

INSPIRE

Daily Mail, Monday, December 12, 2022

A champagne bar. A chef from the Savoy.
And a chauffeur at the click of your
fingers. Suddenly old age doesn't seem
so bad, says LINDA KELSEY (aged 70³/₄)

This is not a
retirement
home, darling.
It's **luxury** late
life living...

Photography: MARK HARRISON. Hair and make-up: OONAGH CONNOR AT JOY GOODMAN

ARRIVING at my destination on a wet Wednesday morning, I am greeted by a gentleman with a large umbrella who shields me from the rain as I make my way from the cab to the high-ceilinged lobby.

Inside, a smiling concierge takes my suitcase and I am immediately aware that a valise from Louis Vuitton would be altogether more appropriate than my slightly scuffed John Lewis luggage. The

feeling of disorientation is acute. I have come for a recce and a one-night sleep-over, but what exactly is this place that operates with all the services and amenities of a luxury hotel (think Claridge's, no exaggeration) and has the feel of a private members' club (think Soho House, in terms of coolness)?

How is it possible that Auriens, as it is called, is neither a hotel nor a club,

by Linda Kelsey

but what we ordinary, common folk might call a retirement home. The kind of place I'm now eligible for, age-wise if not pocket-wise.

Not that the term 'retirement home' would ever pass the marketing team's lips in this five-star environment. No, this is the ultimate expression of what's now known as 'luxurious later-life living'.

And yet the residents I meet, currently

ranging from their late 70s to 91, don't even try to dodge the age bullet, and are quite willing to pronounce how very ancient they are. This may well be because they are so enjoying themselves that they don't give a damn about the terms used to describe where they live.

While Auriens is unique — for the sheer scale of its opulence, not to mention the cost (rental starts at £13,750 a month) — the phenomenon of upscale living for the over-65s is growing apace.

Currently lagging behind the United States, as well as Canada and Australia, this is one UK industry set to go

stratospheric, despite the cost-of-living crisis.

Not only are one in five people in England and Wales 65 or older, for the Baby Boom generation, who have benefited from the increase in property values, there is more cash around for downsizing or at least finding homes more suitable to changing circumstance without sacrificing comfort.

According to Knight Frank's Senior Housing Annual Review, investment in senior developments this year alone is set to reach a record £3 billion.

Frankly, at the age of 70, the idea of a retirement home, whether it's deluxe or one I can actually afford, has zero appeal.

The notion of being sequestered away with a bunch of oldies feels akin to being sentenced to end your days on a cruise ship you are never going to disembark from, in the company of fellow passengers you probably have nothing in common with.

Would my stay at Auriens confirm or confound my prejudices? Or is there anything to be learned from Auriens that might trickle down from the millionaires to us mortals?

Auriens has 56 one and two bedroom apartments available for rent rather than sale, and so far it's just under half full. Still an opportunity then to nab an apartment. It's a mere stone's throw from King's Road in London, a glamorous shopping and dining paradise and handy if you're still on the sprightly side.

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As I walk along the corridor towards the apartment allocated to me for the night, I take in the original prints by 1960s super-snapper Terry O'Neill which line the walls, black-and-white portraits of icons

of the era including Sean Connery, Audrey Hepburn, Frank Sinatra, and Richard Burton in a bath cap.

No expense spared on the art then, as you might expect, for the people who live here have all experienced the heady times these portraits conjure up, coming as many of them do from the worlds of big business, fashion, art and advertising, and with sufficient millions to spend their final years in the lap of luxury.

The huge, gleaming marble and mosaic bathroom in my apartment is twice the size of mine at home. But I am almost grateful for a moment of reality when I realise the loo is leaking slightly at the back.

My own loo at home has the same problem. The difference is that after a week I'm still waiting for a plumber; at Auriens no sooner have I picked up the phone to maintenance than the problem is resolved.

My first gasp is reserved for the kitchen. One thing oldies aren't encouraged to do anywhere is get on a step-ladder to reach the top shelf in case they lose their balance. Here you don't have to. At the press of a button the top-tier cupboard lowers toward the work top so you can simply reach in



What's on: Linda at the cinema

rather than reach up.

Then there's the dishwasher — a top-loader, again to avoid accidents as well as the tricky business of bending down only to realise your back has gone into spasm.

And most comforting of all, a nurse-call button by the bed: press at any time of day or night (no naff red cords here) and, in minutes, help will be on its way. As one 80-something resident tells me later, laughing dryly as she does, 'Someone calls me every morning first thing, just, I think, to make sure I'm still alive.'

In this alternate universe where money is no object, a retirement home is beginning to look like something to

aspire to rather than dread.

And yet, I can't help feeling that it represents a shutting down — cloistering me in a space for old folk only, when I still want to be part of a vibrant, all-age community as I am at present.

One thing you wouldn't be encouraged

to do if you moved to Auriens is rest up. Every new resident gets a health and wellbeing assessment with wellness director and personal trainer Gideon Remfry who, along-side physiotherapist Holly Limbrick, will sort you out as far as good nutrition and exercise are concerned.

