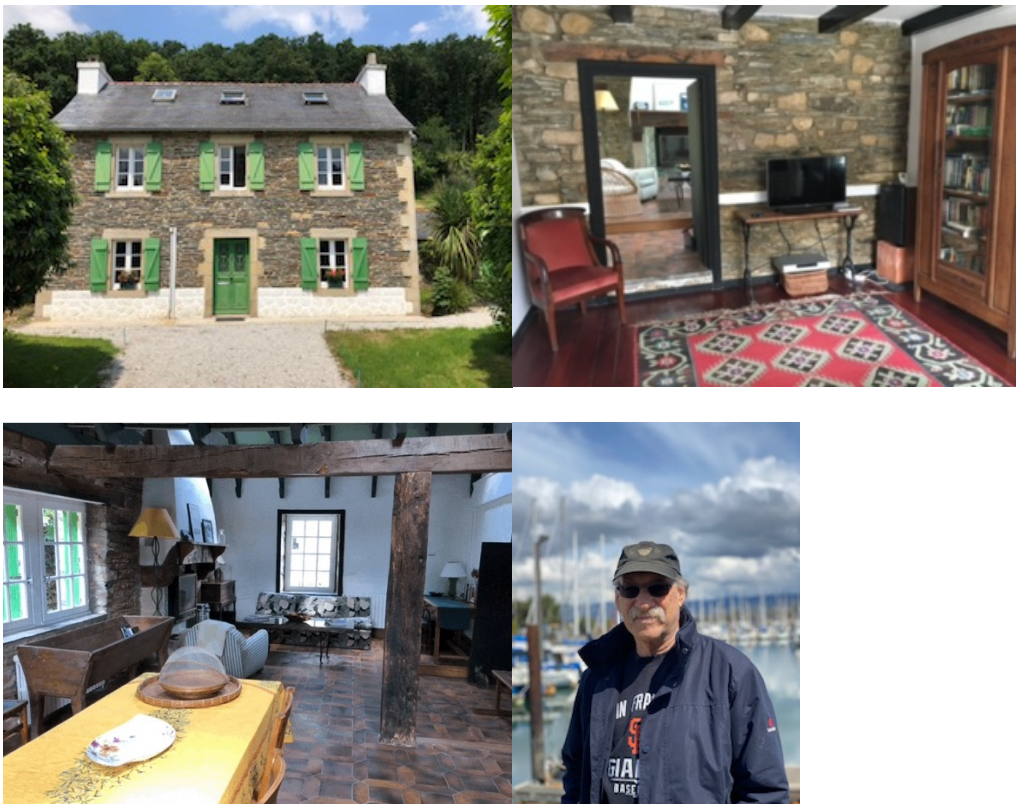


February 2021 Preservation Extra – Mark Greenside Travelogue

"In 1991, Greenside, a teacher and political activist (now) living in Alameda, Calif., found himself at both the end of a relationship and the end of the world. The French world, that is: Finistère, (in) a remote town on the coast of Brittany, where he and his soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend spend 10 weeks.... At summer's end (as well as the end of his relationship), his attachment to France became more permanent through the quasi-impulsive purchase of an old stone house...." *From Publishers Weekly*



My House in France

It's an old stone house made of granite and slate woven together like a fine Harris tweed of tans, blues, black, grays and rust. It is the kind of house—old, stone, lonely, a survivor—I've been admiring and ogling. Sometimes they

look medieval, like there ought to be a moat around them. Other times, like now, in the sunlight, they are wavy patches of light: silver, gray, white, blue, twinkling and winking, seemingly as surprised as I am that they're still here. And with good reason. Most of them have been torn down or have tumbled down, or the stone has been covered by a thick, white, stucco for the same reason people in the 1950s painted their oak and maple furniture: to make it look more classy and refined and finished, less natural and raw. The house is a find, the only old, stand-alone, exposed-stone house on the quay.

A man opens the door and peeks out. He holds out his hand like an American and says, "Hello."

I shake it and ask, "Parlez vous anglais?"

"Yes. Of course," and he explains the house is not clean, his wife is not there, but he'll show it to me quickly.

