

RUN OF THE MILL

Franco-Irish couple Annie and Daniel Flavin tell **Deborah Curtis** why their B&B and gîte business in a pretty riverside setting has been such a rewarding venture



When Annie Flavin was a young woman, she travelled from her home in south-west France to Ireland, to try her hand at farming. It was while working on a dairy farm in the countryside near Cork that she met her Irish husband Daniel, on a fateful night out for drinks at the local pub.

Today, having left the world of farming far behind, the couple now live in Annie's native France. Their home is in the Loire-Atlantique countryside near the pretty village of Gétigné, not far from Clisson, a town renowned for its historic architecture and 14th-century castle. They run a B&B and gîte business from their home, La Sauzaie; have four grown-up children; and welcome scores of people each year, many of whom return to stay year after year, and have become firm friends.

"After five years in Cork and five years in London, we lived in Pas-de-Calais in Montreuil-sur-Mer for 12 years, and then we decided to move further south because the climate is better," says Daniel.

They began their search for a property in Loire-Atlantique in the spring of 2003, and initially discounted La Sauzaie because the large house and outbuildings on the banks of the River Sèvre, which stand in 30 acres of fields, gardens and woodland, were more than they wanted to take on. However, after three days of fruitless house-hunting, the friends they were staying with persuaded them to go and take a look.

"We came to visit and it was May," Daniel remembers fondly. "It was really hot and we just fell in love with the gardens; the whole place, the river and everything; without ever seeing the inside of the house."

The next day they went back and spent some time with the then owner, a doctor who used La Sauzaie as a *maison secondaire* residence. That visit lasted five hours and it was then that they first learned about the history of the property, which dates back to

the beginning of the 19th century.

"There was a lot of history to the place," says Daniel. "One of the original owners had written a book, which we now have, which details the history of the textile industry along the River Sèvre. The mill is on the other side of the river from where we are and there's a little bridge over to it from our property. The same family once owned the whole thing. They set up the factory around 1800 and they lived in this house until 1955 when they sold it to the doctor and then we bought it; so since 1800 we are only the third owners of this property, which is quite amazing."

Once La Sauzaie was theirs, they set about bringing it up to date and getting the place ready to welcome their first visitors. There was a lot of work to do.

"The first thing we did was put in a new water main," says Daniel. "There



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was an old lead pipe, and that had to be changed; we had to get a proper electricity supply in; we put in septic tanks, and then we did the gîtes."

They also decorated throughout; transforming tired interiors from the 1950s and 60s into a fresh, light and modern look. The exterior of the house, they painted white, while the balconies and shutters are now a warm and cheerful shade of red.

"We had to do up the balconies five years ago because the timber was all rotten," says Annie. "The original colour was an old red, which had faded over the years in the sun, so I decided to go for a bright red because actually the façade of the house is more like the houses of the Basque country in the south-west, and down there they are red -

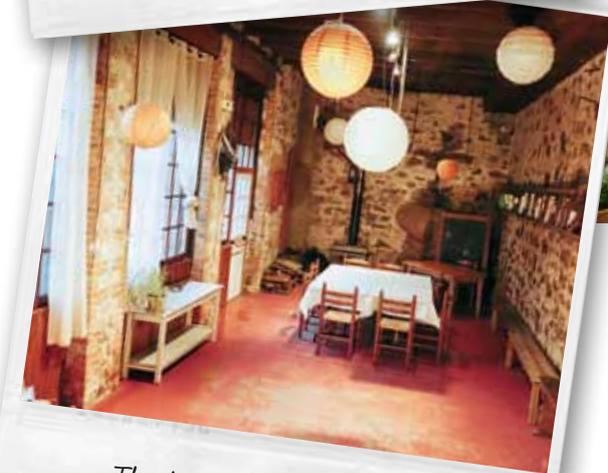
not exactly this red, but I decided on a bright red as it is all green around; to make a lovely splash of colour."

The large outdoor pool is a big draw for visitors, and this too has been updated to meet 21st-century standards.

"The pool was there but it was originally fed from the river," says Daniel. "There was a little canal coming from the Sèvre, which fed the pool, and then at the other end of the pool, there was a little overflow, so you had water constantly coming from the river. When we moved in, we cut that off and put in a proper filtration system because when you've got cold water continuously coming into the pool, it's very hard to keep it the right temperature. We put in the pool house and the filtration system. 🐾"



A living room in one of the gîtes



The hall is ideal for parties



The warmth of their welcome has won them many friends over the years, many of whom return

It's quite big pool - it's 90 square metres - and even if we have 15-20 people staying, there's room for everybody in there."

Every Wednesday evening, Daniel and Annie hold a social evening for their guests; firing up the restored bread oven in the garden and baking delicious home-made pizzas for everyone.

"In a lot of houses, the bread oven was incorporated inside the house, but the bread oven here is an outside building," says Daniel. "I have to light the fire at 4 o'clock in the afternoon because the oven needs feeding with timber for three to four hours to it get up to temperature. If we have families staying, the kids often come and help me. They love it. Everybody makes the dough and then everybody prepares their own pizza, and we have wine and music, and we have a good evening."

The warmth of their welcome has won them many friends over the years, many of whom return for holidays in a part of France

that, in the past, British people have tended to overlook.

Loire-Atlantique is easily accessible, though, and with its stunning coastline, the city of Nantes, and Muscadet wine country to list among its attractions, it's not hard to see why those who've discovered this hidden treasure keep coming back.

"It's a really nice feeling that people have had a really nice holiday and they want to come back," says Annie. "That's the nicest part of the business really: meeting people. Sometimes you get fed up with housework, but you get to meet really nice people, and it makes it all worth it. If you didn't like meeting people, there would be no enjoyment and you can spend a lot of time chatting over breakfast which is very nice."

In the height of spring and summer seasons, however, when everything is growing, there is not much time for relaxing over coffee. Annie and Daniel do the majority of the work themselves at La Sauzaie, and with a property of this size, there is plenty to keep them very, very busy.

"Luckily half of it is rented out to a local sheep farmer, but we've still got about 12

acres of woods and gardens which is quite a handful," says Daniel. "We have a sheep and a donkey, who help keep the grass down and then sometimes, at weekends, we organise for friends from Nantes to come for the weekend to help us. We get a big group together so it makes the tedious jobs that little bit easier. We do work hard but then during the evening we have a bit of a party."

They are currently exploring the idea of inviting a like-minded couple to join them in partnership at La Sauzaie. The idea is in its infancy but they would love to hear from any British people who might be interested in finding out more.

"We'd be interested in hearing from people who would like to come for a week to share this place with us and maybe become a partner. It would need to be somebody who's interested in trees and plants, and likes people. We're open to suggestions."

And with this long-term plan in mind, they are hoping there will be no shortage of people keen to spend some time in their idyllic corner of France. **LF**

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