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SAVOIR FLAIR

SOPHISTICATED FRENCH STYLE,
FROM A PROVENÇAL RETREAT
TO A CHIC BARN RENOVATION

INSIDER'S GUIDE TO FRANCE

*Pierre Frey,
Michel Roset and
Hélène Darroze
on their favourite
weekend escapes*

Natural beauty

GLORIOUS GARDENS
AND ROMANTIC
WEDDING FLOWERS

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PROVENCE VILLA

ROOMS WITH A *VIEW*

Set in the celebrated landscape of Aix, this former farm building has been transformed into a charming home that embodies the traditional style of the region

WORDS NATALIE WAIN PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID CLEVELAND





GARDEN VIEW

The property has 50 acres of land and includes an olive grove, as seen through the windows of the main bedroom.

TERRACE

This area in front of the kitchen, where the flagstones have been edged with pebbles inlaid in

concrete, offers a shaded place to relax away from the heat of the summer sun. Similar garden furniture, Sublime sofa, £1,100, Sweetpea & Willow, 0845 257 2627, sweetpeaandwillow.com. Garden design, Dominique Lafourcade, 0033 4 90 95 52 91, dominique-lafourcade.com. ▷



KITCHEN

The farmhouse-style kitchen is the focal point of the house. Recesses have been built into the table for the family dogs, which like to curl up there.

For similar Burgundy flagstones, try Martin Moore Stone, 01372 478955, martinmoorestone.com.

For a similar antique chandelier, try Brownrigg Decorative Antiques, 01666 500887, brownrigg-interiors.co.uk.

SITTING ROOM

A contemporary sofa was chosen for daily comfort. Although it is not a period piece, its understated looks ensure it does not jar with the antique furniture elsewhere in the room.

Similar coffee table, Low Tibetan painted table, £1,125, Shimu, 0800 088 6800, shimu.co.uk.

For a similar antique console table, try 1stdibs, 1stdibs.com. ▷





Looking at this impressive home, it is hard to believe it was once a large dilapidated farm building with a rabbit warren of rooms. However, with loving care by the architect, it has become a home-away-from-home near Aix-en-Provence.

Set in a picturesque landscape, the property looks out onto Mont Sainte-Victoire, so stunning that Cézanne painted it time and again throughout his career. The area is incredibly popular and good properties are hard to find, so it is best to concentrate on the location instead. Views will be with you forever, but a house can be changed to suit your needs.

ESTABLISHING A STYLE

The property was a *bricolage*, or a jumble of rooms, that had seen many modifications over the years, leaving the floors uneven and the rooms disorganised. The plan was to turn it



Every detail of the property has been designed to reflect the vernacular architecture.

into a charming *bastide Aixoise* – the type of country house the region is famed for. To begin with, and to help determine the new layout, it was noted how the Provençal light and the colours and terrain of the landscape affected the property's appearance and structure.

TRANSFORMING THE PROPERTY

Now, nothing remains of the original layout; the inside of the house is full of light with high ceilings and rooms that flow seamlessly from one to the other in an intelligent, harmonious way – a typical feature of a *bastide Aixoise*. Achieving this look took a team of highly skilled local craftsmen who used traditional methods to create an authentic style, right down to the last detail. As a result, with its classical proportions, the building looks noble and elegant, but is also very charming. All it needed was a collection of carefully sourced antiques to turn it into a finished home. ▷

DINING ROOM

The windows were designed with soft arches (opposite page, top left and right), a typical feature of Provençal villas in the 18th century. **Similar tablecloth**, Rectangular Café tablecloth, £70, Beyond France, 01285 641867, beyondfrance.co.uk. **Flowers by Coquelicot**, 0033 4 90 94 07 34. **Architects** Bruno and Alexandre Lafourcade, 0033 4 90 92 10 14, architecture-lafourcade.com.

SITTING ROOM

Bastides Aixaises were the homes of wealthy landowners and it was customary for an area of the main living space to be used as a music room – a

feature recreated here (far left). **For a similar music stand**, try Period Piano Company, 01580 291393, periodpiano.com.

STAIRCASE

Accessories and artwork reflect the region, from the lavender in the urn to the impressionist paintings on the wall. **For a similar antique stone urn**, try Jardinique Garden Antiques, 01420 560055, jardinique.co.uk.

LANDING

The wrought-iron stair railing was made to a traditional design by a local craftsman. **For a similar antique armoire**, try French Finds, 01538 370052, frenchfinds.co.uk.



LAUNDRY ROOM

A Provençal-style ladder was made to reach the upper shelves of the linen cupboard. For similar linen tablecloths, try Beyond France, 01285 641867, beyondfrance.co.uk.

GUEST BEDROOM

Pairing fabric-covered walls with a quilted bedspread brings softness and depth to the room. For a similar antique bedside table, try The French Depot, 01424 423703, thefrenchdepot.com.

CLOAKROOM

The basin adds a sense of grandeur. It is a copy of a typical Provençal design and is carved from local stone.

For a similar stone sink, try 1stdibs, 1stdibs.com. For a similar mirror, try La Maison Chic, 0845 544 2536, la-maison-chic.co.uk.

GUEST BEDROOM

Terracotta floor tiles combined with red ticking on the canopy bed give the room a warm glow. Similar fabric, red-ticking stripe 235, £25sq m, Susie Watson Designs, 0844 980 8185, susiewatsondesigns.co.uk. For a similar antique chaise longue, try The French House, 020 7371 7573, thefrenchhouse.co.uk. Similar flooring, antique reclaimed hexagonal tiles, £4.60 each, The Reclaimed Tile Company, 01423 339952, reclaimedtilecompany.com. □





SITTING ROOM

The colourful artwork by Fabienne Verdier (above, right) was the first item Bénédicté chose for the house. It formed the basis of the scheme for the sitting room.

