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A TASTE OF THE CARIBBEAN
DELICIOUS RECIPES FOR SUMMER

from SHACK *to* CHIC

Though ancient looking, this Provençal house is a modern extension and conversion of a rough, hillside hut, providing for its English owner a perfect holiday retreat just outside the Lubéron village of Ménerbes

TEXT JOHANNA THORNYCROFT | PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREAS VON EINSIEDEL



The sitting room best illustrates the cool effect of the neutral colour scheme, with Swedish chairs and small side tables painted a soft grey, and a sofa upholstered in a similar-toned linen. Bespoke, glazed doors with matt, black-painted frames open on to the terrace





At night, the medieval hilltop villages of the Parc du Lubéron – in inland Provence – appear to be connected, like a string of fairy lights looping across the landscape from east to west. To the north are Gordes, Roussillon and Apt, while south of the N100 perch Ménerbes, Lacoste and Bonnieux; and who has not heard of L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, a small town on the River Sorgue stuffed with antiques dealers?

Before Provence became so fashionable, decades of neglect and depopulation had all but finished off these historic castles and villages, but it was only a matter of time before the region would undergo an extraordinary renaissance. First came colonies of artists and writers; then Parisians discovered Van Gogh's vision of glittering sunlight and starry nights; and by the Eighties, a trickle of northern Europeans had become a torrent of sun-seekers, eager to buy into the Provençal dream. The demand for property kept on growing, and the desire to reinstate the once elegant *bastides* (manor houses), simpler *mas* (farmhouses), and village houses created a building and restoration boom.

For those who seek to recreate the genuine article there are two key contacts to be made. The first is Emmanuel Garcin of the eponymous house-finding company based in Ménerbes – finding the right property is much harder than people think. Having located the perfect ruin, or

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP A pair of English, eighteenth-century, marble-topped tables from Westenholz Antiques in Pimlico Road flanks the chimneypiece in the sitting room. The painted French chairs were bought locally. The owner collects small animal sculptures, such as these bronze hippos. The stone-topped coffee table was bought at Sacha in Ménerbes. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT The iron chandelier in the dining area was designed by the Lafourcade studio. The dining area opens out to a loggia. On the terrace, a Provençal split-cane screen mounted on iron poles provides shade. The tiles behind the cooker were bought in the nearby town of Apt







castle, or farmyard, the savvy new owner will then contact the architecture and design studio of Bruno and Alexandre Lafourcade in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. 'A Lafourcade house has become the benchmark for restoration across the region,' says Emmanuel.

With few cars, no buses and just a handful of shops, Ménerbes is one of the most tranquil and scenic places imaginable. After renting holiday homes in the area, the New York-based English owner of this house initially considered buying a farmhouse, but decided that maintenance would be difficult. Instead, he bought what he calls a 'shack', on a steep, south-facing hillside below the citadel, and asked Bruno Lafourcade to design a modern home, but with an exterior that looked as though it was 200 years old. It was a challenging project as many of the streets in the village are protected, so access for the delivery of materials was restricted to a limited number of hours each week – and all from a street way below the site.

The owner has a passion for building, art, gardens and interiors. He knew that the project would not be completed overnight, although surprisingly, it took only 10 months to build the 300-square-metre house. 'Having seen the Lafourcade portfolio, I had complete faith in their ability to produce something very special from almost nothing at all,' he says.

Accessed via a discreet door on a steep lane, the house opens up in a series of spacious, light rooms, all of which have views over the wooded hillside and a patchwork of small farms in the valley below. The original 'shack' – now a guest annex – is at a slight angle to the main house. On the lower-ground level are several utility rooms.

The vernacular of the area usually includes spacious outdoor terraces; by exploiting the full width of the very steep site, Bruno ensured that a large terrace could be accommodated, as well as a long, rectangular swimming pool that abuts the retaining wall. Garden designer Dominique Lafourcade planted the small garden with scented Mediterranean plants that create boundaries, but also provide subtle colour and a counterpoint to the rugged, stone walls. Her expert knowledge of plants that thrive in the extreme Provençal climate ensures there is no disappointment after a harsh winter or a scorching summer – this is no place for a tender English garden.

Old beams and reclaimed tiles lend a convincing sense of history in some of the rooms, and uniformly white-painted plaster walls are cool and modern – the ideal setting for the owner's choice of furniture. A single day's shopping in the famous town of L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue produced a large number of interesting cupboards and chairs, as well as an eighteenth-century sofa.

The Lafourcade studio designed almost everything, from the oak-and-stone kitchen to the bathroom fittings. Bruno says that the quality of the craftsmanship in Provence enables him to recreate an authentic period house or a modern

ABOVE The floor of the entrance hall is laid with traditional terracotta tiles; the staircase, with an iron 'rope' handrail, leads up to the bedrooms. **LEFT** In the main bedroom, black-and-white photographs by Peter Beard are arranged on the bookshelves; the metal-and-leather stool at the foot of the bed was bought in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue

interior – joinery, stone-cutting and carving, and forged ironwork are among the skills still undertaken in the traditional way. ‘It does not matter what architectural style our clients request, the quality of all the hand-crafted elements will be the same,’ he says.

There are no carpets or rugs in the house, but the mix of flooring materials creates a sense of rhythm. In the sitting room, the polished concrete is smooth and soft underfoot; elsewhere, old tiles and oak floorboards lend colour and texture to the neutral colour scheme. Throughout the house, the fabrics are mostly off-white, or grey- and green-toned linens; black is used as an effective accent colour, most strikingly in the black-painted metal-and-glass doors that open on to the main terrace. Against this backdrop, Swedish, English and French furniture all work in harmony; with the limited colour scheme, the shape of each piece is clear, and more striking than if pattern had been introduced.

The owner, who spends time here throughout the year, entertaining friends, reading and cooking, reiterates his pleasure in the – albeit long-distance – collaboration with the Lafourcade studio. ‘The joy that this beautifully designed house provides – of being able to relax and forget about business, and to feel part of village life – is the real success. I am so glad that I chose Ménerbes over a farmhouse’ □

Bruno & Alexandre Lafourcade Architecture: 00-33-4 90 92 10 14; www.architecture-lafourcade.com

The medieval village of Ménerbes (right) sits atop a steep, wooded hillside. The main bedroom (below) opens out to a terrace overlooking the valley. The bathrooms have wood-panelled baths (centre right) and limestone vanity units (bottom centre). The shutters of the house are painted pale blue, to complement the stone (bottom right). Bruno Lafourcade designed the narrow pool abutting the retaining wall (centre)

