

Moving to France: a guide to buying your own château

House prices are falling, so now is the time to be king of your own castle

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In Angoulême, Poitou-Charentes, this seven-bedroom, renovated, medieval château is on sale for €3.9 million through Prestige Property

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Many towns and villages in France have a château, ranging from austere Moorish-style castles to Disneyesque affairs with fairytale turrets. A few are open to the public, several are run as hotels, but many remain privately owned, having been in the same family for generations. Now, they may also be for sale, although you're unlikely to see an *à vendre* sign.

"The selling process is discreet," says Sarah Francis of Sifex, a property website that specialises in the sale of châteaux. "Most vendors would be horrified if a potential buyer were to appear without an agent. Many would prefer not to be present and to leave the agent to broker the deal. As a result, the whereabouts of châteaux on the market tends to be a jealously guarded secret."

The Channel 4 TV series *Escape to the Chateau* has sparked castle fever among Francophiles dreaming of a home with the wow factor, especially when grand, rambling châteaux are available for the price of a modest London property. For many it will remain the stuff of dreams, but for others it has become their reality. However, as the name of the spin-off series — *Escape to the Chateau: DIY* — suggests, these imposing buildings are not for the faint-hearted or poor.

In the series Dick Strawbridge, an engineer and TV presenter who bought a run-down château with his wife, Angel, regularly referred to a 200-page survey of their property detailing all the reasons that they shouldn't buy it. Subsequent less-than-romantic scenes of him fixing the ancient sewerage system highlight the hardships.



A ten-bedroom renovated chateau near Rouen in Normandy is on sale for €1.7 million through Prestige Property

A chateau for sale at what looks like a bargain price will almost certainly need some, if not a lot, of work. Even if you find one in great condition, the annual upkeep and maintenance will require dedication and plenty of funds. People buy châteaux with their heart as well as their head, and it's that passion for the project as well as a practical approach that carries them through.



As Strawbridge says: “To do this you’ve got to be a finisher. Not just somebody who starts a dream project and then loses their way. Nothing is a quick job, not in France.”

The new breed of British chatelains are a far cry from the original owners. Originally the trophy homes of kings and nobility, châteaux were run by a fleet of servants, from cooks to stablehands. Today’s owners are less likely to be landed gentry and more likely to be hands-on types eager to get stuck into a renovation. Yet it’s easy to underestimate how much time and money gets sucked into these projects.

“As a rule, the cheaper the chateau, the more expensive the project, the more time it will take to complete and the longer it will take to start generating income,” Patrick Joseph of My French House, an estate agency, says.

Indeed, often the attraction of such properties is their business potential, since they can make an ideal hotel, wedding venue or equestrian centre.



Tim and Rebecca Jones, who are renovating Château de la Ruche in the Loire

Tim and Rebecca Jones, who featured in *Escape to the Chateau: DIY*, turned Château de la Ruche in Pays de la Loire into a family-friendly B&B. “France was never our plan, it was just something that fell into place,” Tim says. In fact, it was only when they saw a rerun of an old series of *Escape to the Chateau* that they began to consider it. “I started searching online and realised we could swap our four-bedroom Victorian house in Lincolnshire for a 14-bedroom château with 15 acres of land,” Rebecca says.

“When we bought the château, it was liveable but very run down. The first winter was tough. Juggling the renovation and family has been difficult; we’ve been working so hard to get the *chambres d’hôtes* [B&B rooms] open so that the château could start to support itself. But we always said this is a project for life — I don’t think we’ll ever be finished, but that’s one of the best things about it.”

The high costs of running a private château, including taxes as well as maintenance, are one of the reasons they end up on the market. In the past, income from the surrounding fields or vineyards was used for their upkeep, but as land was gradually sold off, it left families unable to pay for these vast, unmodernised homes.

Châteaux can linger on the market for years, due in part to owners’ unrealistic price expectations. The former French president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s family château in the Auvergne, in central France, recently sold after 16 years on the market, but only after the price was halved from €2.9 million (£2.5 million). The new owner of Château de Varvasse, said to be a local man in his fifties, plans to spend €500,000 renovating it and will use it as his home and as a venue for weddings and other functions.



Ripe for restoration, this 13th-century chateau near Aulnay, Charente-Maritime, has seven bedrooms and is on sale for €657,000 through Sifex

You don't need the funds of a former president to own a chateau in the Auvergne. Despite the beautiful unspoilt scenery, this mountainous area is one of the most affordable in France. For a budget of just €441,000 you could buy a [15th-century chateau with an independent guest house and several outbuildings in Allier](#) through Leggett estate agency, or a [seven-bedroom chateau in Puy de Dôme](#) for the recently reduced price of €598,000 through Sifex.

"The least expensive areas tend to be more rural environments without easy access to travel," Francis says.

If you would rather be closer to the coast, how about a [12-bedroom, 19th-century chateau](#) 40 minutes from the Atlantic beaches in Vendée for €832,000, on sale with My French House, or a [six-bedroom chateau in Normandy](#) about 35 minutes from the sea for €465,750 via Asi Immobilier?

The Loire Valley is the most famous area for châteaux and is known as the Valley of the Kings due to the number of royal residences built there. It is home to glorious examples such as Chenonceau, Chambord, Azay-le-Rideau, Blois and Amboise. The Dordogne, meanwhile, is known as the Land of 1,001 Castles. However, you don't have to limit your property search to these areas.

"There are real beauties in best-kept-secret areas," Julie Savill of Beaux Villages Immobilier, a French estate agency, says. "South of the Loire and north of the Dordogne rivers would be good hunting ground; check out the north of the Vienne and Indre borders."



They also come in many shapes, sizes and styles. Their evolution over the centuries reflects the state of the country at the time. The original châteaux were fortified for protection, with few windows, and whole villages went about their daily life within the high walls. As the threat of invasion decreased, châteaux became less defensive and more decorative, with the Renaissance era producing beautiful buildings. These residences were a status symbol. They were built at the heart of wine domaines too, owned by prosperous vignerons.

Features may include turrets or a highly decorated *pigeonnier* or dovecote (only lords kept pigeons, which were valued for their guano, used as fertiliser). Inside, you'll find vast stone fireplaces, elegant parquet floors, beautiful cornicing and sweeping staircases. Everything is super-sized too; vast rooms with high ceilings and tall windows.

Most come with a formal garden at the least or parkland, while many have several acres of land. Almost all will have outbuildings, which can be converted into further accommodation, or rooms suitable for events and weddings.

If you've fallen for Dick and Angel's beautiful chateau, and only fairytale turrets and a moat will do, you could buy a [ten-bedroom 13th-century moated chateau in Mayenne](#), just north of the Loire, for €595,000 with Leggett, or a [chateau near Chinon in the Loire Valley](#) that was built in the 16th century with 19th-century additions, featuring several conical towers and water-filled moats, for €928,000 through Sifex.

If you can't afford a whole chateau, consider buying an apartment within one. A [three-bedroom chateau apartment in Indre-et-Loire](#) is for sale for €275,000 with My French House. Or if that's too much like downsizing, what about buying a [four-bedroom tower in an 18th-century chateau in the Dordogne](#) for €593,600 via Leggett?

Just as you need to budget for stamp duty in the UK, don't forget to add in buying costs — solicitor's fees and taxes amount to about 7-10 per cent of the sale price, so you can add at least €56,000 to the price of a €800,000 chateau.

Francis also advises buyers to consider early on how they will finance the purchase. "It is almost impossible to borrow against the purchase of a chateau these days, unless you already have other assets or income in France, or are able to raise the money against your main house in your home country."