

REAL ESTATE

A Prized Location, With Culture, on French Riviera

By JANE A. PETERSON AUG. 11, 2016



Renovation of the estate cost millions of euros. Jane a Peterson

SAINT-JEAN-CAP-FERRAT, France — When John and Amelia Winter married in the spring of 2000, they looked for a seaside holiday home beyond their London base, buying in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat that summer. Wedged between Nice and Monaco on the Côte d'Azur, it's one of the most sought-after coastal villages in the world.

The Winters' clifftop mansion, called Le Toit Bleu for its ceramic-tiled blue roof, overlooks the Mediterranean with a magnificent panoramic view. To

the east, they see Cap Martin and [Italy](#); to the west, Cap d'Antibes and the Massif de l'Estérel near Saint Tropez. Three protruding capes lie in between, and on clear winter mornings, faraway Corsica floats on the horizon.

“Often waterfront property is not user-friendly, but on the Med, water is the attraction,” said Mr. Winter, a native Minnesotan, shifting his gaze from a passing yacht to the shoreline path directly below. “The best spot for scuba diving is right in front of the house.”

The couple and their three children, all sports enthusiasts, spend much of their time swimming and boating as well as hiking and mountain biking on myriad coastal paths. “When John comes in from an overseas flight, I bring the bikes to the Nice airport and we bike back,” said Mrs. Winter, pointing out their route on the famed Grande Corniche.

To see the home’s blue roof, the best spot is street side, just inside the front gate. It’s complemented by a neo-pop sculpture of two happy kids with a beach ball, designed by the Brazilian-born artist Romero Britto, as well as lush greenery — jasmine, kikuyu grass, olive trees and pittosporum.



Venturing inside the home, visitors are immediately struck by a mix of vibrant colors bathed in natural light. Above the front entrance, brilliant blue and orange rippled glass artworks, resembling starfish, frame a skylight, one of the features Mrs. Winter designed herself, this time with

the help of a [Florida](#) glassmaker. “People smell and feel the spirit of a house,” she said, smiling. “I want to make them feel good.”

Above the front entrance, brilliant blue and orange rippled glass artworks, resembling starfish, frame a skylight, one of the features that Amelia Winter designed herself, with the help of a Florida glassmaker. “We like happy stories,” echoed Mr. Winter, who just retired from banking, as he pointed to playful artwork throughout the open plan living area, situated on the third of four floors. Among notable pieces: Britto’s neo-pop painting of two children on a flying globe; a mesmerizing polymer cylinder, laced in blue and playing with light, by the French sculptor Jean-Claude Farhi; and an abstract “beach towel” painting by the English artist Wilhelmina Barns-Graham.

The Winters host frequent dinners, working in a state-of-the-art kitchen that is the mirror image of kitchens in their two other homes. “This way I know where everything is,” Mrs. Winter said.

With sea-view terraces on two levels, the couple have seated as many as 120 guests for dinner outside. More often, though, parties of 24 dine inside on three glass tables arranged in an open square, each with eight broom-like chairs, in white, aqua or ultramarine blue, designed by the Brazilian brothers Fernando and Humberto Campana.

Venetian white tile, bold colors and attention to detail unify the home’s five bedrooms, and a two-bedroom guest apartment. A blue and yellow theme in the guest rooms, for instance, extends to the Nespresso coffee capsules, while the shape of the blue carpet follows the line of the tiered ceiling. All windows are protected by circle-patterned grates that stemmed from Mrs. Winter’s imagination.

It’s a dramatic makeover from Le Toit Bleu’s original Provençal interior, which included a clumsy layout, small windows, columns and heavy red marble. Instead of immediately remodeling, the couple pondered potential changes for years as they interviewed local architects, completed works on other homes, and built up a healthy cash reserve.

They also wanted to resolve nagging problems — salt showers that require extra maintenance, mandatory tight security and ever-changing tax laws, which remain a conundrum, especially for married couples with passports from different countries — the case with the Winters.

In 2009, the Winters began a major renovation with the help of LC Architectes in Villefranche-sur-Mer, Jose Da Costa & Fils construction in Monaco, and LL Design in London. While retaining the facade and the prized blue roof, plans called for gutting the entire interior, retaining the 630-square-meter, or nearly 6,800-square-foot, footprint, and creating an additional loft level — a bonus gained from wasted ceiling space in the original home.



The mansion is called Le Toit Bleu for its ceramic-tiled blue roof. The chief difficulty: working in dangerous, steep terrain while dynamiting bedrock to expand the caretaker's apartment below the swimming pool. "It was impossible for us to modify the exterior walls of the house because of its protected location," explained Eric Raps, the Winters's architect.

The entire project took 18 months and several million euros, finishing on time but 25 percent over budget. Acting as project manager, Mrs. Winter, a former banker and stickler for detail, recalled numerous heated debates. "I would scare my team to find solutions," she said. "I did not take no for an answer."

Case in point: a sunken deluxe sports court with a vertical garden wall to shield both sun and wind, a "game changer for the house," Mr. Winter said, despite the hiccups. First, the garden plantings arrived from [Britain](#) in the wrong dimensions. Then the local customs agent vetoed the American basketball hoop because it had no European Union safety certificate. After three months of wrangling, Mrs. Winter finally obtained a signed certificate, and received the hoop.

When the Winters bought their home in 2000, Cap Ferrat's real estate market was depressed. Though the property was listed for 40 million

French francs, they bid 25 million and settled at 27 million — the equivalent of approximately \$3 million at the time.

Since then, the market has been on a roller coaster. At its high point before the financial crisis in 2008, Mr. Winter received several unsolicited offers — well above 50 million euros. Today bidders no longer call, though this summer, for the first time, they are renting Le Toit Bleu to a Russian couple who met their asking price of €100,000, or about \$111,000, a month through August.

“The trophy bidders have disappeared,” said Alexander Kraft of Sotheby’s International Realty in nearby Monte Carlo, noting that while Cap Ferrat had begun to recover in 2010, the market took a deep dive in 2014 after the Ukrainian crisis. “That’s when Russian buyers left and the market — above \$50 million — crashed. It barely exists any longer,” he said.

The Winters remain unfazed; they do not plan to sell. “There’s always something new to do when I come,” said Mr. Winter, such as attending cultural events at the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild and elsewhere. As he climbed the nearby Nietzsche Path for a first time visit to the Eze Botanical Garden, he paused at a plaque that described Napoleon’s trek on the Grande Corniche. “Culturally, it’s an absolutely fabulous place,” he said.

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