

# Home Tour: Château de Gudanes

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In 2013, an Australian couple bought a crumbling château in the French Pyrenees. Five years and innumerable power outages, leaks and tears later, *Tristan Rutherford* discovers how a “naive willfulness” (and many eager volunteers) helped coax a ruin back to life. Photography by *Salva López* & Styling by *Cobalto Studio*



Château de Gudanes was built in the mid-18th century for wealthy nobleman Louis Gaspard de Sales, also known as "Le Roi des Pyrénées."

It was internet cookies that led Karina and Craig Waters to buy a 94-room château. The Australian couple's daughter, Jasmine, was on a school exchange in southwest France; as Craig followed her progress, his browser became inundated with property ads for the French Pyrenees. One pop-up featured the Château de Gudanes, a Dracula's castle-meets-Downton Abbey in the Aston Valley. The couple tacked it onto a tentative property viewing list for their forthcoming trip.

It was love at first sight, but there was just one problem: The Château de Gudanes was a forlorn wreck. It had neither water nor electricity, let alone a functioning roof. Trees grew from its turreted chimneys. Interior scaffolds were reflected in antique mirrors. Rooftop snowmelt dripped over Empire wallpaper dating from the late 1700s, back when when Voltaire and Diderot philosophized in the castle's principal salon. It was a house of horrors—an atrophied mansion with the power to give even the most accomplished accountant budgetary nightmares.

"The first time we saw the château we should have had more

sense," says Karina, herself a chartered accountant. But she and Craig were enticed through the castle gates by its magic and charm. "Anyway, if we'd have thought about it too much we would never have embarked on the project." Karina describes her original vision as "very Australian. As in, you just get someone to fix up the place then we can play château!" Five years after the purchase in 2013, she concedes that "it didn't quite work out that way."

The Château de Gudanes' history is a tale of religious wars and ritzy pomp. In a storyline that puts *Game of Thrones* to shame, the protestant Gudanes barony was gifted to a son-in-law, stripped of assets during the French Revolution, auctioned by the state, pillaged during a peasant uprising, then repurchased by the government for use as a children's summer camp in the 1970s.

The building's current incarnation was crafted by Ange-Jacques Gabriel, the go-to architect for King Louis XV of France. Gabriel used a similarly muscular grandeur for his Château du Petit Trianon at Versailles, which housed

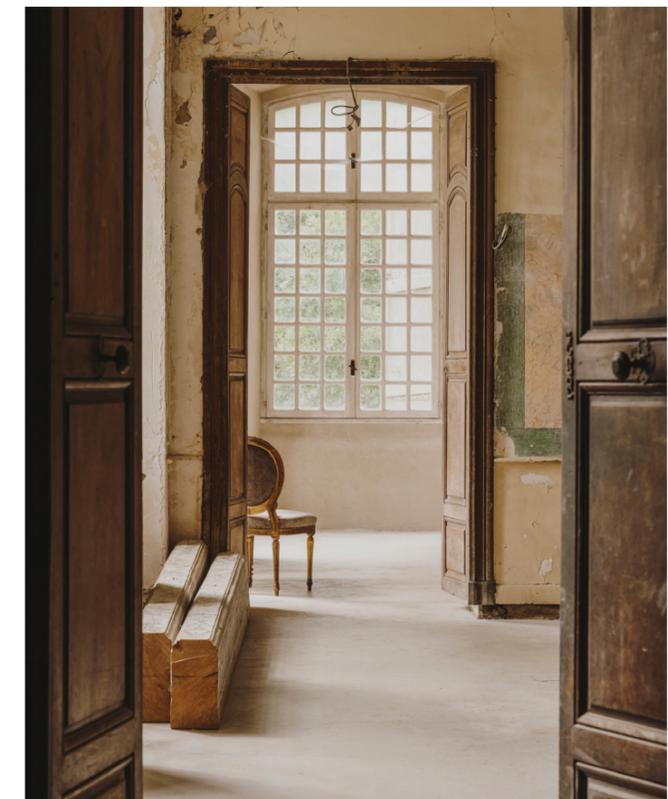
Louis' official mistress, Madame

du Barry. By the 1990s, the Pyrenees château had fallen into such a state of disrepair that it was classified as a ruin and declared a *monument historique*. This official designation hindered relief efforts because any subsequent renovations had to be approved by the finicky regulations of France's Ministry of Culture.

