue Foch in the city's Imperial district. It was built in the early 20th century when Alsace-Lorraine was annexed to Germany and Kaiser Wilhelm II turned Metz into his architectural plaything, all grand apartment buildings and an impressive railway station. The house is designed to look like the mansion — wood panelling, books and curios — and contains the hotel's main bar and restaurant. It's like nothing I've seen before. France doesn't usually need to invent its heritage — it has enough crumbling mansions already — but this is quite out of the ordinary.

The bedrooms are in the grey tower block beneath and have a more industrial vibe, with exposed concrete, smooth marble, neutral tones and a sensational view of Metz. The brains behind this extraordinary hotel is Philippe Starck, the French designer known for everything from glamorous hotels to sleek multimillion-dollar yachts and even chairs. It is an architectural marvel, adding to the city's others, such as the astonishing Centre Pompidou-Metz gallery, with its undulating curves and lattice wooden beams, and the city's imposing 500-year-old ochre-coloured cathedral.

The hotel has a baffling backstory. To explain its concept, Starck wrote a surreal novella titled *The Meticulous Life of Manfred Heler*, in which its fictional protagonist is a lonely, mysterious inventor and the inhabitant of the rooftop house (called La Maison de Manfred, also the name of the restaurant). "One day, Manfred is in his garden, daydreaming in an armchair when, suddenly, the earth begins to tremble," Starck writes. "Soon he is rising up into the air, along with his garden, his house and his armchair. He goes up and up and up, until the shaking stops. Then there's silence. Manfred is high above the city."

Throughout the hotel are a series of clues and fea-



tures from the story woven into the decor. The concierge manager Alexandre Panorfio, who shows me around, encourages me to read the book to fully understand the place. "The story explains why the house is on top of this monolith, which represents the earth," he says, pointing to the rough concrete surface of the hotel's exterior walls as we stand on the sunny patio. "The story makes you wonder whether Manfred Heler really existed or not, and is written so that every guest can add their own interpretation to the tale." I wonder if I've made a faux pas

in not having tracked down the book ahead of my stay (I later discover it is available from reception for £10.25, but I would argue you don't need to read it beforehand).

Having not done the homework, I can enjoy the place for what it is: a hotel with a beautifully designed and welcoming lobby, which leads on to the brasserie, La Cuisine de Rose. The otherwise monochrome decor has touches of soft pink in honour of Manfred's imaginary love, a milkmaid called Rose. "It's Rose who is at the heart of everything that is comforting about Manfred's universe,"

Panorfio says. "And that's why you have touches of pink with the bar and glassware." The restaurant is buzzing and when I eat there a day later, I enjoy a dish of cod with fresh garden peas and pea puree. It is tasty and homely, even if it takes a little while to arrive (small plates from £12).

Elsewhere, the monochrome colour scheme strikes me as a contrast to Starck's style in other hotels, such as Brach in Paris and Lily of the Valley on the Côte d'Azur,

where I loved the lively ambience and warm tones. Here the corridors are moody, with dark wood and concrete. Outside each of the 104 rooms are backlit black-and-white photos of mid-century science experiments, oddities and inventions taken from France's National Archives and its National Centre for Scientific Research. In the rooms, the walls are marble and concrete, with warmer beige tones in the soft furnishings. In the dressing rooms, the specially designed wallpaper acts as a Rosetta stone to help you decipher Manfred's hieroglyphics, a series of symbols engraved or stamped all over the hotel. In an idle moment I translate the symbols on a coaster, and it reads "building castles in the sky"; I was hoping for more than a marketing slogan.

There are flashes of familiar Starck colour in La Maison de Manfred itself, on the rooftop, where Starck's artist daughter Ara has created bold stained-glass windows that cast rainbows of light across the bar and dining room (mains from £13). The dining room has the feel of a gentlemen's club, with curios, vintage books, dark wood panelling and arches between the rooms. As I eat my evening meal, I'm surrounded by the well-heeled men and women of Metz but, despite all the storytelling, my fellow diners are just out to enjoy themselves, which lets me off the hook in trying to work out Manfred Heler and his nonsense.

Free from my hotel homework, I explore Metz. It's an especially intriguing prospect because it isn't somewhere I've visited before, despite it being an easy journey from London. The train from Gare de l'Est, a few minutes' walk from Eurostar's Gare du Nord terminal, takes an hour and 20 minutes. Metz's ornate station is an attraction in itself, with its own water tower from the days of steam engines. Kaiser Wilhelm II brought in the country's best architects and the result was a *quartier* deliberately designed to feel ancient, with curved streets and leafy squares. Elsewhere, there are little gems of Renaissance architecture, such as the Maison des Têtes, which dates from 1529 and has five detailed busts above its leaded windows; and Place Saint Louis, with its stone arcades, that was a hub for money-changers in the 14th century and is now a buzzing square with cafés and restaurants.

