

On Monet's beloved cliffs, villagers fight to save church from conversion into chip shop

Chapel at Etretat on Normandy coast that entranced French artists is up for sale



Kim Willsher in Paris
The Observer, Sunday 3 August 2014

[Jump to comments \(52\)](#)



The current Notre Dame de la Garde chapel in its cliffside location at Etretat. Photograph: Alamy

Perched high on the cliffs at Etretat, the Notre Dame de la Garde chapel surveys the rugged Norman coast famously captured on canvas by Claude Monet.

Known as the mariners' church, the local landmark rose from the rubble in 1950 after the original building had been destroyed by the Germans during the second world war. Its current incarnation is notable for a sharp, arrow-shaped slate roof and fish-head gargoyles.

Today, however, Notre Dame de la Garde is less concerned by those facing the perils of the sea than the threat of property developers after its private owners put it up for sale for €280,000. Now the civil and church authorities have until the end of the month to save the chapel and see off those who would turn it into a chip shop or kebab house.

"The town hall and the diocese are thinking about it. We very much hope the response will be positive and that this wonderful property will become part of the country's heritage," Marie Merien of the estate agents handling the sale told the *Observer*. "We have had a veritable tsunami of interest from purchasers, including those who want to turn it into a crêperie, a chip shop or a kebab house, but we are well known for saving such historic properties, and have been recognised by Unesco for our work, so we will fight for it to remain a cultural place. That's our aim."

The proposed sale has sparked concern in Etretat, where mayor Franck Cottard has pledged to do his utmost to acquire the chapel. "We have to make a case and get our property services to give us an estimate," he told residents, adding that he hoped to have a "favourable outcome" during the summer.

"It is part of the local heritage. It's the seamen's chapel that was rebuilt and there is a whole history around the lives of the fishermen that is part of the history of Etretat. It's vital that it returns to the local community," Cottard told France 3 television.

To find the money to buy the chapel, officials are considering asking businesses or the local diocese to help raise the money or seek public donations.

Etretat's *curé*, Father Durand, who holds services in the chapel every Wednesday during July and August, said: "To conduct a mass facing the open door and to see the sea is a real joy."

He added: "We could hold mini-concerts here ... anything is possible. The important thing is to recognise its value and for that we're putting our confidence in the mayor."

Patrice Besse, director of the estate agents selling the chapel, which sits 30 metres from the cliff known as the Falaise d'Amont, said he would be selective in the choice of buyer and insisted it was out of the question that the building be converted into a house or restaurant. "We have to find a buyer able to bring the place to life in a cultural and religious way," he told the Agence Normande d'Information, adding that his priority was "the protection of heritage over and above all money considerations".

The Normandy authorities are seeking to have the chalk cliffs at Etretat officially named one of France's "important sites".

Few of the tens of thousands of visitors who climb the steep coastal path to the chapel see the interior, with its wood-vaulted roof like the hull of a boat. The original neo-Gothic church, built by and for mariners in a labour of love that involved lugging the stone up the coastal path, often on their backs, was a beacon of hope and home for Norman sailors and fishermen.

To Monet, who was drawn to paint the Etretat cliffs in 1868-69, the old chapel, commissioned by a local Jesuit priest known as Père Michel in 1854, would have been a familiar and imposing sight.

Monet was not the only painter entranced by the white coastal cliffs – Henri Matisse, Eugène Boudin, Camille Corot and Gustave Courbet also captured the local scenery, while writers Guy de Maupassant, Gustave Flaubert and Victor Hugo were visitors.

The newer chapel has been in private hands and closed for some time.

"Hard to credit, but it couldn't be left open because people began using it as a public toilet," Merien said.

Near the church is a monument to aviators Charles Nungesser and François Coli, whose plane, the *Oiseau Blanc*, was last seen overflying the cliffs on an ill-fated bid to cross the Atlantic in 1927.

"This is a mythical place and very popular with visitors, but it's not suitable for habitation nor appropriate that it becomes a restaurant," added Merien. "Let's hope the authorities, or even a benefactor, comes forward before the end of the month. We're optimistic."