

HOUSE CALL



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I CAPTURE THE CASTLE

REVIVING THE LIFE AND SPIRIT OF A 16TH-CENTURY NORMANDY CHÂTEAU HAS BECOME ITS NEW OWNER'S RAISON D'ÊTRE

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Clockwise from this picture: large sitting room; Isabelle Moltzer with her dog, Thérèse; small sitting room; the property's maze. *Opposite:* trompe l'oeil by Spanish artist Angel Ponce de Leon in the everyday dining room

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Clockwise from above: kitchen details, including the Taj Mahal quartzite countertop; chateau exterior; guest room; bathroom

A FORMER HAIR STYLIST AT THE RITZ and a salon owner who thrived on city life, Ranga Brossais Doliger had no plan to live on a sprawling 124-acre estate in rural Normandy. But in the summer of 2017, glimpsing Château de Bailleul for the first time in its ancient parkland, he was overcome by a sense of familiarity. He had found the estate by chance, wandering in the countryside close to a spot where he already owned a holiday home. Curiously, the fairy-tale façade of the 1543 Italian Renaissance-inspired castle – the former seat of the aristocratic Bailleul family from the Pays de Caux – resembled the dream home he had sketched in a childhood notebook.

Returning to Paris, images of the dilapidated chateau continued to invade his thoughts. And when, three months later, it was put on the market, he felt compelled to return and take a closer look. The departing owner, a Russian entrepreneur, had allowed the buildings and gardens to fall into semi-dereliction. But the chateau still captivated:

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY TAPESTRIES AND HANDMADE ARMOIRES ARE SET BESIDE BURGUNDY VELVET SOFAS

a perfect square with four towering pavilions, each crowned with a symbolic statue that represents the cardinal virtues of justice, strength, prudence and temperance. Embellishing the timeworn stone façades were sculptures depicting the coats of arms of the Marquis de Bailleul. Under ribbed ceilings, light cascaded through the delicate latticework windows to illuminate the weathered tiled floors adorned with the initials “BB”. Instantly head over heels, Brossais Doliger rapidly formulated a plan to restore this dream home and estate, and rent out the various outbuildings to make the project work financially. “I felt the house calling me to save it,” he says. By the summer of 2018 his name was on the deeds and he had embarked on a laborious five-year restoration.

It’s a balmy day in late May when I arrive for a weekend stay, off a two-hour train ride from Paris to the remote Normandy commune of Angerville-Bailleul. I’m part of an entourage that includes my husband and our two-year-old son, Julian, plus Erotokritos Antoniadis and Rudolf Ritzer, designers at the Parisian fashion brand Erotokritos, which Brossais Doliger co-owns – they are close friends of his. He leads us to our room, one of eight in the main chateau. Mine is dressed in warm yellow stripes with a pale red Oriental carpet, and has a circular sofa upholstered in a bright floral damask. In the bathroom a claw-foot ceramic tub takes pride of place. I peek into other suites off the cavernous landing: a child’s room stocked with old-fashioned teddy bears and books in one; a hand-carved wooden bathtub in another. Despite the modern creature comforts Bailleul provides, the past is kept alive. Seventeenth-century tapestries and handmade armoires are set beside burgundy velvet sofas. Cracked leather dining chairs bear traces of another life, and antique books line the shelves, completing the *mise en scène*.

Brossais Doliger has completed the meticulous renovation of the other charming houses on the estate, and they are available to rent as self-catered properties (maids and chefs can be spirited in on request). There’s the chocolate-box *Maison Normande*, a beamed 19th-century cottage with a deeply pitched roof, carved balconies and six bedrooms. Then, bookable though Airbnb, the four-bedroom *Maison Anglo-Normande*, a classic Normandy country house with a handsome timbered façade overlooking a newly planted orchard; the one-bedroom slate-and-brick-clad *Maison de Chloé* (named after Brossais Doliger’s best friend); and *Pavillon d’Achille*, also with one bedroom, which resembles a little gingerbread house on the edge of the beech forest, looking out at the chateau’s southern end. All of them have been sumptuously revived with inlaid timber floors, floral, striped or paisley wallpapers, jewel-coloured walls and hand-picked antiques. The chapel, a dinky gatehouse, the elaborate brickwork of the stables and a ➤

