

'Here are the keys to paradise'

When South Africans Louis Jansen van Vuuren and Hardy Olivier saw a beautiful but neglected château set amongst fields of wild flowers they were hooked. But wait... was that a tree growing through a crack in the bedroom wall? PHOTOS: INGE PRINS

Thirteen years ago artist Louis Jansen van Vuuren gave an exhibition of his paintings in Paris. It was so successful that his agent suggested he spend more time in France, so instead of buying a holiday home in his native South Africa as planned, he bought a 'shoe box' in the Auvergne. 'It had a bakery in the garden which I transformed into a studio,' says Louis, 61. 'I started painting, and I loved it so much I never wanted to leave.'

He resigned from his teaching post in Cape Town and his partner Hardy Olivier, now 51, gave up his banking job, and together they looked for a property that could become their 'project'.

That property was La Creuzette, a 19th-century château in the Limousin that had been summer home of an aristocratic family from Lyon for many years. 'But the Countess was elderly and none of the seven children were interested in taking it on,' says Louis. 'She was very sad to sell La Creuzette - she had got married here - but she had no choice.'

Louis tells the story of the château as well as his and Hardy's life here in 'Festive France', a gorgeously glossy book that is part memoir, part cookbook. Here, in an extract, is the story of how he and Hardy came to buy La Creuzette...

THE KEYS TO PARADISE: Duchess Marie Hélène Angelique Sophie Eugénie de Seigner said, standing in the entrance hall of La Creuzette. Her black Christian Louboutin court shoes gleamed spotlessly on the blue antique tiled floor. Her impeccable suit was an early-morning blue, and was unmistakably Chanel. The texture of the fabric showed slight signs of wear, the result of years of brushing and pressing, but it still bore the crisp sophisticated cut of haute couture. Inches from her heart, pinned onto the collarless jacket, was a delicate brooch of a golden sailing ship with fine, filigreed sails. She held out a bag of keys, her blue eyes misty and sad, her mouth set in resignation. Without another word, she turned around and walked into the house. Hardy and I were left standing

in the entrance hall with the huge assortment of keys; kept for opening and closing the countless doors, gates and hatches of what was now our very own little château in France!

It had all started a few months earlier when we browsed through an international property magazine and chanced upon a coloured photograph of a slightly dilapidated little château, called La Creuzette, surrounded by a sea of wild flowers. We were smitten instantly with the grand old dame - only later did we come to realise that the wildflowers were actually weeds that had started to overrun the grounds!

We visited La Creuzette for the first time early one morning. Even though the photographs in the magazine took our breath away, nothing could compare with this first, actual encounter. The lane with wild chestnuts, cedars and oaks made such an impression on me that I could imagine myself as a child in some old-fashioned picture book. I could already see the hammocks, the picnic blankets, and the droplets of condensation glistening on bottles of chilled wine, all under those very trees!

The interior was another story altogether. The Duchess, who answered the door herself, proceeded to escort us through the ground floor salons and the kitchen. There were high ceilings with beautiful cornices in every room, as well as crystal chandeliers and imposing marble fireplaces. Hung against the dining room walls were the heads of a herd of chevreaux.

Even though the walls were a little cracked and there were creaking floor boards here and there, we were excited by the immense potential of what we had so far seen of this charming little château.

We made our way eagerly up the stairs to the first floor, which consisted of five spacious bedrooms but just one bathroom at the end off the corridor. Oh dear. Well, at least every room had a little basin and bidet. The bedrooms were all decked out in the brightest wallpaper imaginable from the Sixties. If doubt had started to set in on the first floor it gave way to mild panic when we reached the second. There were five more bedrooms,

but in these the ceilings were much lower and the marble fireplaces a lot smaller - they had apparently accommodated children and the staff.

It is hard to describe the sorry state that met our eyes, but our hearts sank when we saw that a young tree had grown right through a huge crack in the wall in one of the bedrooms! 'Hmm, this might not be such a clever idea,' I thought. Hardy gave a nervous cough, betraying his feeling of unease.

We then made our way up to the attic where the seven rooms with their bucking ceilings were in much the same state. Most of the windows had simply collapsed, but those few that had escaped the ravages of time hung precariously from rusted hinges, with not a pane of glass to be seen.

On our way back home, an uneasy silence reigned. We went to bed later that night without discussing the matter any further.

'Are you asleep yet?' asked Hardy, from his room at the end of the corridor.

'No, I can't fall asleep either,' I answered drowsily.

Then I saw a light go on and long shadows flickered along the corridor.

'What are you thinking about?' he asked.

'About La Creuzette,' I said with yawn.

