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How the Baltics are bringing crumbling manor houses back to life

Alexander Welscher Mar 25, 2019

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There are hundreds of neglected manor houses available for sale in Latvia and Estonia, the remnants of the ruling Baltic Germans who lost power when both countries gained independence. Some brave entrepreneurs are now restoring them as a way to attract tourists.

Kuksu Muiza, Latvia (dpa) - Anyone who walks across the creaking parquet floor of the Kuksu Muiza manor in Latvia cannot fail to be enchanted.

Sparkling chandeliers hang from the ceilings, which are decorated with exquisite stucco. Elaborately framed paintings adorn the walls, and the rooms are bursting with antique furniture.

"My guests should get a feeling for how the landed gentry lived at the time," says Daniel Jahn during a tour of the estate, about 85 kilometres west of the capital, Riga.

The German hotelier acquired the manor house shortly before the turn of the millennium in a desolate state, and has since brought it back to life. In doing so, he appears to have started something of a trend in the Baltics, where more and more manor houses are being restored as museums, restaurants, hotels and tourist attractions.

"When I saw the house for the first time, it was a ruin," Jahn says. There were holes in the roof, missing windows, crumbling walls, and the garden was overrun with weeds.

But it was still love at first sight.

He paid 18,000 US dollars for the house, whose existence was first recorded in 1530, and where the mother of the German-Baltic writer Werner Bergengruen was born.

"The decision to buy it came entirely from my gut," says Jahn, who has been living in Latvia since the start of the 1990s. Now, looking back at pictures from that time, he questions the wisdom of his decision.

But he was so struck by the beauty of the building, and how it reflected in the adjacent lake, that he couldn't resist.

"It looked like an enchanted fairytale castle."

Jahn studied economics and hotel management in Germany before initially working as a chef and waiter. When Latvia gained independence, he took over the management of the country's first hotel to operate under Western standards - which soon became one of Latvia's leading hotels.

In 2007, he started his own business with Kuksu Muiza - thus launching a new type of guest house tourism in Latvia.

Jahn has invested several million euros in restoring the manor house to its former glory. For the renovation, which was as faithful as possible to the original, he called in conservationists and historians, collected period furniture with reference to an old inventory list and purchased paintings.

The result is a quiet and secluded country hotel with over a dozen guest rooms, each with its own charm.

The hotel attracts 1,200 guests every year, all of whom benefit from Jahn's home-cooked food made from regional ingredients. The manor house has attracted some prestigious guests: From Latvian state presidents to foreign dignitaries, the entries in the guest book are impressive.

But the competition is growing. In Latvia, as in neighbouring Estonia, more and more ancient estates have been restored in recent years - often with ultra-modern interiors.

"Manor houses are becoming more and more popular because the standard of living is rising. Many people want to feel like aristocrats," says Janis Lazdans of the Latvian Association of Castles, Palaces and Manor Houses.

Riin Alatalu from the Estonian Association of Manor Houses says that country is also seeing an increased interest in such houses.

"They are popular with local and foreign visitors," she says about the buildings, which often stand out from their rural surroundings with their bright colours and impressive architecture.

About 1,250 such buildings were still in use in Estonia a century ago, and a similar number in Latvia - most of them Renaissance, Baroque and Art Nouveau buildings.

For a long time, the manor houses were regarded as a symbol of oppression by the Baltic Germans, who as the ruling upper class shaped politics and cultural history in Latvia and Estonia up to the independence of the countries in 1918.


A few years ago, however, attitudes began to change: Today the estates, whose heyday as manors began in the second half of the 18th century, are regarded as an important part of the cultural heritage.

But many are still looking for financial backers to wake them from their slumbers. Hundreds of such properties are up for sale.

Apart from those that were turned into village schools or homes, or used for other purposes during Soviet times, the majority of the buildings fell into disrepair. Most are in poor condition and have been derelict for years.

Prices for the estates, which often consist of several buildings, parks and gardens, range from 1 euro to several million. But buying one can be fraught with challenges: Apart from their poor condition, it is often a lack of economic viability that prevents them from being restored. There are also no subsidies for restoration, but many conditions that must be met.

"You have to love a house like this, because economically, it's a shot in the dark," says Jahn. "You have to be an enthusiast and a little crazy to get involved."

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