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Clockwise from far left: decorative pieces in the large sitting room; terrace of Maison Normande; dining room; stables

foliage-filled greenhouse have been restored – the latter by metal workers in Limoges in central France. A walled garden cleverly conceals a new pool. For lunch in the formal dining room, with its gilded ceiling, richly upholstered walls and gold candelabra, we help carry platters of blanc de poulet, paupiettes de veau (stuffed veal scallops), leek gratin, Dauphiné ravioli and Provençal fish stew from the subterranean kitchen (where, in a scene reminiscent of *Downton Abbey*, copper pans line the stone walls). Brossais Doliger relies on local chefs to prepare seasonal feasts grounded in hearty Normandy tradition for the various houses – though, through the estate’s concierge, guests can curate meals to their liking. The Guards Room is another grand space that seats large groups – perfect for milestone celebrations.

Brossais Doliger regales us with the story of his renovation. With patchy water, heating and electricity, and no internet, he took up residence, rolling up his sleeves to get to work on the project and making the five-door former Marquis’s bedroom his own. It was a case of solo candlelit dinners on repeat, he says, but he remained steadfast, convinced this was his “mission” in life. Slowly he filled the hollow space with his presence. “I felt I had put down roots in Bailleuil,” he says. He enlisted Régis Martin, an architect specialising in historical monuments, to lead the architectural renovation. That included repairing the roof, rebuilding the north façade and replacing all the doors and windows.

Brossais Doliger wanted, from the beginning, to involve “kindred spirits who resonated with the place” in order to renovate it “as though time hadn’t passed”. Enter stage left a designer and private chef by the name of Isabelle Moltzer, who is descended from the ancient Bailleuil family that had owned the estate since the mid-16th century. Moltzer’s ancestor Bertrand de Bailleuil was the first owner of the château, and had once received Mary, Queen of Scots as a guest (she slept in a room on the ground floor). Brossais Doliger found Moltzer on Instagram, explained he had acquired the château and

wanted the estate’s history to be honoured in the restoration, and could she be part of that? Moltzer, who had spent childhood summers in the house, had been bereft when it was sold in 2011. Who better to advise on its restoration? Together they trawled through flea markets and auction houses, enlisting furniture specialist Nicolas Giovannoni to source tableware.

Brossais Doliger takes me around the grounds. Once the largest estate in the maritime region at nearly 9,900 acres, it still folds in more than 120 acres. Most guests sequester themselves chez Balleuil, in the deep seclusion of this rarefied version of Normandy, getting out into

THE CHÂTEAU ONCE RECEIVED MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS - SHE SLEPT IN A ROOM ON THE GROUND FLOOR

the woods or staying home for Ayurvedic massages, outdoor yoga or Pilates lessons, and sessions in the château’s Technogym studio. A haircut by Brossais Doliger is possible too, by appointment.

The past, he says, has been “very important. And now the priority is to create coherence between past, present and future.” We pause to survey the scene. The paint has dried on the interior job, and the hedges and topiary – including the dreamy hornbeam maze – are primed to perfection. In the distance the woods etch a sleepily bucolic horizon. From where I’m standing, the buffed-up fairy tale has a golden glow. I’ve high hopes for a rosy future too. 📍

Château de Balleuil and the six-bedroom Maison Normande are available to book through Instagram at @château_de_bailleuil; prices on request. The four-bedroom Maison Anglo-Normande (from £1,448 for two nights), the one-bedroom Maison de Chloé (from £389 for two nights) and the one-bedroom Pavillon d’Achille (from £368 for two nights) are available to book via Airbnb; contact @château_de_bailleuil for more details