

À LA MAISON

# THE GRASSE IS GREENER

Nick and Lise Davies have lived all over the world, but nothing says 'home' quite like the breathtaking 18th-century *mas* on the Côte d'Azur they spent years bringing to life.  
*Rachel Johnston* drops in for lunch





## This restored farmhouse has everything you'd hope for in a southern French hideaway

### FAMILY MATTERS

Behind Peyloubet's blushing facade is a rentable retreat for up to 14 guests - but this is, first and foremost, a family home. Owners Nick and Lise met in London, though their lives and marriage have been anything but conventionally British; between them they have lived in Canada, the USA, the Caribbean, Malaysia, Thailand, Switzerland and Portugal, and they have travelled more widely still. The call of France came after a spell on the Caribbean island of Nevis when their four children were small.

"They were developing a West Indian accent," laughs Lise as we sit on the terrace outside their apartment on the estate, where they live when the main house is rented out. "Listening to them singing Christmas carols was hysterical. We all adored the lifestyle but islands are isolating; there was a limit to resources and we wanted the children to be bilingual. This part of France offered everything we were looking for as a family - great schools, easy access, proximity both to the coast and to ski resorts, and a thoroughly cosmopolitan community."

All the Davies children have been educated in France and consider Peyloubet their principal home - the eldest, Coco,

was married here in 2013. It was Lise who stumbled upon the house in its formerly dilapidated state as she was driving around the area. Fresh from renovating a place in nearby Opio, she and Nick were seeking something larger to put their stamp on, originally focusing further west towards St-Tropez but returning here for the proximity to Nice (Nick frequently flies back to the UK on business and it's a convenient half an hour to the airport by car). Justifiably, it was the sweeping view from this elevated spot that sold it to them - though how they took their eyes off it long enough to get any work done strikes me as a feat in itself.

### A WORK IN PROGRESS

It's one o'clock now; the cicadas are out in force and I have to move my chair further under an olive tree to save my crisping shoulders. Nick and Lise bring out more elderflower cordial as I ask them about the painstaking process of renovation, completed 10 years ago and which began with the main house. "I did all the drawings of what I wanted but did consult an architect as we wanted to add bathrooms and knock down walls," Lise says. "The main work and expense was really the heating and electrics."



The Davies family at eldest daughter Coco's wedding

Few places in France are as assaulting on the senses as the Riviera. Sentries of fragrant pines and a sparkling sea, the relentless chirrup of heat-stricken cicadas, a tartine of fresh tomatoes doused in local olive oil. As I eat one, listen to another and gaze at the last from a few miles inland, it's hard to remember having a more contented afternoon. Shimmering amid cypresses to my right is Grasse, home of the perfume industry, and I can just make out the bay of Cannes in the haze. A breeze sways spikes of indigo agapanthus and somewhere in the vegetation a cockerel crows. Peace and privacy reign supreme. Welcome to Mas Lou Peyloubet.

Approached by a long, winding driveway and surrounded by a hectare and a half of terraced olive groves, fig and orange trees and exquisitely landscaped gardens, this restored *mas* (farmhouse) has everything you'd hope for in a southern French hideaway. It's near a glut of gorgeous villages including Mougins, where Picasso lived until his death, and Valbonne with its famous Friday market. There are shutters, Juliet balconies and bougainvillea galore. There's a superlative raised pool terrace with 15 metres of inviting saltwater, a summer kitchen and a pitch for boules. And inside, eight cool and calming bedrooms beckon after a hard day of, well, raising rosé to your lips and watching out for suntan lines.

Main photo: Peyloubet's superlative saltwater pool terrace and summer kitchen, awash with Moroccan-inspired trinkets and textiles  
Below: The dining room, seating eight to 10 guests  
Below right: Ancient olive trees and vibrant bougainvillea enclose the *mas*



We had all the old iron radiators taken away and revamped, and then had to have all the pipes put into the walls as they were exposed. We tried to keep as many original bits as possible such as the big old sinks and baths, and also where possible we kept the antique floor tiles. The old French marble in the hall and stairs had to be carefully treated.”

What is now the master bedroom - the palatial Fragonard Suite - was originally two bedrooms, so the conversion involved considerable work; now it's a seamless space in which you can soak up the view out to sea from a perfectly positioned bath. Nick and Lise also revamped the other existing bathrooms and redecorated throughout. Colour schemes are restful everywhere: muted mushrooms and taupe and pale primrose yellows. There's an emphasis on space, too: downstairs a wall was opened up between the kitchen - an attractive mix of wood, stone and modern stainless steel - and the dining room. At this point, work was paused on the main house as they had to apply for planning for the next part. “We were living in it all the time and were happy for a bit of respite,” Lise adds.

