

For Geoffrey Kenyon-May, a life dedicated to restoring French chateaux began with a different kind of romantic dream. "I stupidly left a very nice girl in England and ran off with a Benny Hill girl," the 74-year-old confides as we sit on the terrace at Château du Vieux Fort, near Castelnaudary, in Languedoc-Roussillon. Below, a wide, tree-lined *allée* slopes gently down to the Canal du Midi, which runs past the edge of his property. "An absolute disaster, all my fault — she was very pretty."

Vast historic piles were not part of the plan when he arrived in France from Warwickshire more than 40 years ago — he was going to run a boatyard on the Riviera — but in 1976, Geoffrey paid £60,000 for Château de Commarque, in the heart of Sauternes country, with 50 acres of dead vineyards. Empty for nearly two decades, the 19th-century mansion was derelict: "The beams and the floorboards had been removed."

His squeeze rapidly tottered off into the sunset, but Geoffrey got stuck in. "Every time I see a neglected property, it's crying out for someone to do something with it," he says. "I didn't intend it to be a business — it's a pleasant way of life, and if I make a profit at the end of the day I'm delighted."

It's not quite that breezy, of course. He has a few firm rules that have seen him

through his career as a serial chateau-fancier. "I jump in with two feet — then think, 'What to do to make it pay?'" Cash flow, he says, is king. "People buy a property, spend a fortune before they open the front door, and don't have enough to survive. I've imported plant machinery and mobile homes. You have to be flexible." At Commarque, he turned the *chais* (wine store) into a restaurant, ran vineyard tours and converted the stables for B&B.

His approach to restoration is always hands-on: "I like to get stuck in, I don't count the hours." At Commarque, he started as he would continue, buying "three lorry loads of second-hand timber" from a salvage yard and recruiting some English boys who'd come for the *vendange* (grape harvest) to help put all the beams back in. "It cost me £50,000 to restore it with good second-hand material — new materials spoil the character of a place."

As for furniture, well, it takes rather a lot. "I'm always looking for old bits and pieces," he says. Treasures in use at Vieux Fort include an antique vestments chest rescued from an abandoned chapel and a claw-foot bath he found in a farmer's field. He has accumulated a sizeable cache of old nails, hinges and door furniture to ensure authenticity. "People don't appreciate that you need all these," he says.

Geoffrey also has a huge collection of antique arms and armour, which make highly appropriate decorations for his chateaux. Three knights in armour with lifesize model horses are all



Restoring one French chateau would be more than enough for many people, but over the past 40 years, Geoffrey Kenyon-May has tackled five of them. By Karen Robinson

The man in the high castles



Holding the fort Kenyon-May with his wife, Monique, and daughter, Diane, at Château du Vieux Fort, above. The vast rooms are decorated with antiques and armour



Lydie Lecarpentier

WHAT YOUR CHATEAU SAYS ABOUT YOU

Super swish or shabby chic: what's hiding behind the grand exterior?

CHATEAU BANKER

Immaculately restored, with help from an internationally acclaimed decorator sourced from the pages of *The World of Interiors*, and maintained by a small army of housekeepers and gardeners from *le village*. The oversized kitchen is dominated by a La Cornue range, and expensive modern furniture and large pieces of contemporary art blend perfectly with the colour schemes. Even in deepest winter, it's as warm as an Upper West Side triplex.

CHATEAU BRIT The owners ran out of money for antiques, so the bedrooms are kitted out in Ikea. They hadn't reckoned on the sheer scale of the project – their old semi in Godalming would fit comfortably into the principal *salon* – or on just how stropky British brides could get about having their photos taken in the unkempt gardens. Croissants from the local Lidl don't have the B&B trade rushing back.

CHATEAU DE MA TANTE The younger family members

can't wait to sell up, but what to do with the elderly aunties who've been in the stately all their lives? Infrequent visitors fall into beds with mattresses from the century before last, made up with hand-monogrammed linen that is only slightly mildewed. Faultlessly hospitable, the aunts raid the cellar for staggeringly good wine, though they are likely to serve it in those tumblers that started life as mustard pots. And they never throw anything away – they just move to another room, or wing.