'Me too,' I heard his iron bed creak as he got up.

Suddenly I was wide awake. I switched on my bedside lamp.

'I've got this great idea!' I said. 'Let's go and take another look. But this time, we should start at the top, where it's dark, and then work our way down to the ground level where the sun floods in through the windows.'

And that's exactly what we did. The rest is history.

Before we knew it, the purchase contract had been drawn up, and we had also managed to buy a few pieces of furniture for which the Duchess's children had no further use. A while later, however, we sold some of the beautiful sleigh beds, as no South African is short enough to enjoy a comfortable night's rest in them. I spent one night on the diagonal and decided that they just had to go.

As La Creuzette had been used as a

summer holiday house, it had no central heating. The family simply warmed themselves in front of the fire on the odd chilly evening. But as we planned to live there full-time, we had to give central heating serious consideration. However, after the purchase of the château we needed to give our wallets some respite so we decided to postpone the matter of heating a little while longer.

One cold grey day in January we set off in great excitement for our new home. Despite the weather, I thought that the French made highly exaggerated claims about the cold of winter and that a couple of De'Longhi heaters would do the trick. Well, for the first three relatively

sunny days they did. Yes, I did have to wear two layers of thermal underwear, but *tout va bien*. Then one day the mercury plummeted to -15 degrees Celsius! Just after four in the morning I awoke, shivering violently. At first I thought that Hardy was listening to some perky Flamenco music on the radio but, as it turned out, my teeth were chattering uncontrollably. Without hesitation, I jumped out of bed, plugged in the third De'Longhi and turned it up to maximum heat.

Phaff! Sparks shot through the darkness and the unmistakable stench of electrical wiring permeated the air. Even though we were able to get the lights going

again, the wall plugs were in. This meant I had one remaining option - to dig out my last set thermal undies and pile on a ber jacket, hiking socks, an ugly pile scarf and a Kangol beanie that tumbled down low over my ears.

It was probably three days later that Hardy and a friend called on a country gal, tried to lure me with my feather-and-blanket hide. The tip of my nose was barely visible when I greeted Lynne hal heartedly. 'Look Louis,' she said. 'I have bought you a saviour.'

I poked my nose out a little further, and saw a tall, thin man who immediately bought my collection of old

posters to mind - think Clint Eastwood in *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. My saviour was Bernard Bollinger (alas, no relation of the champagne family), an electrician sporting a pair of red cowboy boots. He brought an extension lead from the cellar to my room so I could power up my precious heaters without further calamity.

A day or two later I had thawed sufficiently to brave the outside world. Although, if truth be told, it was probably the aroma from the pot-au-feu simmering in the kitchen that finally lured me from my den. With renewed vigour, right there in my bedroom, I convened a meeting with a saleswoman from a heating company.

Speed took precedence over price and she left on her clicking heels with the promise that her company would install the heating system the moment we approved the quotation. I assured her she could tell her team to pitch up the following Monday, as I knew that February - the coldest month - was just around the corner. I wanted to be prepared for the grey, cold days that lay ahead.

Wise people say that you can never own a château - it owns you. This was indeed something to ponder upon while I turned up the dial on the brand new central heating system, uncorked the Château Neuf and admired the first snowflakes as they drifted slowly to the ground. **TFP**



Louis, left, and Hardy

BATHROOM: The red claw-foot bathtub is seriously inviting

BEDROOM: Louis and Hardy took the bedroom count from five to twelve

KITCHEN: The pale blue works with both the wood and stainless steel

WALLPLATES: Louis and Hardy chose a black and white theme

The Look

Louis and Hardy completely rewired and re-plumbed the château. One bathroom became 12 (they threw out 14 bidets) and they renovated to create 12 bedrooms. One big job was re-installing two six foot cast iron oval windows that had been taken down during WWII. 'The Countess left us sketches and plans so we knew what it had looked like,' says Louis.

They used local artisans but did a lot themselves. 'Hardy became Mr Bricolage,' jokes Louis. As well as a massive amount of plastering, they extended the kitchen and turned the loft into a private living space for themselves complete with all mod cons including a large flat-screen TV - the couple run a number of residential holiday programmes from the château (see below).

Once the heavy work was completed, they set about decorating the château. 'We have loosely kept the Napoleon III look such as the draped curtains in the bathroom but we've mixed in a more contemporary style with leather and glass, and pieces from South Africa,' says Louis.

In the dining room the silk-screened leafy wallpaper is original. 'We found it hidden behind panels of red linen,' says Louis. 'It took us three months to restore it. When the Countess saw it she told us we had found the paper of her youth.'