He opens the door and I walk in. The change inside the house is palpable. Outside, it is bright, sunny and hot, but inside, in the front hallway, the house is dark, cool, refreshing. It's like walking into an air-conditioned theater on a hot sunny day, only this isn't air-conditioning, it's what happens when you have three-foot-thick granite walls.

I follow Monsieur over a brown-and-ochre star-patterned tile floor that looks early twentieth century, up the stairs, past the second-floor landing to the attic, which is startlingly bright. It has three skylights and is huge, running the entire length and width of the house. The ceiling is an A-frame that peaks at under six feet in the center and drops to less than two at the sides.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of long rusty nails poke through the roof, making the room some sort of medieval torture palace and a haven for tetanus, a shot I haven't had in thirty years.

Monsieur leads me down the stairs, bypassing the second floor, back to where we started at the front hallway. He points to the right, showing me the kitchen. It has a large window facing the river and a red rose bush in bloom, the same early twentieth century tile floor as the hallway, a beamed ceiling, and old, dark-wood paneling that looks as if it came from a church, covering what once was a huge, stone cooking fireplace. He turns me around and points me into a small, dark room with a fireplace, beamed ceiling, hardwood floor, and beautiful granite-and-slate stone wall. It's like a miniature hunting lodge with its smell of smoke, burnt wood, maybe game, or an old library with its built-in bookshelves overflowing with books. It's nice, I think. I like this house. It has three floors, if you count the bat-ridden medieval attic, plenty of room to live in and to write.

“There's one more room.”

He leads me through the dark library/game room, to the darkest spot, where I see a black door I hadn't seen before. It's less than five feet high and cut through the three-foot thick stone wall. He opens the door, and I trip over a step I don't see and fall into another world.

Facing me is a forty-foot-long wall of shimmering granite and slate bathed in light. Built into the wall are two huge, large enough to walk into, fireplaces, each one big enough to roast a pig. Between the fireplaces, a double

window looks out at a five-foot-high slate wall that separates the rear of the house from an open field. I step into the room, gaga. To my left, forty-feet away, is another stone wall of granite and slate with a window that looks at the yard and a strand of thirty-foot-high cypress trees more than one hundred feet away. The wall to my right is white plaster and has a window that looks at more yard, a stone shed, and another strand of thirty-foot cypress trees at least one hundred-fifty feet away. The ceiling has four skylights, beams, and a double cathedral roof in the shape of an M, peaking twice at twenty-five feet. The floor is terra cotta tile. In the middle of the room, forming a perpendicular, are two old, bent wooden beams. One runs the width of the room, at the bottom of the M, to brace the roof. The other runs from the crossbeam to the floor. I later learn the village was a working port until the 1950s, and every home along the quay was also a café, which is why this room was added onto the house. That's why there are two steps to enter the room and two fireplaces, and why the interior wall separating this room from the small dark room is three-foot-thick granite and slate instead of quarter inch plywood.

Monsieur starts leading me out. I look around to take it all in, already picturing myself here, LaFontaine, Chateaubriand, medieval feasts with goblets, banners, shields and family crests; a long wooden table covered with pheasants and game, stained with wine and candle wax; full-bosomed wenches everywhere. I see Bloomsbury, Antibes, a garden room, trellises with ivy growing up the walls, lots of wicker and wrought iron, big floppy hats, frilly

dresses, and linen suits à la the Twenties, Scott and Zelda. As I leave the room, three sheep are grazing in the field out back.

Monsieur tells me the house will be clean tomorrow and his wife, who speaks better English, will be there. “Come back tomorrow at three if you like.”

My House in France, by Mark Greenside

PART 2 continued from the Newsletter

I knock on the door at three. The door opens, and a Lisa Minelli in *Cabaret* look-a-like, smiles at me and says, “Hello. Welcome. Come in.” We sit at the kitchen table, and she tells me the house is an old farm house built in the 1880s, and that they’re selling it because they’ve recently been given a *very* old house from Monsieur’s family that they want to fix up and live in, and it is too difficult to do from here. We talk for almost an hour. Then she shows me the house.