After a finger prick blood test, to assess cellular stress and antioxidant protection scores, as well as body composition analysis, I am advised on tweaking my diet and given a resistance training programme to increase strength and muscle mass. You can have one-on-one personal training (extra, of course) or join group aqua classes or a seated exercise session for free.

To be honest the swimming pool and the sauna with Himalayan salts emitting from the walls are looking more tempting right now than a workout in the well-equipped gym where I spot an elderly chap cheerfully practising boxing jabs. It occurs to me that in a place like this you could actually get fitter rather than succumb to decline, something surely less swanky outfits could learn from.

After a delicious lunch of gnocchi and salad made by an ex-Savoy head chef (while feeling grateful I don't yet need to make use of the specially designed stands next to the gnocchi

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and salad made by an ex-Savoy head chef (while feeling grateful I don't yet need to make use of the specially designed stands next to the table where you discreetly stash your walking stick), I find my self worrying about what to wear for the pre-dinner soiree in the library.

There's a piano recital on the 1929 Steinway, a classical medley provided by a talented graduate of the Royal College of Music, Ana Bursac.

Gosh there's a lot going on here, including singing and painting classes, and there's only just time before dinner for a glass of champagne in the glamorous bar they refer to as 'the speakeasy'. And absolutely no time to catch a movie in the Art-Deco-style cinema where residents choose the film they want to see while enjoying nibbles and cocktails.

On the other hand, if you want to go to the theatre you can ask the concierge to book it for you; if you fancy having dinner delivered to your room you can just ring downstairs and order from the menu.

Feel like doing some shopping round town but can't be fussed with getting transport? The thing I

thing I keep remembering is the rage I felt on reaching my 70th when I started receiving leaflets from purveyors of retirement homes, like Elysian Residences (with properties in Stanmore, Sevenoaks, Berkhamsted and Tunbridge Wells) who wanted to lure me in with a champagne drinks reception. I had no desire to be singled out and categorised

because of my age.

Why wouldn't they just leave me alone and stop reminding me of how old I'd become?

I suppose what most of us want as we age is to retain our dignity and independence, and letting go

of that is scary.

If you're like me and used to being fully independent, and not at all used to butlers and housekeepers and valets on tap, it's easy to find all this pampering a little cloying.

The loss of complete autonomy is, of course, one of the chief draw-backs to all retirement homes, and no matter how high-end the service is, I feel it here too.

I don't want to live under any

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What price luxury? Relaxing by the pool, and below inset, the living room in the flat

When I arrived I had just two friends, now I have seven.' She smiles over at her new pals.

For another resident, John Black-burn, 88, a former art director in advertising who founded a successful design company, the trigger was a bad fall. 'This place is my Shangri La. As long as I'm here I remain young. If I leave I feel I might revert back to my true age.'

I talk, too, to Paulene Stone, a flame-haired supermodel of the 1970s, now a pixie-cropped blonde of 81, still exquisitely elegant in cream cashmere and sporty Zara trousers. Although temporarily wheelchair-bound after fracturing both kneecaps after a fall, she

The truth is, I'm in denial about the real issues of old age

remains upbeat about her decision to sell her Pimlico home.

Covid loneliness and more particularly a concerned and persuasive daughter were catalysts for moving to Auriens.

'For the first month I thought why on earth did I do this? I even felt shy about going down to the restaurant for breakfast,' she says. 'Then one day I was lugging groceries from M&S, came through the door and said to myself, "Thank God I'm home".'

For some of the already frail residents, carers can be brought in from a recommended agency, or you could, in a two-bed apartment, have one living with you.

And so after my brief stay I was almost sold. Auriens could change my mind, at any rate. Loneliness, frailty, feeling unsafe, a desire for community — no matter how many millions you have stashed in the bank, we are all human, we all get old. Companionship and caring staff on hand who feel like friends are things no amount of money can buy.

And yet from the concierge to the waiters, I couldn't help but notice on what friendly, chatting terms they all seemed to be with the residents. I guess they're trained that way and are paid a lot better than staff in an actual care home would be.

A retirement home? Instead of never, it's more of a one-day maybe. Now, come the tipping point, I feel a little better prepared for the big decision. I just need to start seriously saving.

when your friends start dividing into those who need care, leaving those who don't as the carers?

The truth is, and I suspect like many, many others, I'm not planning at all for when my own home might become less manageable with its stairs and the constant maintenance required of a Victorian house.

My sister and brother-in-law, too, now 73 and 76 respectively, have no thoughts of foregoing their four-storey town house, banking on their good health and luck for the foreseeable future. Denial, I suppose, is what it's all about, until the watershed moment.

For Auriens resident Josiane Woolf, that moment came when, after nursing her husband for the last four months of his life, and spending Covid in isolation, she felt painfully lonely.

'I was married 58 years,' she told me, 'and yet old friends stopped contacting me. And then, during Covid, I could only meet my kids outdoors for a walk.'

'This is the best thing I've done.

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