



When Tanya McGilligan and her husband Adriaan Waiboer decided to move to the Dordogne, they visited several properties before falling in love at first sight with Château La Carrière. **Penny McCormick** discovers how they turned it into a luxury wedding venue

For brides-to-be seeking a fairytale ceremony in a castle, the newly opened, picture-perfect wedding venue of Château La Carrière in the Dordogne, south-west France, is hard to fault. The setting - on a stunning estate with panoramic views of fields and forests - means there are many places to exchange vows.

There's the formal French garden to channel any Marie-Antoinette notions, a period conservatory or perhaps the foot of an old chestnut tree for more bohemian ceremonies. Moving inside, the multiple

terraces and staterooms provide plenty of elegant backdrops for aperitifs and wedding breakfasts, not forgetting the Elephant Bar, an intimate space perfect for after-parties.

It's hard to believe that the owners, Irishwoman Tanya McGilligan and her Dutch husband, Adriaan Waiboer, bought the chateau, moved to France, renovated the property and opened it as a wedding venue in little over a year.

Their decision to move from Dublin was driven by their desire to escape urban life and live in the countryside. "We first thought about doing

so in Ireland, but we soon realised that we also wanted to change our work environments too," explains Adriaan, a former museum curator and senior manager.

Having successfully rented out a thatched cottage in Donegal for several years as a hobby, they decided to do something similar, but on a much larger scale. "Going to France was an obvious choice, not only because we loved the culture, food, landscape and climate but also because we never had a strong relationship with other countries such as Italy, Spain and Portugal."

LOCATION LOCATION

A priority was to hone in on a particular region: "Our decision to focus on the Dordogne was partially motivated by the type of architecture you find here," says Adriaan. "It's said that there are 1,001 châteaux - we're not sure if that's true but there are certainly a lot! It's not just the châteaux though. Most of the buildings here, even new family homes, are built in a highly attractive yellowish limestone with charming roofs, windows and shutters. There are strict building regulations so all of the houses look more or less the same. When you



drive around, you sometimes have the feeling you are in one huge open-air museum.”

The couple were also drawn to the landscape, particularly the oak forests and views of rolling hills, cornfields, meadows and old rural hamlets - places that as keen cyclists they frequent on regular Sunday outings.

Thinking commercially, they also chose the Dordogne because of its attraction to tourists, a must if planning to set up guest accommodation.

“It all went quite fast after that,” says Tanya, a former estate agent and owner of a high-end fashion boutique. “We simply booked a five-day holiday and allocated one day each to visiting four properties we had seen online.

“The first three were very nice but not nice enough to move country for. The last was Château La Carrière; it had everything we had envisaged multiplied by 10.”

Fortunately, the château was unlike the protagonist of the ongoing Channel 4 series *Escape to the Château*, which follows Dick and Angel Strawbridge as they restore an uninhabitable building to working order. “The property was in good condition when we bought it,” says Adriaan. “It



was just the interior that was dated and not in accordance with what we thought luxury accommodation should look like.

“Everything had to be painted, and all the flowery curtains and pelmets had to come down. There was also quite a bit of electrical, plumbing and other jobs to be done.”

ART DE VIVRE

Describing themselves as hard workers, Tanya and Adriaan were not afraid to put in long hours during the renovation process. While they had some experience in hospitality, their strongest skill was their eye for aesthetics. “Even though buying and selling fashion

is not the same as analysing art, we had both strongly developed our visual skills over many years, which is precisely what is needed when decorating a château,” acknowledges Adriaan. They can now offer accommodation to groups of up to 18 people, often families; a bonus, especially for overseas guests.

Their initial decision to specialise in weddings was driven by basic research and enthusiasm, admits Adriaan. “When we looked around we saw other similar châteaux were hosting weddings and wondered if we could do this as well. And then we became excited by the prospect of turning our own property into a wedding venue.”

