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## Making a castle your home



Photo: DPA

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**Rich in castles and stately manors, Germany has plenty for sale to both commoners and bluebloods alike. [Sally McGrane](#) reports on buying your own fairytale home.**

Alexander Dragilev likes buildings with history. So when he decided to buy a castle in Germany, it had to come with a story.

Dragilev looked at about twenty properties before he saw the seven-storey, 2,500-square metre Burg

Möckmühl in Baden-Württemberg. The castle, whose name means “Monk’s Mill,” was first mentioned in writing in 1150. It played a role in the Wars of the Roses, and one of its owners, under attack, was said to have coined the phrase that translates as “kiss my arse.”

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He was defeated, and his hand was cut off. But thanks to his ingenuity, he was able to invent what might be the world’s first artificial hand, now on display in a nearby museum. The artificial hand has two buttons to grasp and release; it was, said Dragilev, designed to hold a sword but, due to its owner’s military defeat, was only ever used to hold wine glasses.

“There must be some legend,” explained the Moscow-born Israeli, a retired businessman, of what attracted him to the castle, where he now lives with his companion, Marina. “Some kind of myth, but a true myth. Also, the tower here is fascinating. The other day, I found an old bell from the 17th century. I installed it, and now I can ring it.”

While no one knows exactly how many castles there are in Germany, there are plenty on the market for interested buyers. Matthias Helzel, co-owner of Vermittlung Historischer Immobilien, a real estate firm that specializes in the sale of castles and manors, estimated he’s personally visited about a thousand.

Helzel, who also helped create the comprehensive list of German castles online at [www.burgenwelt.de](http://www.burgenwelt.de), said there are many different reasons for people to seek out a castle, rather than put money down on, say, a condominium. For some, it’s the fulfillment of a childhood dream, for others, a capital investment. Some want to turn the premises into a hotel or office space for architects, others are looking for a tax break, yet others want to buy back a castle that was once home to their aristocratic family.

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For those who are interested in buying a castle, Helzel said the first decisions to make are not so different from those involved in any other home purchase: How much do you want to pay, and how big do you want your living space to be? From there, you should think about what you want your castle to look like.

“For a lot of people, it’s absolutely important that the castle have a tower,” said Helzel. “Some people want it to look mediaeval, some people want an elegant countryside castle with lots of light and high ceilings. Some people might want something a little darker, more of a classic Dracula castle.”

The next question is how much renovation you want to do. Some castles – like the dreamy 400-square metre number with a high, white tower and fantastic views on the island of Rügen – come fully, and luxuriously, renovated. Others may be much larger, but only have a couple of rooms that are inhabitable.

“Some people really buy these to renovate them themselves. They want to make something wonderful,” said Helzel. “I tell them, if you buy an object to renovate yourself, plan on it taking years. Don’t try to do it overnight. It’s better to take a longer time, and make it perfect.”

One friend of his, he said, has been renovating his castle by hand for the last decade. “It’s his life’s work,” said Helzel.

Another thing to consider, of course, are the larger scope of renovation projects, when it comes to a castle. "A new roof might cost €500,000," said Helzel. "You could almost buy two houses with that. You definitely have to think in those dimensions."

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Helzel, himself a lifelong lover of castles who finally turned his hobby into his career, said that the negotiations often require extra sensitivity. "The seller has put lots and lots of love into his castle," he said. "And he wants a buyer who is going to love it as much as he does."

Once his firm makes a sale, they also help put the new owner in touch with architects and restoration experts. "We don't just leave them alone, once they've bought it."

For the castles themselves, finding a buyer can be a real boon. "A lot of municipalities own castles that they can't afford to keep up anymore," said Helzel. For one castle in Thuringia, he found a Dutch buyer who immediately re-opened the previously fenced-off castle grounds to the public. "He said, this is yours, too."

At the Monk's Mill, Dragilev said he and his companion particularly like all the wild animals, from birds to ground hogs and foxes that they encountered on the grounds, as well as the castle's abundant apple, pear and nut trees.

"We are vegetarians," he explained. "We love collecting the fruit."

His renovation plans include changing the heating system from oil to gas, cleaning the castle walls of ivy, and ridding the place of every vestige of a beer garden that was set up there during one "dishonorable" interlude. While he doesn't believe in ghosts, he says that if he were to meet any, they would be most welcome, as they would be co-owners who have been there far longer than he has.

"I am happy now," he said. "I don't have to work, so I just read books and contemplate the purpose of life. Why are we here on this earth? This is the perfect place to think about that."

Would Helzel like a castle of his, one day? He isn't sure. "I would want one with a big garden," he said. "A mediaeval castle with thick walls that give you such a sense of security. Maybe when I'm retired."



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