



A SHARE OF A CHATEAU

A NEW ZEALAND-BASED COUPLE WHOSE BUSINESS REGULARLY TAKES THEM TO FRANCE SAYS THE GRAND DESIGN OF THEIR HOME THERE WOULD LOOK JUST AS GOOD IN MORE MODERN NEW ZEALAND HOUSES, AND THEY'D BE MUCH EASIER TO HEAT

WORDS YVONNE VAN DONGEN PHOTOGRAPHS MICHAEL PAUL





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Trimming the courtyard topiaries is one of Nick's first jobs each summer; a 19th-century shop counter provides extra bench space in the kitchen; one of the chateau's few concessions to 21st-century living; produce from the morning market is arranged in conifer pots and locally made baskets on a vintage butcher's block; a gilded Louis XV faience sits beneath a 19th-century mercury barometer.



THE FIRST OWNER WAS MURDERED, construction stopped for about 100 years, the windows leak, it takes a week to heat in winter and if you're looking for outdoor/indoor flow - forget it. This is not the place for you. Really, who would want to live in a building beset with such woes? A New Zealander, of course, and his French girlfriend and more than likely everyone else who is fortunate enough to visit the 17th-century Chateau de Saussignac in south-west France.

Nick Fernyhough and Cheyenne Baran already knew the building when three years ago an antiques-dealer friend told them it was on the market. They didn't hesitate. They said "oui" tout de suite and, with the blessing of the gods of right-place-right-time, a little corner of France was theirs. Tucked away between Bordeaux and Bergerac in the popular Dordogne region, the chateau had the real estate agent's mantra of location, location, location in spades. Five hours' drive from Paris or Provence, surrounded by picturesque villages, great restaurants and vineyards, Chateau de Saussignac more than met their needs.

Even better, given that the chateau comes with 20 or so bedrooms, was the fact that they were unable to own the building outright. The chateau had been divided into five separate titles in the 19th century, something Nick says happens very rarely in France. He surmises the sheer size of the structure was too difficult to maintain by the local council of a small village like Saussignac. It's now shared between them, a couple of American artists, an English banker and a family of French aristocrats. Each comes with its own private land and access so there is no shared responsibility between owners whatsoever.

The couple has been running its Auckland-based antiques business, Baran de Bordeaux, for eight years and Nick describes the chateau as a great pied-à-terre for them on their regular buying trips to France.





PREVIOUS PAGES: An enormous Louis XV chandelier hangs above the dining table; Chrystelle sets the table from the imposing cherrywood armoire. THESE PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Tigris on his favourite Louis XV bergère; once a refuge for Protestant monks, the cellar now houses Nick's wine collection; paneling in the salon is original to the chateau while the chandelier is 19th-century Baccarat crystal; Nick loves the salon's acoustics for guitar practice.



"They try to spend three months there in summer and a few weeks in winter. Any longer and either pneumonia would set in or they'd go bankrupt heating the place. The stone walls are about a metre thick and take a week to warm up. But the chateau's idiosyncracies and imperfections are more than compensated for by its natural wonders. Its walls fair shiver with history. It was built by a renowned general under Louis XIII but construction came to an abrupt end when the general, a Catholic convert, was killed by Protestants. In the following 100 years the chateau's vaulted cellars provided refuge for Protestant monks.

In any event, the architecture of the Fenneybough-Baran wing falls within their favourite period – Louis XIV (1640–1715). "It's such a strong period for art, architecture and design," says Chrystelle. "A very masculine Italianate style. One is hard-pressed to find an example of bad design in 17th century Europe." The four-and-a-half-metre stud height, floor-to-ceiling windows, interior panelling and slate-covered mansard roofs are common to noble homes of this era.

The couple has attempted to decorate the chateau entirely in period style, with the exception of the kitchen and bathrooms. "I don't really fancy reverting back to using the chateau's original dirt-floor kitchen in the cellar," laughs Chrystelle. "They start with the right chandelier and build on that. The exception is the whopping great armoire in the dining-room. They stumbled upon it in a local shop before they'd even closed the deal on the chateau. "It had come from a nearby chateau and was proportionally and stylistically perfect for our new home."

The chateau also enables them to experiment with discoveries they believe might suit New Zealand homes, such as the sumptuous Italian bed linen and cushions in the master bedroom.





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Chrystelle describes her decorating style as timeless elegant, opulent but not stuffy, using pieces that show their age and patina. "Antiques needn't be fragile, precious things," she says. "These pieces were designed to be used: terracotta jugs made for fetching water from the village reservoir; tables built for rowdy family feasts."

In New Zealand the couple has applied the same philosophy of design to its purpose-built Georgian-style coach house. The restoration/construction gene runs strongly in this family. Nick's parents have spent 25 years lovingly restoring and decorating their 19th-century homestead in Remuera. His father is an active member of the Historic Places Trust; his brother and uncle are architects while his great-grandfather designed the classical Florence Court in Epsom. Chrystelle grew up in Bordeaux, about an hour from the chateau, where her parents have an 18th-century maison de maître.

Nick is also a composer and music producer and says the chateau's acoustics are near perfect. He plans one day to transform part of the chateau into a recording studio but for now finds it the perfect haven in which to practise guitar between music projects in London and Paris. For those looking to emulate their luxurious style, Chrystelle promises there's no need to construct a French chateau to go with that *armoire*. "What we've done here can be translated into a more modern environment. Chandeliers, demolition materials like floor tiles and fireplaces and a few pieces of the right early-European furniture can create an atmosphere very similar to what we have achieved here."

The hardest part of living in a place where their main activities involve scouring the countryside for treasures, organizing dinner parties and cycling through the vines, is watching the grape-harvesting machines roll through the village and the sunflower fields fading. Because then, and only then, do Nick and Chrystelle have to think about packing their bags and heading south again. www.frenchantiques.co.nz

FAR LEFT: The Louis XIV bedroom shows a strong Italian influence with the bed-head, velvet bedspread and cushions all being sourced in Italy. Bedside lamps are converted from 17th-century candlesticks and the walls have been limewashed with natural earth pigments. **THIS PAGE:** The Louis XVI bedroom has a lighter feel with pastel colours and *toile de jouy* fabric. 19th-century Italian bedside cabinet and crystal lamps; a Regence bureau sits beside a 17th-century regional cotter and Flemish tapestry with some of the couple's collection of antique leather-bound books.

