

french fantasy

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS JULIA THORNE

Among the cypress and apricot trees of a tiny Provence town, Kiwi Hester Bullen restored an ancient building into a charming retreat



She thought it might have been a dream, but no, the kitchen ceiling of Hester Bullen's country apartment in Provence had indeed fallen in during the heavy spring rain that April night. Soggy chunks of plaster dangled over the newly tiled bench and totally distracted her from the intoxicating views over a valley of sunflowers, grapevines and cherry trees.

It wasn't what she'd planned for the start of this year's May-to-September tourist season. The next paying guests were due in 24 hours

Above: The countryside in Provence is dotted with charming properties hundreds of years old. **Far right:** Hester relaxes in the courtyard of one of her apartments, Le Cave. **Right:** Hester may spend six months of the year in France, but as this *Buzzy Bee* shows, she's a Kiwi at heart.

and this was France – where not a lot happens in a hurry.

Now Hester can laugh – with the help of a glass of crisp local rosé. After all, she survived far worse nightmares two years ago during the restoration of 'Absolutely Fabulous' – her 14th-century stone farmhouse in Saint Maximin.

Most people are content just to watch reality TV programmes about people extracting themselves from the norm to follow their dream. Not Hester. After her family flew the coop, the 60-something former caterer from Matamata

launched herself into just such a project, and built a life among the 600 villagers of Saint Maximin, near Uzès in Provence.

"I can't say it's what I dreamed of as I really just stumbled into it. It all just happened," Hester reflects.

Actually it didn't "just happen" as simply as it sounds. Hester's husband Mike died in a tractor accident on their Te Poi farm more than 10 years ago, leaving her with five kids to raise. Then her daughter Penny died from a stroke two years ago, so there have been many challenges to face on the way. ➤



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Turning this property into three self-contained holiday apartments was another huge test of character. She'd already spent a couple of European summers making crêpes in a friend's restaurant in Aix en Provence and working on her friend Amanda Taylor-Ace's house in St Maximin when, in 2004, a property around the corner in Rue des Jardins came onto the market.

Hester and Amanda jumped at the chance to buy, and some months later they finally sealed the deal. Leaving Auckland and her cottage in Takapuna behind in February 2005, Hester returned to a stone-cold French winter. She knew the picture-postcard village, set among cherry and apricot orchards and vineyards, would be delightful in June but as the restoration began, it was freezing and her first guests were due in just 12 weeks.

"It was a scary deadline to begin with," Hester recalls, "and then the first contractors pulled out of the job before they'd even started. Fortunately another team turned up and we'd brought out a Kiwi builder to help, but things are done differently here so hardly a day went by without a hitch.

"I don't mind saying it was really hard going, and I wondered what on earth I was doing here sometimes. It could be very



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frustrating trying to communicate with French labourers just how I wanted things done – never mind that they'd pack up for their two- or three-hour lunch break each day.”

Being unable to speak more than rudimentary French didn't help. “Amanda speaks some French, but we just couldn't leave the builders for a moment or they would do the opposite to what we had asked.”

Hester is no novice in terms of house revamps, having renovated a farm cottage, her own homes and an investment property. But in France, most materials are limestone rather than timber, so the structural work had to be done by professionals. Even for them, installing new electrical wiring, plumbing and drainage into 25cm-thick, 700-year-old stone walls

Top: Hester visits the open-air markets in Uzès on Wednesdays and Saturdays to stock up on food and gifts, then catches up with friends for lunch before heading home for a siesta to avoid the heat of the day. **Above:** Sightseeing in the area includes St Siffret, a charming medieval hillside village near Uzès.

and floors was never going to be trouble free. Inevitably the already lean budget dissipated. But as far as Hester was concerned, there was no option other than to keep going.

Morale was seriously ground down in all camps. At the end of several long days of scrubbing, sanding, scraping, plastering, painting and polishing, Hester – dust encrusted and exhausted – found her usually sparkling green eyes giving way to tears.

“It's just as well our local cave [wine cellar] was only a five-minute walk down the road so we could go and fill our plastic 'cubies' with the local wine at the end of the day,” she says, topping up our glasses.

More easily managed and enjoyable was the decoration and furnishing of the three apartments. Gleaned from local second-hand yards and antique markets, a mixture of old country-style armoires (wardrobes), bedside tables and cabinets were attacked with creative vigour. Sandpaper, steel wool, paint and wax brought it all into keeping with the soft, minimalist theme Hester wanted.