We march up the stairs. “The stairs are old,” she says, “original to the house.” We turn on the second-floor landing and head up the stairs to the attic. I’m surprised they’ve made no attempt to fix it up, make it look like a kid’s room or a study or nook. It looks exactly as it did yesterday. A light bulb hanging from its wire in the middle of the room looks like a hanged man. Madame points to the floor. “The wood is original, but unfinished.” I look at it. The floor is primitive, ten-inch wide, half-inch thick, rustic-cut planks of white pine. I’m in trouble. Yesterday I saw this room as a horror chamber and a personal-injury lawyer’s delight. Today it represents the most dangerous word in the real estate buyer’s lexicon—*potential*. I see a study, a writing place, my master bedroom with private bath. The bad news is it would take me years and a fortune to build. The best news is it is now a study and master bedroom with a private bath.

Madame leads our procession back down the stairs to the second-floor landing, which has the same ten-inch-wide plank floors as the attic, only these are oak, finished and stained dark cocoa-brown. We turn left on the landing and Madame opens the door. Monsieur reaches in and turns on a lamp with a 40-watt bulb. In the dusk-light I see loose wires for an overhead light fixture that’s not there, a beamed ceiling at least twelve-feet high, a fireplace, radiator—central heat?—a closed and shuttered window that must face the river, and the same original wood floor.

Monsieur turns off the lamp and closes the door. Madame leads us across the landing to the room on the other side of the stairs and stops in front

of the closed door. “This is our bedroom,” she says. “It’s the same as the room you just saw,” which I actually didn’t. She opens the door and we’re enveloped in light. I walk through the room, straight to the window and look out over a thicket of trees in the front yard, at the two swans in the river, the cotton-ball sky, evergreen hills, and the horizon. Then I turn around and look at the room. It needs paint, some plastering, and there’s no overhead light fixture, but it’s large and cozy at the same time: large because of the window and the light and the twelve-foot ceiling; cozy because of the fireplace, the beams in the ceiling, and the dark, cocoa-brown floor.

“I love the light here,” I say. “I love the light.”

“Yes,” Madame says, “it’s magic.”

There are two more closed doors facing us on the landing. I’m starting to feel as if I’m in a French version of *Let’s Make a Deal*—I’ll take door number 3. Madam opens the door nearest us and steps back for me to see the shiny white toilet sitting alone in a narrow, dark, windowless room with a twelve-foot ceiling, looking like an *objet d’art* or a throne or the electric chair. She closes the door, then opens the second one: the bathroom. It’s as light as the toilet is dark. It has the same window as the bedroom, the same light and view of the trees, sky, river, and horizon. The room is blue—The Blue Room—navy-blue carpeted floor, swirly royal-blue-and-white tile walls, navy-blue ceiling, with a big, old white porcelain bathtub, a shower, a sink, a radiator, and a bidet. I see myself in the shower, luxuriating, looking out the window, standing in the sky.

Monsieur takes over and leads the way down the stairs. He turns left at the bottom of the stairs, into the small, dark, library-reading-hunting room with built-in bookcases that he and I walked through yesterday. He turns on the light, an overhead light, albeit a sixty watter, and I say, “I like overhead light,” and he turns on another light, a sconce on the wall.

“Do the fireplaces work? *All* of them?” I see leering fires and candles and heavy red wine and oysters in winter—and using the bidet for something other than laundry or washing my feet. I have no girlfriend, lover, or prospects, but being in France fills me with hope.

“Yes,” Madame says, “but we never use them.”

“The radiators work?”

“Of course,” Monsieur says, as if I accused him of trying to trick me and sell me a pig in a poke. “The house has central heating. Oil. I will show you.”

He leads us through the cozy, nest-like room, under the five-foot doorway, over the step, into the cathedral ceiling, 40-foot-long-stone-medieval-garden-party room and points out the window to the tiny stone shed. “The oil tank and heater are over there,” he says. “Oil heats the radiators and all the hot water in the house.”

I follow Monsieur as he walks us through the medieval-garden-party room, to the other side, where he opens another five-foot door cut into the stone wall, and we’re back in the kitchen.

Madame directs me back to a chair and pours me a cup of tea. “French law requires me to tell you everything about the house, and I will.”

In the U.S., that sentence alone would trigger calls to lawyers, plumbers, engineers, electricians, roofers, architects, and exterminators. In France, I have no one to call, so I listen. She tells me the electricity is an old system and needs upgrading, and the drainpipe is loose. She says the rest is cosmetic—painting, plastering, sanding, polishing. They’ve taken care of everything else, including draining the septic tank, which I didn’t even know existed. “Oh!” she adds, “We have extra tiles for the kitchen, bathroom, and back room floors if you want them.”