CHATEAU BCBG Acquired by a forebear to stash the spoils of a career representing *la France* abroad: antique Chinese armour, Persian rugs, monumentally ugly Bavarian commodes. Succeeding generations use the place every August for holidays with their families and their smart Paris friends – up to 20 at a time – and don't go near it the rest of the year. They put in a pool in the 1980s, but are happy with the tiny kitchen and single bathroom, so long

as they can tan by the pool and drink cocktails.

CHATEAU SECRET Electric gates, high walls, hidden cameras and drone patrols ensure the privacy of the oligarch or deposed dictator. It has more gold leaf than Versailles, endless salons in the style of Louis-Whatever, with handmade silk wallpaper, and a vast flatscreen telly in every room. Below stairs, the bored security detail are giving the gate passcode to the pizza delivery bloke.

CHATEAU ARTISTE Between sell-out shows and soaking up critical acclaim everywhere from the Venice Biennale to Art Basel in Miami, the star of the international art scene repairs to his French domain. The extensive outbuildings are remodelled into vast studios with room for plenty of assistants to complete the master's work, and any fancy decorative detail inside the chateau has been scoured away in favour of raw stone walls, scant furniture and shockingly explicit artwork by his contemporaries.

but lost in the vast hall at Vieux Fort. He's also been an enthusiastic racer, collector and restorer of vintage cars – another handy income stream – so it's no surprise that one of the things he loves about chateaux is their extensive outbuildings. Moving home involves 10 lorry loads of possessions.

In 1980, he sold the restored Château de Commarque for £450,000 and moved with Monique, his newly acquired French wife, to Château de Veyrignac, near Sarlat, in the Dordogne. A stately pile in 50 acres, with classic *chien-assis* dormer windows, it had served time as an abbey. German bombardment in the Second World War had done serious damage to the roof, so Geoffrey had to restore that first – funded by balloon rides over the Dordogne, and opening a museum devoted to his armaments collection.

By the time he'd finished making the 30-room place habitable, he was "offered £1.5m for it by a Brit", but Monique didn't want to move. Then "the market dropped"

"I didn't intend it to be a business. It's a pleasant way of life, and I'm delighted if I make a profit"

and it sold for about £800,000 in 1993, enabling Geoffrey, Monique (a nurse) and their three-year-old daughter, Diane, to move to Château Rigaud, near St Emilion.

He paid £110,000 for the two-storey L-shaped building, which has a tower dating from the 15th century. It was in the usual state of dereliction: the fireplaces, doors and even flagstones had been removed. They did up one wing as holiday rentals, the other to live in, and all was going well until a fire caused by a dodgy boiler devastated their quarters. Still, the insurance paid out for that, and in the swings-and-roundabouts world of chateau life, two weeks after one buyer pulled

out of paying £500,000 for the place in 2002, Geoffrey sold it to another for £650,000.

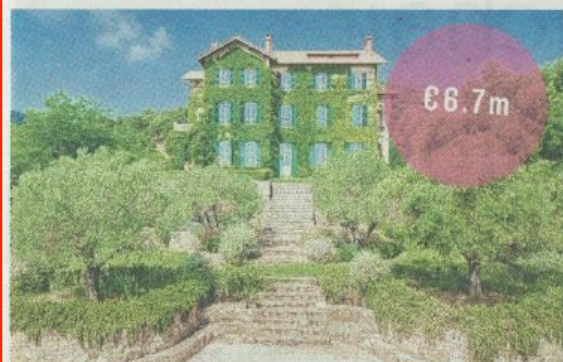
Could he see a pattern emerging? "You put so much money in, you have to sell up to get it back," he says. Which brought the family to Thiviers, in the Périgord, where £450,000 secured Château de Razac, a fairy-tale castle built in the 16th century, with a 17th-century wing and a square tower, as well as a manor house, five cottages and eight sizeable outbuildings in 200 acres.

