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DEGREES *of* SEPARATION

On a rocky hillside in the Languedoc, with its fierce summer heat and torrential autumn storms, this rough stone former barn is now a comfortable retreat from their busy London lives for its interior-designer owner and his partner

THIS PAGE Doors lead from the sitting room out on to the terrace, where a table and chairs offer a good vantage point to take in the tranquil garden views. OPPOSITE Pink silk embroideries from the Swat Valley were the starting point for the sitting room, picked up in the pink lampshades and offset by the custom-made sofa, covered in an indigo Manuel Canovas fabric.

'I have always been an avid collector of textiles from North Africa and Asia'



The Languedoc region in the South of France is said to have some of the most extreme weather in the country, so much so that Nîmes in the centre of the region is described as the hottest city in France, with temperatures in the summer sometimes steaming up into the thirties, while in the autumn, torrential storms sweep the area – one exceptional downpour in 2002 delivered 168mm of rain over 30 hours, and the accompanying hailstones were said to have been enough to 'strip a car of its paint'.

It was in 2006, in a similar autumn downpour, that interior designer Douglas Mackie and his partner, Julian Jackson, a professor of French history at the University of London, first saw their house. They had been searching for somewhere in France and had initially looked in an area nearer to the Pyrenees, but, having seen nothing to excite them, had begun casting their net further afield. A small photograph advertising a house which appeared to be completely masked by cypress trees intrigued them and so they drove for three hours in the pouring rain, arriving in the early evening in front of a shuttered building covered in vegetation.

There was, however, an immediate appeal. Built of the same grey stone as the rocky hillside on which it stood, it looked out over the wide and beautiful valley below and seemed very much at one with the Languedoc landscape. Originally a *bergerie*, a staging post on the

transhumance – the pathway used to move livestock from one grazing area to another – the building dates back to the eleventh century. It stands next door to an eleventh-century refectory with vaulted ceilings, but Douglas describes the house itself as 'a rather more humble sheep barn'.

The coarseness of the house, the odd changes of level and the potential of the garden were sufficient to persuade them to buy it, and just after Christmas of that year, they moved in. Having first seen the house in the pouring rain, they spent their first days there freezing. 'Poor insulation, no heating and an unreliable electricity supply combined to make it a very uncomfortable New Year,' remembers Douglas. 'Huge open fires did little to ease our discomfort, so that when works properly began in the spring, central heating was the priority.'

As Douglas explains, the house does not conform architecturally or decoratively to the norm. It is built on several different levels against the side of the hill, and in places, where the rock almost threatens to break through the thick walls, the floor curves round its bulging forms. Douglas installed long windows overlooking the garden and instantly the strong southern sun poured into the interiors, which, as he explains, gave him an opportunity to decorate in a way very different from his approach in an English house.

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Douglas and Julian ordered the parasol by the pool from Bail, after they spotted it at the Oberoi hotel in Jaipur. Candle sconces bought at the Decorative Antiques & Textiles Fair flank a hanging above the fire. The house is built into the hillside, on various levels. Pendant lights by

Fontana Arte hang in the kitchen. A lounge chair by Syrie Maugham is covered in antique linen. OPPOSITE A chandelier by David Chipperfield for Fontana Arte hangs above the dining table, on which stands a candelabrum by Tom Dixon for Willer. Douglas bought the rug on eBay, direct from the makers in Kyrgyzstan



*This is a supremely comfortable house,
furnished very much as a home*



In his professional work, Douglas is knowledgeable and fastidious in his choice of modern textiles, but here he was able to use his source of older and ethnic pieces. 'I have always been an avid collector of pieces from North Africa and Asia, and now their rich saturated colours sit wonderfully well in the shafts of sunlight of a southern home,' he says.

Deep indigos offset with magenta-pink silk embroideries from the Swat Valley were the starting point for the sitting room; Tunisian shawls were transformed into curtains in the dining room; and Persian jajims were made into heavy window hangings in the bedrooms.

In the dining room, under the industrial French table and a David Chipperfield chandelier, is a favourite felt carpet from Kyrgyzstan. 'It has been soaked by flooding twice since being here but brilliantly has lost none of its intensity of colour,' laughs Douglas. 'I bought it on eBay direct from the makers and it was miraculously delivered 10 weeks later by an exhausted postman carrying a huge paper parcel bearing the stamps of several ex-Soviet states. Its journey here makes it all the more loved.'

The walls throughout have been brush-plastered, giving the interiors a rough finish that fits the feel of the place; the kitchen surfaces are made of rough flamed granite, while the cabinets are made of Louis XIII cabinet doors cut down to size. Each piece in the house seems to

have its own personal history and it is obvious that they have both enjoyed the task of furnishing the interiors. 'We are constantly changing things around,' explains Douglas; 'rugs move between bedrooms and new panels of textiles fill up different wall spaces. The oddest objects have found their way into the house, such as a wonderful beaded Italian parrot, an Indian carved toy tiger and a Kashmir crewel-work leopard which form part of our ever-increasing internal menagerie.'

Work in the garden is a continuing process; in this rocky terrain, terracing is the only way to create different areas, and each year new changes are made so that now, from various new vantage points, there are glorious views to be enjoyed over a drink or dinner. The extremes of climate have taught them many lessons in planting as the garden, like the house, grows and evolves; over the years it has become obvious why olive trees, rosemary and lavender remain the backbone of southern gardens.

This is a supremely comfortable house furnished very much as a home and to its owners' specific needs. The isolation, silence and constant, gentle battle with nature provide great stimulation, and a very necessary restorative antidote to the busy lives its owners follow in London □

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main bedroom, a French, eighteenth-century tapestry based on the story of Abraham and Isaac hangs behind a copper bath from Armstrong Woodhouse

