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Schloss leaders

A glut of German castles at rock-bottom prices is offering the promise of a baronial lifestyle – or opulent corporate HQ – often within striking distance of major cities. Sue Chester charts the pleasures and potential pitfalls



Schloss leaders



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Burg Kipfenberg in the Altmühltal Nature Park

Image: Rebecca Streitmayer

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HIDE INFO

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SUE CHESTER

Ludwig II of Bavaria, who, in the mid-19th century, created the fairytale Schloss Neuschwanstein, was called the Dream King. Cut to the 21st century, and owning a castle in Germany would seem still the stuff of fantasy. But for the savvy buyer it can be an achievable reality – in some cases for less than the price of a Mercedes.

When the wall came down in 1989, the new unified Germany woke up to

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find it had a glut of heritage in the former DDR hinterlands, including some 1,300 castles (of around 5,000 nationwide). Although their original owners, displaced by the second world war, had the right to reclaim them, many were abandoned because the titleholders had died or saw their grand properties as a costly liability. The local councils that inherited them off-loaded the crumbling grandeur at bargain prices, sometimes for as little as €1.

Over the past 20 years, many former DDR castles have been fully restored, while others, acquired with initial enthusiasm, have ended up back on the market only partially renovated because romantic dreams proved overambitious. Christoph Schenck, general manager of Heritage Media and a consultant specialising in historic homes for Engel & Völkers, believes the German market has a lot to offer. "Germany has excellent transport and there are beautiful houses for relatively low prices, compared with France, the UK, the US and Italy," he says. Property prices here remain much lower than in the rest of the world, not only for normal real estate, but for castles too. "This means great potential for capital growth, and Germany's reputation as a safe haven in the financial crisis is also having a positive effect on property values."

Schloss Oberstadt, a 28-room water castle, 15km from Thüringen's Vessertal Forest Unesco biosphere reserve, is on the market for €595,000, with 700sq m of the total 1,068sq m renovated. Another star property, Schloss Mühlberg, an authentic 16th-century Brandenburg beauty (in need of extensive TLC), with a tower, moat and chapel, is being sold for €390,000. Both are available through Vermittlung Historischer Immobilien, which sells historical properties all over Germany. By contrast, in the EU powerhouse's western forelands, near established economic centres such as Frankfurt and Munich, restored castles sell for as much as €17m.

Whether you choose east or west, Schenck warns against emotional purchases. "The dangerous thing with castles is that you can never be sure you'll recoup the money you invest. If you want to re-sell, you need to look at the minimum price you would expect, and work from there. Wait and see who else is bidding for the property. If there's no one, you can really negotiate."

Sotheby's International Realty Frankfurt-Wiesbaden affiliate Peters & Peters has the 12th-century Schloss Kransberg on its books. Just 30km from Frankfurt, it has 3,350sq m of living space and 1.18 hectares of land. Most of the visible structure was built in the 1870s, when a local baron gave it a neo-gothic overhaul, accessorising with pointed arches, columns, wrought-iron balustrades, galleries, masonry coats of arms, "medieval" statues and a grand Knight's Hall.

Kransberg has seen two waves of office refurbishment. The first was around 1939, when it was commandeered by the Nazi party: Albert Speer remodelled a wing as a military HQ and a huge bunker was built into the rocks. The allies then used the castle as a prison, where Speer was ironically detained along with Nazi rocket scientist Wernher von Braun. The second came some 60 years later, in the early 2000s, when an internet company converted another wing into office space – and added significant sales appeal. "If a castle is a ruin, it will be very hard to find a client," explains Peters & Peters Sotheby's International Realty CEO Olivier Peters. "At least a few rooms should be usable immediately. In

any case, we believe you can only sell a castle if it's on for a really interesting price." Kransberg was put on the market for €1.8m (and at the time of going to press was under offer) – a sum, says Peters, that stuns many of his clients, who would be hard-pressed to find a three-bedroom flat in New York's East Village for that amount.

Boris Becker is an associate of Living Estate Immobilien, a Cologne-based company that builds, develops and sells high-end real estate; he specialises in quality service with a limited, exclusive listing. What, in Becker's estimation, makes a good castle purchase? "For me, it's location. You need a big city nearby, so you have several usage options." His listings currently include such a property – Burg Hemmersbach – which is centrally located in the North Rhine-Westphalia megalopolis, within 20 minutes' drive of Cologne, Bonn and Düsseldorf, and discreetly on the market for a by-request purchase price only. The 3,000sq m castle is set in 22 hectares of parkland, in which there is an additional 2,000sq m manor house. The estate was founded by nobleman Wigmannus von Heymenbach around 980; one owner was Germany's fabled Formula One driver Graf Berghe von Trips. Following restoration in 2001, Hemmersbach morphed into sophisticated office premises when telecom technology worth €1.3m was installed. It also has an indoor riding arena and a tennis court. "If you want an office HQ, then Hemmersbach is plug and play," notes Becker. "Ideal usage would be as a head office for a computer firm or a five-star hotel with a large wellness facility, to capitalise on the extensive grounds. This castle is really well maintained, so you can measure the monthly maintenance costs very exactly."