Similar armchairs, Clio armchairs, £1,858 each; similar tables, Xilos low tables, £3,470 each; all Maxalto at B&B Italia, 020 7591 8111, bebitalia.com. Artwork by Fabienne Verdier, fabienneverdier.com.



CONVERTED STABLES

The serene, contemporary interior of this Provençal retreat belies the fact that until recently it was a crumbling ruin

WORDS REBECCA DAVIES PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID CLEVELAND

Restoration mission





Seven years ago, Bénédicte Petit and her husband Claude began to dream of an idyllic countryside bolt hole in Provence. With busy careers as designers of bathroom fittings, and six, mostly teenage, children, they were looking for a quiet place where they could escape the hubbub of Paris for weekends and holidays.

THE RIGHT PROPERTY

When the couple started their search, they had two main stipulations: the house should be small and not require any renovation work. So Bénédicte was surprised when they were drawn to a vast, abandoned farm building which had previously been used to stable horses and house seasonal farm labourers.

"It hadn't been touched for forty years," says Bénédicte. "It had no windows, no floors, no kitchen, no bathroom, nothing. But it did have a fantastic sense of space, with views right across the Alpilles mountains."

Bénédicte and Claude's children were not so easily won over, however. The property was too dark and

spooky for their liking, and they were afraid to step inside. Bénédicte realised that a great deal of imagination would be needed to transform the dilapidated building into a home, so she called on the services of Alexandre Lafourcade, a local architect who specialises in the restoration of country houses.

DESIGNING A FAMILY HOME

Being careful not to diminish "the spirit of the house", Alexandre set about creating a series of rooms which made the most of the building's cavernous size, while also instilling a sense of comfort and cosiness so that the family would feel at home.

When the restoration was complete, just six months later, the old property was barely recognisable. The crumbling stables had given way to a contemporary sitting room, while the hay loft had become a chic main bedroom with an adjoining bathroom.

It might have been tempting, given the building's agricultural heritage, to furnish it in a more traditional, rustic style, but Bénédicte had other ideas: "I wanted

KITCHEN

A polished-steel pendant light gleams against a subtle palette of greys.

Bespoke kitchen. Alexandre Lafourcade, 0033 4 90 92 10 14, architecture-lafourcade.com.

Similar pendant light, Monza 500, £152, Nova Deko, novadeko.com.

DINING ROOM

Reserved for special occasions in winter, this space has been decorated with warm neutrals and darker accents to ensure it has a cossetting feel.

Skygarden pendant lamps, from £1,547 each, Flos, 020 7681 9933, flos.com.

Flowers, Coquelicot, 0033 4 90 94 07 34.

BATHROOM

A bespoke vanity unit fills the space between the windows perfectly, enhancing the room's sense of symmetry.

Similar mirror, Contour, £140, Habitat, 0844 499 1111, habitat.co.uk.

HOME OFFICE

As Bénédicte and her husband run their own company, having a quiet place to work was essential.

Max writing desk, £4,480, Maxalto at B&B Italia, 020 7591 8111, bebitalia.com.

Spun Light T2 table lamp, £652, Flos, 020 3328 5140, flos.com.

the house to feel peaceful and, for me, that means a modern design. Straight lines and calm colours – I find this sort of style relaxing and very easy to live with.” The minimalist decoration also provides an ideal backdrop for the Petits’ collection of contemporary artwork, such as a treasured calligraphic painting by world-famous artist Fabienne Verdier.

CREATING THE OUTDOOR SPACE

Although harmony now reigned inside, there was still much to be done outside. Most urgently in need of attention was a huge barn that completely blocked the views that had attracted the Petits to the property in the first place. Thankfully, the local authorities granted permission for it to be taken down and, as soon as it was gone, Bénédicte recruited her friend, landscape gardener May de Lasteyrie, to design a Zen-like garden to match the tranquil atmosphere inside the house.

With six children – including two with a penchant for motocross biking – peace and quiet is not always an option, but as Bénédicte says, “We’re very lucky to have

a hundred hectares of land. There are no neighbours close by so we can make as much noise as we like.”

LIVING THE GOOD LIFE

Happily, too, Bénédicte and Claude’s children no longer have any qualms about the property. Now all grown up, with only the youngest still at home, they are regular visitors, more often than not arriving with a host of friends in tow. “Two of my daughters currently live in London,” says Bénédicte, “and they love to bring their English friends here to stay. They say that Provence is a really special place.”

To complete the pastoral scene, the family has ensured that some of the land remains dedicated to farming, with acres of cornfields and olive groves, from which they press their own olive oil. Farming the land has, Bénédicte says, made her feel more connected to nature: “For the first time, we understand all the seasons. When you have farmland, you get to see exactly how things change over the year. That is one of the things that makes life here very different from in the city.” ▷



MAIN BEDROOM

The original wooden beams on the ceiling have been painted white so as not to disrupt the minimalist scheme.

Similar bed, Charles bed, from £2,720, bed by B&B Italia, 020 7591 8111, bebitalia.com.



*Removing a derelict outbuilding
has opened up views across the
rugged Provençal landscape.*



GARDEN

Classic bistro furniture has been positioned to enjoy much-needed shade and the dramatic scenery beyond. Garden design, May de Lasteyrie, Mayflower, mayflower@delasteyrie.fr. Similar folding

bistro chairs, £78 each, The Conran Shop, 0844 848 4000, conranshop.co.uk.

VERANDA

Bénédicte kept the original exterior shutters and painted them light grey in keeping with

local tradition. By selecting a wicker lamp shade and comfortable furniture, the Petits have ensured this area functions as an extra room. Bespoke outdoor shutters, Shutter Design, 01423 359230, shutterdesign.co.uk. □