

One has to make ends meet, don't you know?

Faced with economic hard times, Britain's aristocrats have hit upon a cunning wheeze – invite tourists in to see how the other half live. By **Carole Cadwalladr**

So it's off to the country. Suffolk, specifically, where Veronica Joly de Lotbinière (née Levett-Scrivener), also known as "Onky", is going to teach me to be upper-class. Crikey, Onky, I want to say, have you any idea about the scale of the task ahead of you? Luckily, I realise, she's not actually in the job of converting me, per se; it's merely a new form of experiential tourism. She runs holidays "for guests wanting to experience a traditional British upper-class way of life".

The obvious market for this kind of thing is foreigners of the more gullible persuasion (Americans or Japanese, probably, although the Germans love it too; that's the thing about social democracy, of course – not enough polo). But why let them have all the fun? Because while one's natural reaction when one hears "upper" and "class" used sequentially in a non-ironic fashion is to whip out one's automatic weapon and pretend

Veronica's house doesn't disappoint. It's very Jilly – a Georgian rectory with chintz and dog hair and gymkhana rosettes and thick cream invitations on the mantelpiece from people with what sound like made-up names ("The Comte and Comtesse de Guillaume de Paysac", the "Blitherington-Idiots" – although possibly my shorthand lets me down at this point). There's a tiger under the piano shot by the grandfather of husband Giles and pictures of Veronica's mother as a debutante in 1955 and, in the back garden, a woman called Fi, who has come to teach me etiquette.

To be honest this part of the day is a bit like being trapped inside an episode of *From Ladette to Lady* where I'm the Kerry Katona character. But then, I suspect that to Veronica and Fi, I am the Kerry Katona character. To my untutored eye, all posh people, from the Queen to Jeremy Paxman, are equally posh, and I suspect the reverse is also true. For all I know, Veronica expects me to fish a can of Tennents Extra out of my bag and light up a Superking. Whereas I only feel like doing that on a couple of occasions. Mostly when listening to

Fi tell me how much you should tip the servants (£5 per head per night). What if they don't have servants? "One must always assume they do," she says.

Meanwhile, Veronica fills me in on her background, interspersing her narrative with some arresting non-sequiturs. "You can always tell an Old Etonian, don't you think? They're just more charming, aren't they?" She met her husband Giles skiing in Verbier and "I think I'm very much typical of our background: four children, dogs, horses..."

Unlike most of her friends, though, Veronica works. She's a business dynamo, owning 35 buy-to-let properties, but the downturn prompted her to cast her mind around for other business ideas and the result is *More Than Good Manners*, which offers guests not just the chance to stay in her and her chums' houses, and mingle with the owners, but also to try their hand at what Veronica calls "upper-class pursuits" – hunting,

Holkham in Norfolk.

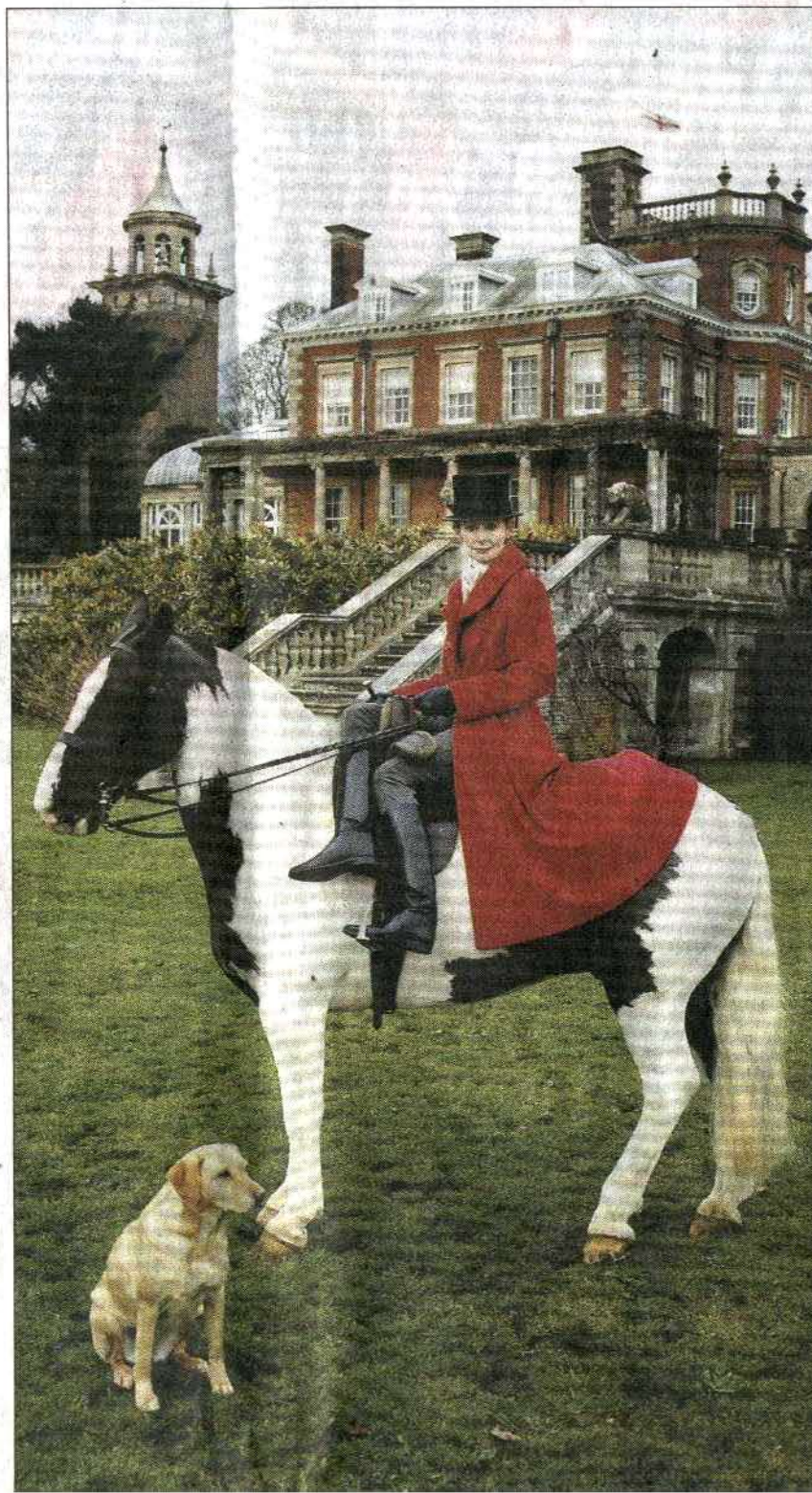
Fi has flown a light aircraft down from Cheshire and parked it on an airstrip in a nearby field. Lots of people have landing strips in their back gardens in Suffolk, it turns out. And I had no idea! I feel like I've entered Britain, the multiverse – a parallel country that exists at the same time and place as the one where I live, but in a different dimension. There's no time to dwell on this though, as we're off to one of Veronica's friends for lunch.

