

Starting Afresh in France

François and Linda Collet refurbished an old country house in the Vendée, in the Western Loire - turning it into their home and a residential language school with holiday accommodation

When François and Linda Collet decided to move permanently to France from southern England they knew that they would be looking not only for a comfortable home, but also a suitable base to start up a business in which they both could be fully involved.



François, Paris born and educated, had lived in England for nearly thirty years. With a background as a lecturer teaching adult French in southern England, he had long dreamed of running his own small residential French language school. In France, of course!

Linda needed little or no persuading of the benefits of moving across the channel - the couple had owned a small cottage in a quiet area of Picardie known as Le Petit Poyenval for several years, using it as a holiday home and occasional retreat. She had always been keen on the idea of living in a typically French-style house and running a small chambres d'hôtes alongside the language school.

For their business venture to succeed they needed an area with easy access for students from England and elsewhere, as well as the weather and attractions that visitors to the chambres d'hôtes would expect. Convenient though the cottage might be it was totally unsuitable - somewhere else must be found! The search for premises large enough, attractive enough and (above all) French enough to meet their needs started in earnest at the beginning of 2001.

Early in their search they decided

to concentrate on the Vendée, in the Western Loire - an area with good accessibility and a microclimate offering some of the best year-round weather in France. After looking at several unsuitable houses they were given details of an old country house in the village of Bazoges-en-Pareds, close to Chantonny and surrounded by beautiful countryside.

The house was ideal. Sitting prominently on a corner near the centre of the village, it had been used previously as a small, private nursing home. With a traditional French 'feel' and well-established, landscaped grounds, it had been known locally as Le Petit Chateau.



Le Petit Chateau

Lounge, dining room, kitchen and breakfast-room were large enough to cope with both residential language students and a number of holidaying guests. Ten bedrooms would meet their needs, although redecoration and

improvements to the plumbing would be required. Two of the bedrooms occupied the top floor, making it possible for François and Linda to retain some privacy from visitors.

"Once we saw it we knew straight away that it was exactly what we had in mind," Linda recalls. "We just hoped that we could make it happen we stopped looking at anything else."



The dining room

The large grounds contained a greenhouse, chicken run, and various other outbuildings. A solidly built, old stone barn alongside the house added to the visual appeal of the property but was derelict with no immediate use. Gradually, however, they realised that here was added potential - part of the barn was easily large enough to be modified into two substantial gîtes for holiday rental.

On the day that they moved in to their new home they began to

meet the unexpected. They had assumed that the previous owner would leave behind basic fixtures and fittings, but that was not to be. Lights had been removed, as had kitchen units: the kitchen was bare except for taps over the space where a sink once had been! François and Linda spent the first night in their new home sleeping on the floor of one of the bedrooms in sleeping bags. They had no furniture or equipment nothing apart from their cat Meisa, two wine glasses and the few things they had brought with them in their car. "It was a nightmare," laughs Linda. "We sat on the floor and drank a bottle of wine, not sure whether to laugh or cry!"

With the arrival of the first of their possessions three days later normality started to return and they were able to begin the process of settling in. Bazoges-en-Pareds is a living village, with several shops and an active community; they found the villagers friendly and immediately helpful, interested in them and what they had come to do. The fact that François is French might have helped there, although he believes that being a Parisien makes him more foreign than an Englishman!



The kitchen completed!

Before leaving England François had been busy promoting the new language school, using contacts at home, advertising, and a newly created website. Their first booking established a deadline for having the main parts of the house completed and usable, and they had set aside three weeks to get key rooms into an acceptable condition. Priority was given to the kitchen; François fitted

kitchen units and appliances obtained from a supplier in nearby Fontenay-le-Comte and before long the kitchen was usable both for cooking and eating. A downstairs bedroom was converted into a spacious classroom.

"Our first student arrived just four weeks after we moved in, for a one week course. We had made a lot of progress and there was still plenty to be done but all went well. Le Poyenval passed its first working test!"

Early on they decided that they wanted to rename their house - not always a common practice in France. Their former neighbours at the cottage in Le Petit Poyenval in Picardie had donated a sign to put outside the house: Le Poyenval. François and Linda



wanted this to be the name both of their new home and of their business. "From then on it really felt like home," says Linda.

Even though the house had been in use as a nursing home none of the bedrooms had its own bathroom facilities - and it was with the plumbing that they ran into one of their first problems.

François explains: "We worked out the changes that we needed to provide en suite facilities in some of the bedrooms. A local builder agreed to call - but when he came it was just to tell us that he was very busy and that he would return again after several months to prepare a quotation. We were horrified! We needed to be able to accept students and guests as soon as possible. We asked around, and found that the situation was typical."

Reluctantly they decided to use builders from England for the first phase. "That did not go as



The living area of one of the gîtes

well as we had hoped. There were several problems with leaking joints before the work was finished, but everything was put right eventually. We worked with local builders and tradesmen from then on."

Once the building and restoration work on the house was in hand it was time to start on the stone barn alongside destined to become two gîtes. Plans were drawn up (using a local architect) and agreed. Major tasks would include the installation of mains services such as water and electricity, as well as the creation of bedrooms and living rooms.

"All went well the work was completed on time and although slightly over budget we were delighted with the results. The first gîte was occupied eighteen months after we moved into Le Poyenval."



Work underway!

Since their first student there has been a steady stream - both of students and of holidaymakers enjoying the Vendée countryside. Many of the students are themselves considering a move to France and are keen to improve their French.

"All our visitors enjoy staying in a village community. Students are given 'tasks' to visit the village shops and practise their French, and the locals have welcomed them. It brings life and interest into the village."

Integration with the local community has been important throughout, and both François and Linda have involved themselves with their new neighbours at every opportunity. This has applied not only to the French, but also to many of the English people already living nearby. A keen gardener, Linda has enjoyed resurrecting a former potager (kitchen garden) and

introducing chickens to provide fresh produce for their students and guests. In doing so she has exchanged gardening ideas picking up local methods in



Large grounds surround the house

return for those used this side of the channel.

Further local involvement has

come about through offering tuition to others living in the area. François has been teaching French to small groups of English people now living in the area, and Linda (who gained a Teaching English as a Foreign Language qualification before moving to France) basic English to a number of French locals.

For both François and Linda the move to Le Poyenval has been successful in every way. "We enjoy living here, in a beautiful village amongst some very friendly people, and feel that we have achieved a lot in a short time!"

Grahame Stovold

François and Linda are happy to pass on their experiences to others considering a move to France. Tel 0033 (0)2 51 51 26 85 or contact them via their website at www.lepoyenval.com

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