THE INDEPENDENT

Looking for a pied-a-terre? Grab yourself a French church

By Molly Guinness in Paris

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Property in France doesn't come cheap, but thanks to judicial reforms, there are several courthouses going for a song. And a decline in religious conviction means that there are also priories, abbeys and churches on the market – but both church and state are having difficulty bringing in the customers.

A reform enacted last year closed down 401 courthouses in small towns around France, as the cost of running them became too much of a burden. Now, for €200,000 (£175,000) you can snap up the former courthouse in Bar-sur-Seine, in eastern France – complete with peristyle and columns.

Or, on the Luxembourg border and "ideally situated close to the town centre and the cinema", the Hayange courtroom for €465,000 (panelling included. The decommissioned courthouses were first offered for sale by the state to their respective local councils. The majority were taken on and converted into public spaces such as cultural centres or galleries.

Sold ?325,000: Avallon courthouse; For Sale: ?435,000 Art Deco church, Haute Picardie; For Sale: ?340,000 Sainte Trinity and the Virgin Mary Church
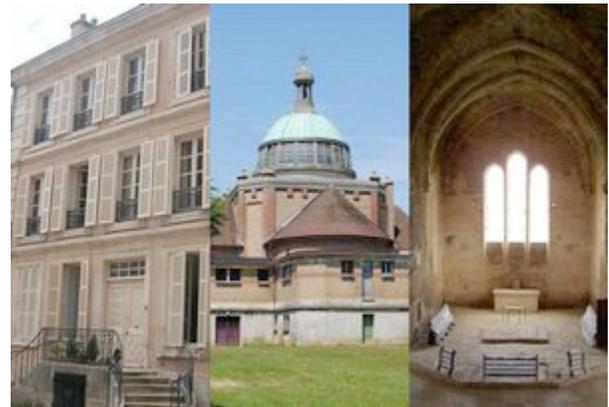
But many councils have no use for an old courthouse, so the government put them on the market. While the buildings stand empty, the state pays for their upkeep, so the prices per square metre have been fixed low. Nevertheless, several buildings have stood empty for several months now without finding a buyer.

The courthouse in the eastern town of Forbach – more than 2,000 square metres for an asking price of €650,000 – has been on the market for a year, but so far, no takers. "We also didn't have any use for it." said Jean-Pierre Jung, director-general of services for Forbach town council. "It could be transformed into accommodation, but it would be better as an exhibition space."

In the eastern town of Avallon, a couple of antiques traders were happy to shell out €325,000 for the courthouse. Forbach has had some interest from a book collector, but it seems there just aren't enough people in France who want to start private museums, and the cost of renovation and conversation of the courthouses has put off private buyers looking for a unique home.

Meanwhile, estate agents are taking an increasing number of religious buildings onto their books.

After the departure of the last nuns back in 2008, the congregation of Pamiers in southern France has decided to put their Carmelite convent on the market for €1m. "There are fewer and fewer people who practise religion, and often the church puts a building on the market so as to pay for repairs to other buildings it owns," said estate agent Patrice Besse.

He heads up the Patrice Besse estate agency, which sells distinctive buildings including chateaux, churches and fortresses.

The notion of selling religious buildings has become more acceptable, and selling a church is no longer thought of as sacrilege, according to Mr Besse, who says that churches tend to be transformed into cultural spaces rather than houses.

But again, it can be hard to find any buyers for these buildings. The mayor of Pamiers turned down the building when he was offered the first refusal, pointing out that the town has no use for it, and that it would cost a sum of €6m to restore it.

Other local officials have put the restoration figure at much less – €700,000 – and say that it should be transformed into a cultural space to revitalise the town centre.

"These buildings are not always good to live in," said Christophe Gonzales, the associate director of the estate agent Maisons et Chateaux.

"The majority go to social or cultural projects. It was an austere life in a place like this," he said.

"A nine-metre squared cell is not a good place for a luxury accommodation and it's not straightforward to turn it into something most people would want to live in," the estate agent added.