It's a 40-minute drive in the sort of four-wheel-drive that is designed to crunch over gravel driveways and Veronica chats away. "The thing is," she says at one point, "we're soon going to be rid of that awful man and all the awful things he's done. I mean this new upper-rate tax bracket for earners over £150,000 a year is an absolute travesty."

"So, do you just assume that everyone is conservative, Veronica?" I ask.

"Well, yes. Yes, I do."

Oh, it's all quite interesting, this. But much as I'd like to scoff, the thing about it is that I realise my belief system is every bit as narrow as Veronica's. I assume that no one I know votes Conservative. Then



Veronica Joly de Lotbinière, founder of a new tourism business, pictured in front of Sennowe Hall in Norfolk. Photograph by Amelia Troubridge

challenged. And, sitting in her four-wheel-drive crunching up and down the gravel driveways of her friends, I really feel I have a window into a completely different world, a world which at the next election will in all probability be running Britain.

"Do you know anyone who didn't go to a private school?" I ask Veronica.

"Well of course I do," she says. "Lots of people. I mean, for example, my cleaner didn't."

"Friends of yours?"

"Oh well, friends, well, hmm, I suppose not, no."

We visit Philippa, who lives in the absolute image of a dream country cottage. "Philippa's husband reads the *Observer*," Veronica tells me in incredulous tones. "He must be the only person in Suffolk. But then he does have a beard."

And then to Sennowe Hall in Norfolk, a vast turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts pile with a beautiful glass "winter garden", acres of manicured parkland and a teenage Etonian who's been sent home with possible swine flu lurking in the kitchen. Veronica picks up a novelty tea towel. "Look, it's Annie Tempest, you know, the woman who does the cartoon on the back page of *Country Life*."

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again, Veronica is not one to equivocate, having the sort of confidence that money can't buy. Except, of course, money can buy it. To be precise, £30,000 a year – the cost of sending your child to a school like Harrow, where Veronica's eldest goes.

It all comes down to education. Time and again, we come back to schools. When we discuss upper-classdom, Veronica says it is not to do with having a big house; it's "just something you can tell – the way they speak, whether they say 'toilet'."

"Pardon?"

"Yes, exactly. Or 'pardon'."

"No I mean why not 'toilet'?"

"Oh, it's always a loo. A loo or a lavatory. Never a toilet."

But mostly it's down to where you went to school. Sending your child to

requirement.

"Yes, I mean we all practically bankrupt ourselves to do it. But you have to. I mean at Harrow, they've got the most amazing facilities. There's a polo ground. They can do flying lessons. You simply get a much better education."

"So does that mean you think you're better educated than I am," I ask, "because you went to a private school and I went to a state school?"

"Well, no..." says Veronica.

And then, just as I'm about to chuck out all sorts of facts and figures, Veronica throws me by telling the truth.

"Of course, it's not just about education. It's about who you meet. The networks you make at public school will be with you for life and of course in a lot of jobs it's not what you know, it's who you know."

Well yes, exactly. The funny thing is that I might have used exactly the same argument, only I'd see this as a bad thing. Whereas to Veronica it is a Good Thing. It's what you pay for. It's why she's sending four children to boarding school, at a cost of around £100,000 a year.

Anyhow, the great thing about Veronica is that she's happy to be chal-

lenged. And, sitting in her four-wheel-drive crunching up and down the gravel driveways of her friends, I really feel I have a window into a completely different world, a world which at the next election will in all probability be running Britain.

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tie dinner for 12, I read a stack of them in bed, including, most rivetingly, the property ads, with which I play fantasy lives hesitating between a house in Dorset with paddocks and a trout stream and a medieval manor house in Gloucestershire with its own moat.

A *More Than Good Manners* holiday is a bit like a sort of life swap. A taste of life in a Georgian rectory with a husband called Giles, a handful of horses and four children at private schools.

"I get so cross when people say, oh you people have no idea about real life!" says Veronica. "This is our real life. This is what we know. It might seem narrow to you, but it really is our real life."

It is. And very nice it is too, although I travel back to my universe far, far away (about an hour-and-a-half, on the train, dreaming of Tennents Extra and Superkings. And I don't even smoke.

More Than Good Manners (07769 6867599; morethangoodmanners.com) trips start at £200pp per night. Tours, including accommodation and activities (options include duck shooting, hunting and fishing) from £500pp per day