

A Love Affair With a Castle in Southwest France

By KATHLEEN BECKETT OCT. 8, 2015

BIZANET, France — Here’s a game to play while driving through the Aude, that rocky, wind-swept region outside the medieval city of Carcassonne in the southwest of France: Try to spot all the ruined castles. In days of old they commanded the tops of hills and mountains, providing bird’s-eye views of the surrounding landscape and any invading marauders. But these days, centuries after falling into disuse, most are nothing more than crumbled walls that seem to sprout out of the terrain, nearly indistinguishable from the rocks beneath them.

And then there’s the Château de St.-Martin de Toques. The castle lays claim to being the only totally rebuilt privately owned Cathar castle in existence. According to the current owner, the businessman Philippe Hesnault, its origins go back further than the anti-Catholic religious movement that flourished in the region from the 1100s until the 1300s; they go all the way back to Roman times.



The Château de St.-Martin de Toques was rebuilt from its ruins. Antiquities dealers from around the world provided all the elements. [Agence Patrice Besse](#)

When Mr. Hesnault’s father, the transportation titan Pierre Hesnault, first saw the castle about 25 years ago, more than half of it lay in ruins. But something — the beauty of its setting, with 360-degree views over vineyards producing Corbières wine, the rugged power of its remaining massive walls, the romance of its drawbridge and moat, now dry — captured his imagination.

Pierre Hesnault bought the fortress, outside the village of Bizanet, and in 1990 commenced a multiyear, multimillion-dollar restoration. Or rather, re-creation. He didn’t just rebuild; he reimagined every detail as it might have been back in A.D. 978, when the mighty de Narbonne family, who gave their name to the neighboring city, inhabited the place.

There wasn’t enough original stone for the entire project, so additional material was excavated from a neighboring hill. Dealers in antiquities from around the world were contacted to provide all the elements: the massive bolted wooden doors, the gargantuan carved stone fireplaces, narrow spiral staircases, the gargoyles that spout water to fill the plunge pool in the center of the courtyard.

“When ‘Papa’ Hesnault first bought it, the courtyard was filled with 100 trees,” said Yves Saint Martin (no relation), the caretaker. Today it is paved with golden stone and filled with chaises longues, pots brimming with lavender and yucca plants, an old well, a sheltering oak tree and an iron dining table with seating for 10.

During the restoration, Mr. Hesnault added modern conveniences, carefully hidden so as not to spoil the atmosphere of antiquity. Floors, for instance, are dry set. Some are solid slabs of stone; others, grids of oak blocks, 25 cubes set in square oak frames that clack ever so softly against each other when stepped on.

“In old times,” said Philippe Hesnault, who inherited the property after his father’s death in 2010, “sand was laid underneath the wood for warmth.” These days, there’s modern underfloor heating. Light switches are hidden in tiny niches carved into the rocky walls. Mood lighting provides illumination from under wood beams. The fixtures in the en suite bathrooms for each of the eight bedrooms are all different, and all old; some are stone, some marble, one copper, and one wood — the bathtub, sink, even the toilets. No worries that the openings between the wood slats in the tub will leak; they seal up as the water fills, swelling the oak.

The narrow private road leading up to the castle is secured by a gate at the base of the hill where Mr. Saint Martin and his wife, Nicole, live, in a stone farmhouse that now contains 10 apartments. The road climbs to the base of the castle, where an elevator rises 17 meters, or 56 feet, to another level. Then the climb on foot begins, over the original rocky passage, to arrive at the castle’s entrance.

The climbing continues inside the castle’s gate. The castle’s interior covers 859 square meters, or 9,246 square feet, including bedrooms, salons, a billiard room, a card room, dining room, kitchen, laundry and terraces — all on so many levels, reached via so many staircases, that a visitor might need GPS.

Each room offers breathtaking views over Saint Martin de Toques’ 227 acres of hills and valleys, as well as a tennis court and a helicopter pad. A crenellated rampart wall crowns the castle and culminates in a terrace overlooking it all. On a clear day you can see the Pyrenees.

A real gem is the chapel. Inside, in a glass case, is what is purported to be a piece of Jesus’s robe. In the chapel, Pierre Hesnault saw what he took to be a sign from above: During certain times of year, the sun’s rays shine straight through an opening in the wall in the shape of a cross, spotlighting the crucifix on the altar.

In Roman times, according to Philippe Hesnault, Saint Martin de Toques served as a guard post for the Roman road that wound through the landscape below. The castle later became the property of the Vicomtesse de Narbonne. Rumors fly as to the causes of its ruin, but, Philippe Hesnault said, “In the early 1800s, the owner had a profligate nephew who spent all his money, dissipating his fortune. He turned to his uncle to help him pay his debts, and little by little the uncle sold off the furniture, then the windows, then even the very stones.”

Pierre Hesnault spent 20 million euros rebuilding the castle, and according to Philippe Hesnault, a recent assessment said it was worth €25 million, or about \$28 million. It is being offered for sale for €7.63 million. The price includes the castle, the chapel, the outbuildings including the 10 apartments, and 227 acres.

Purchase of the furnishings can be negotiated, including the nuns’ beds with their wooden pews at their bases for kneeling in prayer.

While Philippe Hesnault remains emotionally attached and still visits throughout the year with his wife and children, he lives in Tahiti and Los Angeles and is open to selling.

“When I first saw Saint Martin de Toque,” he said, “I thought what a marvelous folly it would be to rebuild it, but it made my father very happy.” Now it’s someone else’s turn to find happiness within its ancient walls.