I ask her if I can walk through the house again.

“Of course,” she says, “take your time.”

I walk through the house and sit in each room. Feel it. Practice feng shui before I knew what it was or that it existed. I move furniture, face it in different directions, touch the stone walls, look out the windows, open the skylights. I sit on a chair in the medieval-garden-party room and look at the two fireplaces and granite and slate walls and see how the stone was recently pointed and set, how much work and love they’ve given the house. I see parties and pageants and my family here. I want it, which I know is the worst time to buy. But I feel it in my heart. I see myself here. It’s crazy, I know. Place has never even been important to me, but here I am wanting, desiring—*loving*—this place. The fact that it’s 6,000 miles from home, in another country, a country that speaks a language I don’t understand, and that I have to travel twenty hours to get there doesn’t seem to matter a whit. I’m certain as I rarely am about

anything, that I want to be part of this house, this village, these people, and Brittany.

“Ok,” I say, walking into the kitchen. “I’d like to make an offer.”

We reach an agreement quickly: they agree to fix the drainpipe, and I agree to pay their price. It’s the only time in France I paid more than fifty dollars for anything and didn’t bargain.

I leave giddy, frightened and perplexed. I’ve been in the house twice for a total of less than three hours, have had no inspections, no experts, only the word and guarantee of the owner that nothing is wrong. Six thousand years of shopkeepers, bankers, and lawyers and it’s come to this. My father and his father and his father’s father—all the way back to Egypt or Adam or Australopithecus must be shaking their heads.

In February, I fly back to France for the closing. I drive past the house and my stomach sinks. It’s dark, bleak, shuttered, and closed, looking lonely and unused, uninhabited and uninhabitable, leaving me scared and embarrassed. I’m wondering about heat, warmth, fireplaces, dampness, smell, no inspections, tests, engineers, experts, and fearing the worst.

A week later I write “lu et approve,” read and approved, on a twelve-page document I can’t read and don’t understand. Then I sign a bunch more papers I don’t understand, and they give me the deed and the keys to the house.

I drive to the house and unlock the door, highly expectant. I open the door with great trepidation, expecting the worst and am greeted by shiny, spotless, gleaming floors. The old tile looks new. I walk through the house,

ooing and aahing: the wooden floors, including the stairs and the attic, have all been cleaned, waxed, and oiled. Later, when I do it myself, I realize what it means: sweeping, dusting, vacuuming, then getting on your knees with a pile of rags and a can of oil and rubbing every plank, every corner, foot, and square centimeter of a three-story house. Your back aches, knees, arms, chest. It's painful, and it's the only way to do it. I didn't know that then, when I first walked in, only that they took good care, were proud of their work and their house, and everything was beautiful—and now and as long as I own the house, it is my job to do the same. Later, when I thank them for the care they took, their thoughtfulness, everything, Monsieur shrugs, and says, "C'est normal," Madame says, "C'est propre."

They leave a stove and refrigerator—both working, which I find out later is not common. Houses are usually bought and sold without appliances—only a sink and toilet. They also leave a polished oak parquet table with two leaves and four chairs, a set of dishes for eight—none chipped or cracked—silverware, pots, and a frying pan. A full, operating kitchen. They leave a double bed, mattress and box spring, and a walnut armoire in the bedroom. The attic is spotless. Even the stone shed is clean and organized, and the fuel tank has oil. I'm amazed. I walk through the house again and see all the overhead wiring has been completed and connected to overhead lights. I go outside to check, though I already know—the drainpipe, which had been separated from the spout, is back in place.

Everyone I know in the U.S. owns a house, but not one of them, from my parent's generation to my nephews and nieces, has any kind of relationship, except maybe for a while litigation with the previous owners. Except me. Monsieur and Madame have become some of my closest friends in Brittany. Indeed, in my life.

Mark Greenside is the author of *I'll Never Be French (no matter what I do)* and *(not quite) Mastering the Art of French Living*. The full, hilarious story of buying his house in France can be read in *I'll Never Be French (no matter what I do)*.