She hunted out old picture frames from flea markets, treated them in similar fashion and, adding touches of colour, transformed them into mirror surrounds. One pièce de résistance is the French bread-making cabinet. Another is the built-in armoire with the 'tree of life' hand-carved up the side.

Friends came to sew bedspreads and curtains and re-upholster second-hand furniture in cream, biscuit beige and white cottons bought at the markets in the former medieval Duchy of Uzès, 9km away.

Le Roof apartment was the first to be finished. “Our first guests stayed about a week and during that time we had to carry on with work on the other apartments before the next guests arrived,” explains Hester. “We'd wait until they'd gone out sightseeing ➤

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before beginning, and stop when they came back.”

The whole restoration took 12 weeks. All seemed well as the next guests were due to arrive – until the sewage system became blocked. Hester tried to persuade her new arrivals that they might like an apéritif at the local bar/café before settling in, but no, they insisted on staying, and stood by as the drain layer did the dirty work.

Two years later, despite the ceiling collapse this April, life is now absolutely fabulous, and the property stands true to its name.

Entering the paved courtyard, warm light bounces from the sandstone, cattle troughs overflow with petunias and lavender, lizards sun themselves on the walls and cicadas chirp in the trees outside.

All three apartments – Le Cave, La Terrace and Le Roof – have their own kitchen, bathroom, living room and balcony. Le Roof has 180-degree views over the plains to the limestone hills of the Garrigues, and La Terrace overlooks the central courtyard. Le Cave is the warmest place during winter but is also the coolest in summer.

There’s an endless pile of linen to be washed and ironed, and apartments to clean, but at quieter times Hester’s days are now filled



Above: Sharing time (and local food and wine) under a sunny sky is just one of the wonderful parts of Hester’s new life in France.

Below: Friends helped Hester realise her vision for the interiors of the three apartments. In this bedroom, French country furniture tones well with neutral walls and a cotton bedspread.

with more “sunshine, silliness and frivolity” and the understated “slightly grim days” are in the past. She enjoys preparing meals from fresh local produce for guests, and sharing time under a clear blue sky with swifts flitting above is just one of the special aspects of this life. Her calendar is also asterisked with invitations to one soirée or another.

The residents of St Maximin are a mélange of 18 nationalities

– people who, like Hester, have sought a life embracing real French culture. In turn they too, have been embraced as neighbours. French, English, German, Irish, Scottish, Canadian, Swiss and Kiwi accents create music when they mix and mingle at a garden party in a friend’s orchard or join street parties and the grand fête in the square outside the Hôtel de Ville on Bastille Day.

The fêtes celebrating religious saints, seasons, harvests, national heroes and historic battles won or lost are all colourful occasions Hester encourages visitors to participate in. More low key, the cheap and cheerful “truck stop” down the road and the Italian family pizzeria are frequent haunts and a chance to put her French lessons into practise.

“I certainly wouldn’t take on such a large project again, but now I really enjoy my lifestyle and meet such lovely people,” she says. “But I have to go home to New Zealand for six months to catch up with family and friends – and recuperate!” ☒

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what you need to know about provence

accommodation

✦ For more information about Absolutely Fabulous, visit www.absofabulous.com.

getting around

✦ A rental car gives you the most flexibility for exploring Provence. Absolutely Fabulous is just 10 minutes from Uzès, Pont du Gard (the famous 2000-year-old Roman aqueduct), medieval village Castillon du Gard, and a multitude of small country villages en route. It’s also 30 minutes from Avignon or Nîmes, within one hour of Orange, St Rémy, Les Baux, Arles, and when the traffic’s not heavy about one-and-a-half hours to Aix en Provence and Marseilles.

must dos

✦ Buy fresh local produce from the open-air markets in Uzès.
✦ See Pont du Gard at sunset while enjoying a picnic on the banks of the river.
✦ Try lavender ice cream.
✦ Pick up a bottle (or several) of local rosé wine from the supermarché.
✦ Book in for a meal at Julian’s restaurant on the square in St Maximin.
✦ Walk or ride a bike along forest trails – a multitude of maps are available from Uzès tourist office.
✦ Allow a day at Les Baux de Provence and the quarried Cathedrale D’Images.