Next came the transformation of the outhouses into self-contained apartments, which took longer than expected as they turned out to not have any foundations, so they had to be demolished rather than simply renovated. “The planning application for this was a bit of a headache and had to be done in two parts, as our planning was for renovation only and if the authorities came to inspect the works - as they did every now and then - and were to find the whole building gone, they might have stopped us from putting something back. So at the cost of a lot more time and money, we had half knocked down and rebuilt, and then did the other half. Eventually, when that was all done, there was a lot of terracing and garden work to be done around that area.”

## AN ECLECTIC MIX

Nick and Lise naturally ran into their share of stumbling blocks during the renovation process - having to reconsider foundation depth is one that sticks fast in the memory - but what sticks in my own memory of Peyloubet is its eclectic, multi-cultural interior style, and how personal it is. A home wouldn't be a home without the signs and symbols of past travels and experiences - and virtually all the furniture and decorative items here have been



**Main image:** The Mediterranean sparkles in the distance from this elevated spot, which takes in the olive grove and a sprinkling of villages between Grasse and the coast  
**Above, top to bottom:** Sit in the bath with a rosé in hand and soak up the views from the Fragonard Suite; Peyloubet's Provençal kitchen is chic but homely, blending wood with stone and modern steel; the house has no shortage of covered terraces and the family lives an almost permanently alfresco lifestyle



*It was the sweeping view from this elevated spot that sold it to them*

collected during the Davies' travels around the globe. “It's a very strange mix and not very Provençal, but somehow it all works,” Lise declares. “The antique sleigh bed, for instance, was bought in the UK for our eldest daughter on her second birthday; it's hers, we're just minding it for her. And the antique iron four-poster was bought in West Sussex from a place that has fields full of old beds undergoing restoration. It was destined for the house we had for many years in the middle of Black Down forest.” Guests of Peyloubet comment frequently on the comfort of the beds, a point of some amusement for Nick and Lise who admit none of them were bought with holiday rentals in mind.

“We call the dining room the ‘Nevis’ or ‘Caribbean’ room as all the art in it is from the home we had there. This was another wonderful property; a colonial wooden house painted yellow and called Pelican Point, with its own beach and, of course, lots of pelicans,” continues Lise. “The Asian furniture has been picked up on our trips to Asia over the years or during our time living in Thailand, and some smaller bits are from Borneo where I grew up. The Asian and Middle Eastern carpets were passed on to me by my parents, who not only lived in Asia for over 40 years but

also spent time in Jerusalem.” I comment on how trusting the couple are with their precious family possessions and they laugh - although Lise confesses she doesn't like going into the house when guests have taken it over.

The beauty of a house of collectables is that it's ever-evolving and in fact, despite Peyloubet's renovation coming to a triumphant end a decade ago, interior decoration continues to play a part in Lise's life with her business ‘Vintage Charm’, for which she and a few friends source old furnishings to do up and sell on. Then there's the abundance of interesting artwork adorning the walls. “The painting over the fireplace in the sitting room was done by a Polish painter in Ramatuelle of a view across the bay of St-Tropez,” she continues. “We fell in love with it on one of our trips to the south of France long before we moved here.” Mostly, though, the

house features art from elsewhere in the world: Loe, Vietnam and Thailand as well as Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. Other paintings are by artist friends of Nick and Lise and some are even by their younger daughter, Tamara.

As established a home as Peyloubet is, I'm curious as to the Davies' next move given their itinerant background, and I'm relieved when they say they're staying put for the foreseeable future. The pleasure of throwing open Peyloubet's doors is apparently all theirs. “It's a beautiful place in a wonderful part of the world and should be enjoyed by many - we love travel and meeting like-minded people, so what better than sharing our home with other travellers?” But they do spoil them: when I eventually drag myself away from this paradise I have more sensory delights in hand, in the form of a jar of home-made marmalade from the estate's oranges and a bottle of oil pressed from the 250 ancient olive trees surrounding our lunch table. Workers from the local community team up to harvest the crop, 10% of the oil from which Nick and Lise keep for themselves - and their lucky guests. A more idyllic and uniquely personal place in this part of France I've yet to find. **LF**  
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