WALL PLATES:

Above a mantelpiece Louis and Hardy have used a number of different plates to create a striking wall decoration. Want to try this yourself? Make sure the plates are of a similar or complementary pattern, and an odd number of plates works best.

DINING TABLE:

Under the tablecloth is a contemporary glass table which ensures the room has a modern feel but it is tied in with the traditional chandelier and original wallpaper by the set of vintage wicker chairs. When living in old properties mixing the old with the new works well. A similar idea has been used in one of the salons where modern-style cushions - the pattern is by Fornasetti - update the look.

BATHROOM:

The red claw-foot bathtub immediately gives the bathroom a luxurious feel, as does the peacock painted on the wall by Louis.

BEDROOM:

One of the 12 bedrooms, where the creamy white bedding is the perfect foil to the bright yellow walls and ornate bed.

KITCHEN:

A mix of contemporary and what Louis calls 'creuse campagne' - think traditional pale blue walls, a wooden work surface, the sleekness of stainless steel and liberal scattering of traditional French country accessories.

The Food

Hardy has enthusiastically swapped a corporate suit for an apron. 'I didn't cook before, I just enjoyed eating well!' he says. 'But when we started cookery courses with French chefs here, very few spoke English or Afrikaans so I did all the translating and enjoyed a cookery lesson each time myself. That was seven years ago and now I cook myself. The recipes in the book are adapted from traditional French cuisine, with some dishes spicier than how the French would eat them.'



Duck breast salad

SERVES 4
2 plumb duck breasts
Fresh ginger
Salt and pepper

Fresh thyme
Olive oil
French green asparagus
250g cherry tomatoes
Salad greens

Cut the duck breast on the skin side in a criss-cross pattern and rub with a mixture of grated fresh ginger, coarse salt, pepper, thyme and olive oil. Set aside in a cool place for about an hour.

Break off the hard bottom parts of the asparagus and discard. Boil the tops in salted water for three minutes. Rinse with cold water and roll in a little olive oil.

Roast the cherry tomatoes with coarse salt and olive oil on a baking sheet in a hot oven (180 degrees Celsius) for 10 to 15 minutes until the tomatoes just start to 'pop'.

Remove from the oven and allow to cool. Keep the pan juices.

Heat a heavy-based pan to a high heat. Place the seasoned duck breasts skin side down in the hot, dry pan and cook for three minutes on each side. Pour off any excess fat as it melts.

Now put the pan in a hot oven for about four to eight minutes - depending on how pink you want the duck to be. Once done, remove from the oven and leave to rest for a few minutes while you prepare the plates.

Make a dressing by mixing the pan juices from the duck breast and the tomatoes. Arrange the slices of duck breast on a plate and top with asparagus, tomatoes and salad greens. Drizzle with dressing and a balsamic vinegar reduction and serve.



Crab cakes

SERVES 4
500g white crab meat, chopped
Cayenne pepper
Tabasco sauce
1 teaspoon wholegrain mustard
4 teaspoons mayonnaise
100g fresh breadcrumbs
Olive oil
1 red paper, cleaned and finely diced
1 red onion, finely diced
2 stalks celery, finely diced

Mix the crab meat well with a pinch of cayenne pepper, a dash of Tabasco, the mustard, the mayonnaise and breadcrumbs. Sauté in a little olive oil for a few minutes.

and set aside to cool.

Sauté the red pepper, onion and celery over low heat in a little olive oil until softened. Leave to cool.

Now mix the red pepper mix with the crab mix. Shape into 12 small cakes, flattening each one slightly, and chill in the refrigerator for 30 minutes.

Heat a little oil in a pan and fry the cakes until golden brown, three to four minutes, on each side.

Serve on a bed of lamb's lettuce salad with lime wedges and a special mayonnaise, preferably home-made. We sometimes add a touch of the hot Japanese paste, wasabi, to ours.

Rose ice-cream

SERVES 8 (OR ONE IF NO ONE IS WATCHING!)



500ml low fat milk
500ml Monin Rose syrup
250ml thin cream

Blend all the ingredients and churn in an ice-cream maker until frozen. Store in the freezer until required. Serve in a glass with rose petals and an optional *taile* biscuit.



LA CREUZETTE

Louis and Hardy run a number of residential holiday programs at the château including those on art, cooking and creative writing. See: www.lacreuzette.com. Festive France, a beautiful, hardcover book with its own case is sold out on Amazon but to buy a copy email: info@lacreuzette.com. It costs costs €45 (including p&p).

LA CREUZETTE: the château's charm is easy to see. Below: the elegant salon

DINING ROOM: The original wallpaper was uncovered during the renovation