

OVERSEAS

Renovating a property in Europe? Here's what you need to know

What (and what not) to do when renovating a holiday home abroad — by those who have been there and got the T-shirt



Karen and Will Foster “spent way too much money not knowing any better” on their 12-bedroom château in Haute-Garonne, France

Liz Rowlinson

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From Toulouse to Tuscany, Britons have long been purchasing romantic wrecks, tumbledown village houses and châteaux to bring back to life lovingly. The tears and the triumphs of restoring a historic home oozing with potential and navigating the local tradesmen have been the subject of numerous books, films and TV series — most recently the BBC’s *Amanda & Alan’s Italian Job* and More4’s *Home Greek Home*.

Increased labour and building costs across Europe may have dampened enthusiasm for a fixer-upper but agents report that there are still buyers keen to get stuck in. “The renovation trend isn’t over, people are just more sensible,” says Nick Ferrand of Abode Italian Property. “Yes, you can buy homes for €1 in less highly populated areas of Italy, but buyers are realising that location is important. A wreck on the top of the hill may have panoramic views but it won’t be practical.”

The cost of some building materials is still up 40 per cent after pandemic shortages and Andrew Guck of Leggett Immobilier in Carcassonne, southern France, warns of overspending: “Recent buyers took on a renovation project and put in a swimming pool first – but because the cost of building materials exploded, they now can’t afford to do the house.”

Here some happy renovators — past and present — provide some tips and inspiration.



The Fosters' colourful kitchen

Double UK building prices and you are close

Karen and Will Foster live in a 12-bedroom château in France's Haute-Garonne department and say they “spent way too much money not knowing any better” when they started renovating it 15 years ago. The couple from West Sussex moved to the Lot-et-Garonne village of Beauville, north of Toulouse, with their two daughters, now 23 and 24. Between working — Will is a tree surgeon and Karen is an art director and fashion stylist who commutes to the UK — they did up their house and three outbuildings as gîtes.

Their first mistake was using a “fancy expat architect”, says Karen, who’s in her fifties. “We spent £15,000 and we didn’t use the overdetailed plans. What we needed could have been done by the local architect the mayor suggested for less than half of the price.”

The couple used local tradespeople, rather than saving money by bringing people over from the UK to do work. “If things go wrong — like a fire or water damage — you are covered by their insurance. Tradesmen in France are expensive, but it is worth the peace of mind,” Karen says. “In France we found that if you try and negotiate on the estimates — *devis* — it is basically saying you know better, which they don’t like. You also have to get used to their two-hour lunch break, but using locals helps you integrate with the local community too.”



The Fosters fixed up the château and converted three outbuildings to gîtes in their spare time

Will, 52, echoing other owners, says: “When buying a property to renovate, don’t think in UK prices for materials. Do your calculations and double it, then you are close.”

Karen also suggests not buying your white goods in the UK, despite them being “way less expensive than in France”. She adds: “If anything goes wrong you have no guarantee. We have a broken Rangemaster cooker for which we had to buy the new parts from the UK but no one here will fit the parts, so we have to get a new oven.”



The château before, pictured with the Fosters' daughter, Maddie

Their property is now for sale at €2.2 million [through Beaux Villages](#).

Get a builder to check out the project

When the locals in Normandy see the extent of the project that Helen Roache and Richard May have taken on there's usually a wide-eyed “*bon courage!*” (good luck). Fed up with not being able to afford the space they needed in Honor Oak, southeast London, the couple, who have two boys aged three and ten, bought a run-down watermill for €95,000 (£82,000) in July last year and moved out to Flers.

Roache, 50, says the overgrown, derelict mill house is probably a “lifetime's work”, although they have estimated it will take about three years and a budget of £300,000 for the initial renovation. The first six months have been spent clearing the waterside site, while settling the boys into the local school and also juggling her PR business, learning French and paperwork — her Irish passport got them their residency permit.



Helen Roache and Richard May moved from London to a former watermill in Flers, France, which they bought for £82,000

“We are tackling the [three-bedroom] main house first and building some temporary sleeping pods so we can move in,” she says. “Until then we are renting a house from a farmer ten minutes’ drive away. If Rich hadn’t been a builder there’s no way we would have done this — we are doing as much as we can ourselves.”

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May, 44, says renovating in France has been eye-opening. “Materials are way more expensive over here – a sheet of 18mm ply that costs £35 in the UK costs €115 here. New parts for our mini digger take eight weeks to arrive and cost crazy prices. The water board put the phone down on us, telling us our French wasn’t good enough.”

He advises taking a builder with you to look at any house you might be thinking of buying to renovate and a survey and make friends with the builders’ merchant. “But beware, it opens at 9am and breaks for lunch!”

The goal at the end of all this is to live mortgage-free, with onsite gîtes and a roomy home to entertain family and friends. “The boys see eagles and baby lambs on the way to school and we’ll just have more freedom in our lives,” Roache says.

Follow their story on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) or [@moulinroche](https://www.instagram.com/moulinroche) on Instagram.



Sarah Moore, pictured with her husband, Pete, and their three children, spent double her renovation budget on a property in Skiathos, Greece

Find a local contact to be your eyes, ears and translator

Sarah Moore, an interior designer from West Sussex, bought sight unseen a 123-year-old derelict house on the Greek island of Skiathos during 2021's lockdown for £100,000. Her family's renovation of the property, in Plakes, has been followed on the six-part series *Home Greek Home*.

Although Sarah's plan was initially viewed as a "stupid idea" by her husband, Pete, 49, and their children, Harry, 20, Ed, 19, and Libby, 17, and it cost double the £60,000 renovation budget, she maintains that the property, which they will use themselves and rent out, has been a good investment.



Moore bought the 123-year-old derelict house for £100,000

Among her top tips is to use a local surveyor to guide you through the various licences and building regulations. "And find a local contact to be your eyes, ears and translator if you are remote from the build. A daily update stops things unravelling too quickly."

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Make sure your project is well insured as health and safety is less stringent in Greece, she adds. “Make sure all the tax liability is covered in the numbers.”



After: Moore's renovation was documented in the TV series Home Greek Home

Brace yourself for a slipping time schedule and a shifting budget. “Local workforces often don’t put a shift in if it’s too hot, raining or it’s a holiday or celebration. Respect the rhythm of your neighbourhood and involve yourself in the local life. There is no warmer nation than the Greeks.

“Enjoy the struggle: frustrations, compromises and the “*siga, siga!*” [slowly, slowly] attitude all need to be embraced,” she says. “It’s worth taking time to make your dream property perfect.”

Instagram: [@sarahmoorehome](https://www.instagram.com/sarahmoorehome).

Sounds too much like hard work? Try a revamp instead

Not brave enough to take on a complete restoration? Consider buying an old 1970s or 1980s whitewashed Spanish villa and giving it a stylish and energy-efficient revamp. It's the speciality of Jessica Bataille, an interior designer based in Javea in Alicante, who uses natural and recycled materials to turn "obsolete holiday homes" into Ibiza-style properties ideal for dual-season living. She also converts and builds from scratch homes built to Passivhaus standard through her Bataille Living company.



Jessica Bataille, an interior designer based in Alicante, Spain

"We will use reclaimed materials and better insulation allied with modern technology to make a more comfortable home," she says. Old wooden beams, *esparto* (raffia) blinds, wood-panelled iron railings and pergolas along with beige stucco (not brilliant white render) combine to provide something more obviously in tune with its natural setting (agave and other drought-proof plants add to the effect). Traditional dark-wood Spanish interiors are lightened up, and you can shop the look at her online home furnishings store.





After: the villa's Ibiza-style facelift

France

Property

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