The city's central attraction is its cathedral, which has 6,500 sq m of

stained-glass windows, the largest expanse in any single religious building worldwide (metz.catholique.fr). Some date from the Renaissance, others more recently, by Marc Chagall and the Korean artist Kimsooja, and each tell familiar stories from the Bible. Its nave is a towering 41m — the third highest in France.

The oldest part of the city is a criss-cross of streets of ochre Jaumont stone buildings, where French high street shops and independent cafés and restaurants surround the buzzing Place Saint Jacques and Renaissance architecture hides between more recent additions.

The star attraction, though, is the Centre Pompidou-Metz, just a few minutes from Maison Heler on the site of a Roman amphitheatre (£11; centrepompidou-metz.fr). It's an extraordinary gallery that is the best reason to come to Metz. To celebrate its 15th anniversary a new exhibition, *Dimanche Sans Fin (Endless Sunday)*, brings together some of the very best pieces from Paris alongside works by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, including a whole room dedicated to his banana taped to the wall.

I am shown around by one of the curators, Zoe Stillpass. "Maurizio Cattelan came up with the idea of a never-ending Sunday and so we started looking at the collection and picking works in relation to that," she says. There are more than 400 pieces including some great works: Picasso's *Little Girl Jumping Rope*; a feature wall from the surrealist André Breton's studio; and Francis Bacon's *Three Figures in a Room*. They are punctuated by Cattelan's own works, including *Felix*, a 6m-high skeleton which at first glance looks to be a dinosaur but turns out to be a huge domestic cat. "Illusion is a really important entryway into the show," Stillpass says. "There's always a work by Cattelan that makes you think, 'Oh, it's not what I

thought it was.'"

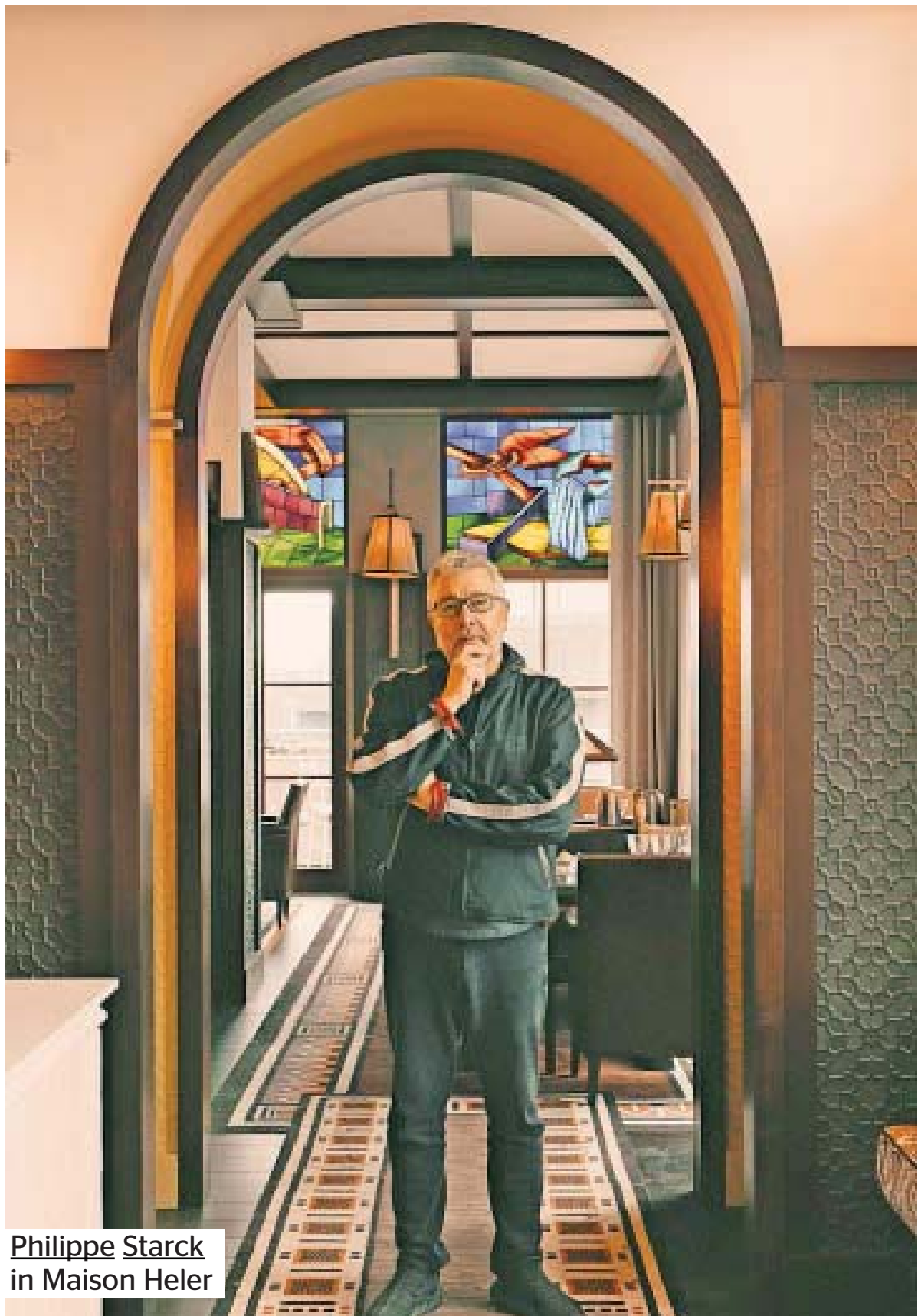
It's a good principle to embrace, and so I return to Maison Heler with a renewed sense of curiosity, determined to get my head around Manfred's musings. On the train home I read the book, which makes no sense whatsoever. In the third chapter, Manfred designs a homemade wimple — a headdress worn by nurses and nuns in days gone by — to cut out the noise of the trains outside his home. Only it transmogrifies into a pet, which gives birth to nine baby wimples. I put the book down and stare out of the window as the countryside flashes past and accept that, sometimes, art just isn't meant to be understood.