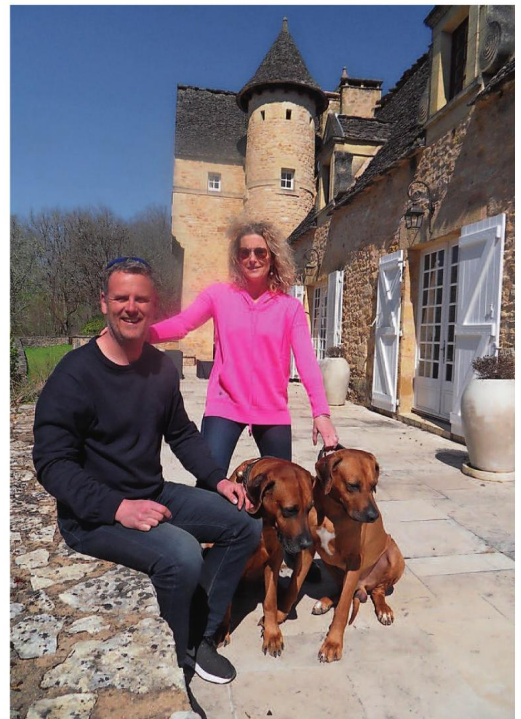
ABOVE: The château is set in rolling countryside
TOP RIGHT: The pool is a relaxing spot

Did you know?

‘Lauze’ roof tiles, like those on the château, are made from slabs of limestone



RIGHT: The couple have aimed for a relaxed luxury vibe at the château



Tanya adds: “How cool is it that a young couple comes all the way from the US to your romantic château, then says yes in your garden and afterwards dances the night away with friends and family?”

It’s hard not to be convinced by their combined passion, but, underlying this, one senses a dogged persistence and the quest for perfection, when it came to the details. Rather than hiring a builder or group of workmen, the couple decided to employ a craftsman, Olivier, from the neighbouring village on a full-time basis.

This meant the renovation process was slower. “Working slowly gives you more time to think, reflecting on your decisions and, of course, changing your mind once in a while,” advises Adriaan.

A by-product of the process is that they have built up such a good relationship with Olivier they feel this will be a long-term friendship. He’s also helped with their French language skills. Surprisingly, neither Tanya nor Adriaan were fluent in French.

“All the grammar rules and mnemonics such as ‘bon, beau, joli...’ were somewhere in the back of our minds but didn’t come straightaway. We also worked so hard during the day that we had little energy left in the evening to open a book or learn conjugations,” says Tanya. In the end they realised that their French improved the more they tried to read, speak and write, in the immersive context of setting up a business from scratch.



The romantic dining room

“Working slowly gives you more time to think and reflect on your decisions - and change your mind once in a while”

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Since they moved, Tanya and Adriaan have met quite a few locals, some of whom have lived in the vicinity for generations, while others are British, American and Dutch expats who, like them, are new to the Dordogne.

“You tend to make friends more easily with non-French people of the same age, probably because you are all facing similar challenges,” says Adriaan.

For now, they are enjoying the beautiful countryside around their estate, which encompasses a huge garden, woodlands and fields. “There are public paths meandering

through the estate that go on forever, and you rarely meet anyone else, just some wild animals,” says Adriaan.

They have quite a number of bookings for their first year, which is a testament to their combined work ethic, idyllic situation and range of services they can offer guests.

It remains to be seen what impact Covid-19 will have on their business. For now, Tanya and Adriaan remain optimistic and are content to work on their garden and plan the next part of their project: the renovation of their own accommodation, a pretty gate lodge in the grounds. ■

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TOP TIPS

Adriaan and Tanya’s advice on setting up an accommodation business

- **Be ambitious:** If you are giving up your home and job you need to replace it with something that will keep you busy for a long time. If you buy a property and know immediately how to organise it, boredom will soon set in. Allow yourself to be overwhelmed.

- **Think about your age:** We are in our late 40s. Time will tell whether we made this move too early or too late. At this stage, we have both had plenty of work experience but are still physically healthy and strong enough to run around all day.

- **Ignore your own taste to a certain extent:** When decorating rooms, you need to think about what guests will regard as attractive and luxurious, not what you personally like. Our previous home was painted in bold colours. At Château La Carrière we opted for neutral creams which was radically different.

- **Be conscious that business hours may be different than in the English-speaking world:**

French lunch hours, for example, are long, from 12pm-2.30pm; emails are not answered as promptly and quotations are often so high it is clear that some companies do not want the job. It’s all part of the learning process.