This is where Karina's lack of local language skills or architectural knowledge came to the fore. A naive willfulness allowed her to find offbeat solutions where more experienced project managers would have failed. When it rained during the consolidation phase, she pitched a tent inside the château so she could carry on her travaux. Her evolving Franglais insulated her from criticism, "because I couldn't understand what everybody was thinking," Karina claims that being a kindly Aussie rather than an invading Brit helped her cause. "Locals also understood the château's heritage and were embarrassed at how far it had fallen, so they had a heartfelt gratitude that someone was trying their best."

As the Waters family gave their all, the château gave up its secrets.

*"You don't buy a château and think you'll live the same life."*





In 2016, the Waters family was awarded a Medal of Honour by Prince Albert II of Monaco on behalf of the Institute of France in recognition of their efforts to restore the chateau.



“I try not to think more than three months ahead.”

When the building team cleared 500 tons of rubble, they discovered Venetian glassware and faience pottery. They also found an eight-foot-wide tunnel bolted shut in the floor. Legend has it that during the religious conflicts that wracked southwest France, an escape tunnel ran from the château to the local village. “One of the counts apparently escaped by being put in a barrel, then rolled to safety,” explains Karina. When the couple tried to excavate the shaft, however, “it was like we were digging all the way to Australia, so we temporarily stopped.” Nevertheless, such discoveries blossomed into a narrative that inspired them to proceed.

After several months of restoration work, Karina’s social media page had 50 likes from disbelieving family and friends. “Then one day I woke up and I thought the kids had hacked the site.” One of Karina’s blogs had been shared by HuffPost, pushing up the château’s Facebook likes to 25,000. “Then my neighbor’s 12-year-old daughter said I should get Instagram.” After a slow start the feed was covered by a San Francisco newspaper. “Around 100,000 followers came on board in a few days,” recalls Karina, who must have touched an earthy nerve for viewers glued to Silicon Valley screens. “Then all the accounts went up in big numbers and it hasn’t stopped.” The Château de Gudanes now offers a regular dose of pastoral bliss to 400,000 Facebook fans and more than 300,000 Instagram followers.

As if by magic, the derelict mansion became a fantasy castle where everyone wanted to stay. The château was now inundated not by leaks but by guests eager to help: Whispers of wildflowers and birdsong mingled with Neo-Latin and American-English, as curators, linguists and food foragers offered their services. Salon after salon was painstakingly excavated with the assistance of, for example, a team of Italian Byzantine fresco restorers. Work on the rear of the château revealed medieval friezes hidden under layers of plaster. Word of the restoration spread to

an elderly gentleman whose family had owned the château from the 19th century until the 1950s. “The guy could see what had been accomplished was done with love and purpose.” Both he and the Waterses shed tears.

As château guardian, Karina has the delicate job of channeling the resources of well-wishers. She created “Restore and Stay” packages for three, five and seven nights based on visitors’ interests, ranging from yoga, to flea markets, to rock art and patisserie making. These paying volunteers engage in “château camping.” Each is lodged in a semi-restored suite with a marble hearth and crumbling ceiling, rustically furnished with rococo bedsteads and dried flowers. A conservator from Britain’s National Trust recently stayed, as did the NASA executive in charge of reconditioning the Apollo 13 spaceship, who passed on valuable restoration techniques. Dinner table conversations, fueled by local Ariège wine, are maelstroms of Languedocian linguistics and Mesozoic geology, of “kindred spirits and positive energy.” Karina explains, “You don’t buy a château and think you’ll live the same life.” Her accommodation is booked up until 2020.

Karina is a custodian of a rural idyll, rather than a strict mistress bossing staff at a boutique hotel, and she attributes her success to the laissez-faire character of her adopted country. “I love the way that the château is about what might happen. Long term? I try not to think more than three months ahead.” Five years ago, she dove in at the deep end, and the castle has repaid her faith in spades. “After the château got all this publicity I received several publishing offers,” she says. The result is a book that was published in September 2018. “It’s titled *Château de Gudanes: A True Love Story Never Ends*, because love doesn’t have a fairytale beginning. It’s about hard work. About trust. And it’s forever.” The next chapter of the château’s unlikely annals is just beginning.



When the Waterses bought the château, the roof had collapsed in four places and champagne buckets were deployed to catch rainwater.