Need to know

Carolyn Boyd was a guest of Maison Heler, which has room-only doubles from £144 (maisonhelermetz.com); Metz Tourism (tourismemetz.com); and Eurostar, which has London-Paris returns from £78 (eurostar.com)

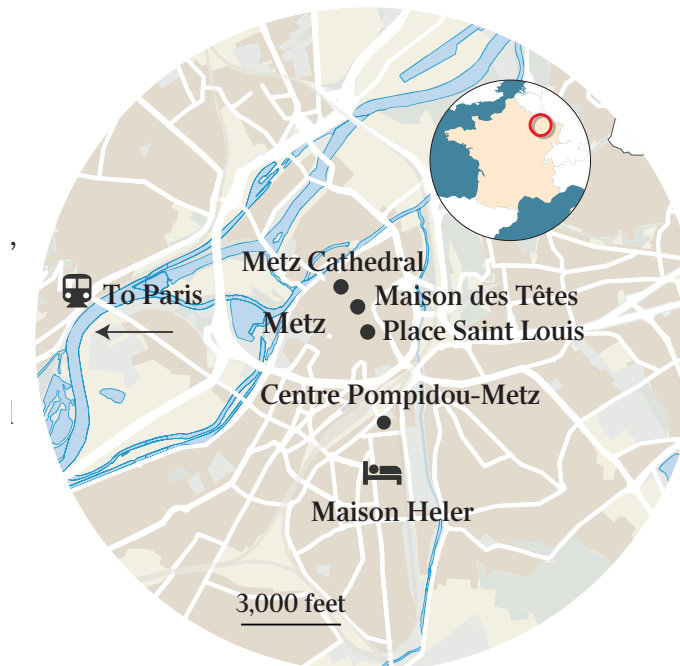


The star attraction is the Centre Pompidou-Metz, an extraordinary gallery



Philippe Starck
in Maison Heler





La Maison de Manfred

Two more surprising French city breaks

St Étienne

This city in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes in central France has a flourishing street art scene, a gothic cathedral and the Pilat Natural Regional Park for hiking, cycling and wine-tasting at hillside vineyards. The Hôtel du Golf has an outdoor pool, 48 modern rooms and a Med-inspired restaurant.

Details Room-only doubles from £215 (hoteldu golf42.com). Fly to Lyons

Poitiers

Poitiers is on a rocky plateau overlooking the Clain and Boivre rivers in central France. Its medieval centre brims with half-timbered houses, cobbled streets

and ornate Romanesque churches. There are riverside walks and a 22-acre park. The Hotel de l'Europe is in a 19th-century coaching inn and has a wood-panelled lounge, small gym, bright rooms and a sunny garden for breakfast.

Details Room-only doubles from £77 (hotel-europe-poitiers.com). Fly to Poitiers