They knew the drill by now: the cottages would become holiday lets, Geoffrey dug a lake in the grounds "to make it interesting", and Diane, now 25, with an MBA and an online chateau-wedding business (dkmluxuryrentals.com), set about getting to know a whole new set of ghosts. "With my father, it's always a haunted chateau," she says.

Geoffrey reveals that he always spends a couple of nights in a camper van on the drive to check out the vibe before he purchases, and →



BUY YOUR OWN



€6.7m

COTE D'AZUR

Built in the 1880s and completely renovated in 2002, this nine-bedroom chateau stands on a secluded hilltop, yet is easy to reach from Ste Maxime or St Tropez — the land runs straight down to the coast road, with beach access via a private lane. Within its 260 acres, you'll find a one-bedroom guest flat, a two-bedroom caretaker's house, a studio and several annexes, as well as workshops, garages and a pool.

020 8144 5501, home-hunts.com



€4.75m

LOT-ET-GARONNE

Here's one for history buffs: this renovated nine-bedroom chateau near Agen was built for a royal mistress in the 16th century, and is the centrepiece of a 75-acre estate with traditional walled gardens, a walnut grove and a pool. There's about 16,000 sq ft of living space in all, and the outbuildings include a guest house and an orangery. Bordeaux airport is a 90-minute drive away.

00 33 5 56 79 63 62, sothebysrealty-france.com



€880,000

TOULOUSE

Set in 24 acres, 15 miles from the airport, Château Dejean has been enlarged and improved over the centuries. As well as the main four-bedroom house, there's a separate wing with three further bedrooms, as well as a large barn, a chapel and an old wine store that is now a reception room large enough for 150 people. Historic features include gilded plasterwork by Ingres's father and a tiny oval fumoir, or smoking room.

00 33 5 59 01 59 59, emilegarcin.fr

"I jump in with two feet, then think, 'What to do to make it pay?'"

→ "I only buy a property if it's suitable for my animals" — currently a boxer, Nicky, and a Labrador, Bruce.

In 2007, the shock waves from the global financial crisis reached all the way to his tranquil rural domain. He was about to close a sale for €2.2m, but a chain reaching back to New York crumbled and, more than eight years later, Château de Razac is "still sitting there waiting for somebody", priced at just €1m (£780,000; francechateaupropriete.com).

Geoffrey had already committed to buy Vieux Fort — which has three cottages, many stables and 15 acres of garden, woods and park — for €800,000, so the lorry convoy rolled south to another date with history. In the 17th century, it had been a garrison for soldiers who guarded the merchants taking goods by road between Narbonne and Toulouse, but the aristocrat who acquired it in 1710 brought in an Italian architect to create its elegant canal-facing facade.

It had been neglected since the war: there was "a lot there, but hidden". Knocking through to recreate the original front-to-back entrance hall restored a sense of grandeur. Yet for all its elegance and imposing proportions (the *grand salon* is 740 sq ft, and even the *petit salon* covers a stonking 430 sq ft), it feels lived in. It's "*dans son jus*", the estate agent says approvingly — meaning that the chateau's heritage and style have been respected.

The plan was to turn it into a venue for weddings and events — Geoffrey thought all those suits of armour and ancient weaponry would create just the right ambience for a medieval banqueting hall in the stables — but for once he didn't have the cash. So that's one business opportunity that he didn't manage to explore, and a possibility for whoever wants to buy Vieux Fort, which is on the market for €1.49m (00 33 5 59 01 59 59, emilegarcin.com).

Which chateau has been his favourite? It's an unfair question to ask a true romantic. "I have a love affair with each of them — and I always put a four-poster in every bedroom. The *vie de châtelain* is very nice, but it's a full-time occupation. I need to slow down a little bit."

So what's the plan? Not exactly a bungalow in Bognor — Geoffrey has his eye on a castle in Spain.



Lydie Lecarpentier; Philippe De Paris

Wheeler dealer
Above, Château de Veyrignac was Kenyon-May's second stately purchase, in 1980. Right, after a sale fell through in 2007, Château de Razac is still on the market at the reduced price of €1m

