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Profonde ideas

Nothing could deter **Louis Jansen van Vuuren** and his partner Hardy from making their property dreams work once they caught a glimpse of a weather-beaten château in Creuse

"It's on the edge of the world!" Claire said as she leaned forward in her bistro chair. I had just told her that my partner Hardy and I had bought a property in Creuse. "Everyone is moving to Paris. The countryside is empty," she said. She rolled her eyes, took a sip of champagne and waved toward an elegant shop window on the Places des Vosges. "It is not possible to survive without all of this. You will be lost in *la France profonde*."

Our life in *la France profonde*, or 'deep France' began with a house-hunting expedition in the remote Creuse department in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region, slap-bang in the heart of France. It is one of the original 83 departments created during the French Revolution in 1790.

Claire is not the only one of our Parisian friends who were quick to remind us that nothing much has changed there since the storming of the Bastille. They never mention the plus factors though. Creuse is one of the least densely populated parts of France with the most extensive forests and the biggest lakes. 'Idyllic' is the word that springs to mind.

FERVENT HUNTERS

Hardy and I started househunting with such fervour that it bordered on obsessional. We knocked on the doors of every fair-sized townhouse, farmhouse and dilapidated barn. Anything that had a door in it became a possibility. There was the stone house, a watermill that could

be converted into a cottage, a deserted barn in the middle of a spectacular sunflower field. If it hadn't been for the obnoxious power pylons along the border of this little farm, it could well have become our new home.

One day, Hardy spotted a photograph of a weather-beaten château in an international property magazine he had picked up at a train station bookstore. The building dated from the Napoleon III era and was called, ever so elegantly, *La Creuzette*.

We could hardly contain our excitement. The agent wasn't able to show us the property immediately, unfortunately, but it was impossible to wait a moment longer. There was no indication of which village the château was in, nor its address. After driving around a few dozen villages, we meandered down Boussac's main street, past a high stone wall with an impressive stretch of parkland.

"There's *La Creuzette*!" Hardy shouted, nearly rolling the car when he climbed the curb. It took an acrobatic team effort to clamber onto the wall. Then, out of breath, we sat like teenagers surveying the scene before us. The manor was breathtaking. Surrounded by cedar and chestnut trees, it had a self-assured beauty with some shutters clinging resolutely to single hinges.

It was far too big a place for us, I realised with a sigh. Discouraged, I started battling my way down to earth. The dilapidated old château was beyond our grasp. I expected



The scale of the property was intimidating but perfect for a holiday business



Hardy and Louis with their dogs

"I felt like a child walking through an illustrated fairytale"



Elegant interiors are the result of five years of renovations



La Creuzette guests at a summer kitchen event



Dressed up for Bastille day celebrations

Hardy to follow but he grabbed hold of my hand and pulled me back onto the wall. "Wait a bit," he said, his eyes open wide with wonder. "What if we open a guesthouse?"

A CLOSER LOOK

Our first official visit to La Creuzette took place on a sparkling morning in September. The avenue of wild chestnut trees was so impressive that I felt like a child walking through an illustrated fairytale. I imagined hammocks swinging between the tree trunks, picnic blankets on the lawns and, of course, a chilled bottle of rosé in the ice bucket.

The interior of the château told another story. The duchess answered the door and led us through the salons and kitchen on the ground floor without ceremony. These spacious rooms had high ceilings, ornate moulded cornices, crystal chandeliers and striking marble fireplaces.

On the first floor were five gracious bedrooms, all plastered with hideous wallpaper from the 1960s. There was only one bathroom at the end of the hall, although each bedroom did have a small washroom with a basin and bidet. We later had to replace 14 bidets with toilets. But that's a story for another day.

When we reached the second floor, our collective hearts sank to the dust-covered floorboards. It had seven bedrooms. But the ceilings were much lower, and

the fireplaces much smaller. They must have been children's rooms, with a suite for the staff. These rooms were scary; a tree had grown through a gap in one of the walls. Not a good omen. "No way!" Hardy coughed. We bid the countess and agent a quick goodbye and drove back to our village in silence.