Bernd Neuhäuser, part-owner and general manager of Vermittlung Historischer Immobilien, brings home one of the risks of entering the market with a property that's not as recently renovated as Hemmersbach. "The number one risk is buying a large historical building that needs work," he says. "Renovation costs can be 10 times the purchase price, and maintenance costs are also high. You have to have a really good business plan." Case in point: the actor Nicolas Cage. He cited Bavarian roots as the impetus for his purchase of Schloss Neidstein, near Amberg, but he almost as quickly divested himself of the castle when the full extent of the restoration costs became clear.

Neuhäuser's agency currently has around 60 castles on its listings, including Burg Kipfenberg (on the market for €5.7m) in the Altmühltal Nature Park, 90km north of Munich – a 830sq m residence with 11 hectares of land, two guesthouses, a barn and a cottage. Dating back to 1277, by the early 20th century it was a ruin and was rebuilt from the original plans. It's suspended above the River Altmühltal, anchored into a sheer cliff face. The park invades the castle's entrance in the Stone Hall, where stag heads lurk among the boulder "walls". With 40 rooms, it's the ultimate character residence: the minstrels' gallery in the sitting room overlooks the annexed Red Room, where a copy of a medieval mural winds across scarlet walls. One could move in with suitcases, pull up the drawbridge, then host Cluedo parties in the library, chapel, Knights' Hall or Witches' Tower, rounding off the evening with a night cap in the Drinking Hall.

The appeal of that sort of fantasy drives buyers as much as do the hard-numbers arguments in favour of commercial viability. South Africans Juan and Ingrid Swartz decided to start castle hunting when architect

Ingrid realised, during a discussion about their ultimate life dreams, that she'd like not only to restore a castle, but to live in one. "At the time, we didn't think it was a feasible idea. I told Ingrid that if she were able to find a castle we could restore, I'd invest in it and build a business there," explains Juan, whose company, Scientia Institut, provides research and strategic advisory services.

One year later, they had a selection of 10 potential castles to view, most of them in the former DDR and in various states of disrepair. "We like being close to the forest, in the middle of nowhere, so we didn't actually want to be near cities," explains Ingrid. "We quickly realised that western Germany had fewer options with this sort of setting and they were far more expensive."

The local council in Saxony-Anhalt told them that a property called Schloss Heuckewalde was for sale for €25,000, and they battled their way through weeds and cobwebs to investigate its potential. The four-winged structure dates from 1700 and has 2,500sq m of living space, including a separate 60m tower dating back to 1198. Surrounded by a moat and two hectares of parklands, it had no shortage of appeal. "Many of the other buildings we saw were built after 1700 and had a lot of elaborate decorative interior detail. If you had to restore that you'd go insane. Heuckewalde's fort-like simplicity was something we could entertain," Juan explains.

When the Swartzs heard that plans were afoot to retain the medieval tower but demolish the rest of the structure and sell the land to a developer, they didn't hesitate to put their own business and restoration plan before the local council. They started with a budget of €10m and nerves of steel but, when they started removing the DDR-era ceiling, reality hit: with castles, the saying goes, you get what you haven't paid for. Historical restoration experts warned that recovering the original beams could cost up to €2m. "You have to have blood and guts to take on a project like this," says Swartz.

Prince Alexander Sayn-Wittgenstein is president of the German Castles Association, a heritage preservation organisation founded in 1899 by German citizens who were outraged to see their castles being "upgraded" to romantic parodies. "There was this big 'faux' movement in the second half of the 19th century," Wittgenstein says. "A lot of people bought ruins and rebuilt them in a fantasy way, so they could play medieval knights."

Wealthy industrialists took inspiration and had their own whimsical piles built from scratch. Schloss Lietzow is such a castle, built in 1892 for a railway industrialist on the island of Rügen off the Pomeranian coast at Stralsund, where Brahms, Thomas Mann and Erich Honecker would holiday. On the market for €1.95m with Vermittlung Historischer Immobilien, Lietzow is an imitation, with a degree of panache Ludwig II would envy. The bright, white façade, pierced with neo-gothic windows, and the obligatory tower are surrounded by thick forest; it's a statement home par excellence. Set in 7,453sq m of landscaped gardens, its 400sq m of living space have Baltic views, topped only by those from the 30m tower.

Another model of the category is Herrenhaus Gut Borghorsterhütten (€5m, through Engel & Völkers), a sophisticated mansion built in 1911 at Eckernförde, 20 minutes from Kiel. A mix of manor-house architecture

and Jugendstil, it was designed for an aristocratic family by architect Hans Schnittger. The neo-classical/gothic tower defines its castle status. The elegant interior features three salons decorated with Zuber wallpaper, 13 bedrooms, six bathrooms, a library, dining room and study, while in the 8.3 hectares of parkland there are three additional houses, tennis courts and stables.

Wittgenstein, 27th heir to Schloss Sayn, 15km north of Koblenz, defends the challenges of castle ownership with a citation of its many rewards. “The joy of being the owner of something that has been around for a long, long time; of living somewhere aesthetically lovely, surrounded by beautiful parklands; of being able to entertain friends and family in wonderful surroundings – is priceless.”

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