CHANGING STANCE

When we eventually got to bed, sleep evaded us. "Are you asleep?" asked Hardy. "No, I can't sleep," I replied. "Is it about La Creuzette?" he inquired in a dark voice.

I flicked my bedside lamp on. "I have an idea. Let's go back and have another look. This time we start on the top floor and work our way down to where the sun shines through the large windows." Which is precisely what we did.

Standing on the top floor, we still felt that buying the château was out of the question. The condition of the rooms was overwhelming for novice renovators like us. Things started looking better on the first floor. Then, I heard a "Maybe..." When we came to a halt on the beautiful blue tiles of the entrance hall, we both yelled: "Where do we sign? We'll take it!"

After signing the *acte de vente*, the countess handed us a big bag of iron keys. "*Ce sont les clés du paradis*," she said. (These are the keys to paradise.) And so, our life at La Creuzette began on a grey and freezing day in January.



Louis in the summer kitchen

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The first winter at La Creuzette was a chilly one

WARMING UP

La Creuzette had always been used exclusively for summer holidays. It had no central heating. Since we would live there year-round it became a priority to think about heating, but we were not in a hurry to make this pricey decision. I'd always thought the French made a mountain out of a molehill when it came to cold. A string of electric heaters could certainly do the trick.

But then, one dark night, the mercury dipped to -15°C. I shivered myself awake at just after four in the morning. I leapt out of bed and turned on a fourth heater. The other three were already on full blast. Sparks suddenly flew through the dawn gloom. The lights survived the surge but all the wall plugs had been blown to smithereens. My herd of heaters all kaput!

An urgent meeting with the saleswoman of a heating company happened right there in the bedroom. She made a solemn promise to begin with the installation after the ill-fated weekend. That is, if we approved the quote. We had no choice but to raid the piggy bank again.

The wise say that you never own a château, but that the château owns you. A morsel of wisdom I contemplated weeks later, in great comfort, when the first snowflakes started to fall in Creuse.



The luxurious lounge

Before you lose all hope during the endless months of the French winter, March brings a miracle. Spring begins. Shutters are thrown open and the little towns and hamlets gradually awake. The enormous task of our renovations could no longer be postponed. We needed to become operational and earn much-needed euros. Since budget takes centre stage, we tried to do some renovations ourselves. But unfortunately, it took us a full five years before we could open La Creuzette's imposing doors to guests.

WELCOMING GUESTS

There were some hair-raising moments when we nearly gave up on the French dream. Like the day we learnt that the entire château's roof needed to be redone. We just did not have the money to pay the staggering bill. We came up with a workable plan.

We restored the roof over four seasons, which kept the bank manager appeased and put some croissants on our breakfast table.

Another mammoth project was to appoint one of the outbuildings with a large state-of-the-art kitchen and dining room to offer cookery courses and host functions. We transformed the old stables into our splendid summer kitchen. There was enough space for my dream studio in the loft. A friend, an accomplished chef, suggested getting a group together and bringing them on a culinary tour to test our kitchen and hosting abilities. And the rest, as the saying goes, is history.

After the first successful cookery tour, a garden expert brought a group of enthusiasts to view the beautiful gardens. Then another friend brought a group to paint with me in my new studio under the trusses.

Thus, the luxury theme holidays of La Creuzette were launched.

In 2014, the glossy *Le Figaro Magazine* named La Creuzette one of the best guesthouse destinations in the French countryside. All the blood, sweat and rosé, in the end, was worth it. We now work with many local and celebrated international chefs and offer our guests an unforgettable French experience. In addition, we have published two successful lifestyle books and my latest publication, *Almost French*, is now available.

I have to conclude gleefully. I recently had a phone call from Claire in Paris. She is looking for a *petite maison* in Creuse. The city has become claustrophobic during the pandemic. "By the way," she said. "I believe you have the purest water and cleanest air in France." I looked through the window to our row of cherry trees glistening with delectable fruit. There was a very broad smile on my face. ■

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