



HIT or myth?

PART ONE: first steps

Going concerns

In the first of a three-part series, Eleanor O’Kane looks at some of the most common presumptions that surround a move to France, and offers advice from the experts to help you make the right choices

Since *Living France* first launched at the end of the 1980s, the experience of moving to France has been transformed by pet passports, low-cost air travel and online expat forums. Even so, our beliefs about starting a new life across the Channel remain broadly the same, from where we want to live to how we’ll get to grips with the language. Here we address some readers’ assumptions and cast a reassuring light on things that worry them, so you can approach your new life fully armed with the right information.



TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

Q

“I daydream of a life in France but still get butterflies when I think about making a full-time move. Does this mean I’ll never actually make the leap?”

A

There’s no rule to say you have to jump into French life with both feet straight away. If finances and time permit, consider ramping up the amount of weeks you spend across the Channel over a period of time to discover if living there full-time really is for you.

Buying a French house to rent out is a good way to dip your toe in the water as you can easily plan how much time you spend there, and rent it out when you’re back home. When it comes to buying a home with rental potential, there are some rules for success as Glynis Shaw, co-founder of property rental website French Connections (www.frenchconnections.co.uk), confirms:

“Always look for the three As: access, attractiveness and amenities,” she says. “The setting should be pretty and peaceful, with good views, local amenities for shopping and hopefully a market or two. Eating out and local life should ideally be within walking distance or a short drive.”

If your house is to generate income, you will need to put some effort into marketing it. Many homeowners use a professional lettings agency to boost their occupancy, especially in the tricky low season.

“House-hunters usually make use of the lower rental charges out-of-season,” says Glynis. “They can even keep your property ticking over with a winter let.”

Top tip: Spend time in France during winter to discover what life is like when all the tourists have gone home. 🇫🇷

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WEATHER PATTERNS

Q

“I want a place in the sun but I can’t afford a Côte d’Azur price tag. Should I resign myself to packing my wellies?”

A

Not necessarily - due to microclimates, some northern pockets of France enjoy balmy weather, while seasonal winds can bring chilly blasts to the sun-soaked Mediterranean. The most famous of these gusts is the *mistral*, which blows south along the Rhône Valley and can reach speeds of 80 miles per hour. Others include the brutal *tramontane* in Languedoc-Roussillon, and the *levant*, which can bring heavy rainfall and storms to the Mediterranean.

Weather is one of the main considerations for British people moving to France, as Joanna Leggett, of Charente-based Leggett Immobilier (www.frenchestateagents.com), attests: “I have a map of the different climates around France, which shows that summer temperatures from Vendée all the way down to Aquitaine are the same as in the Côte d’Azur and the Languedoc,” she says. “It really makes people think twice about where they might move to, especially when they realise they’ll pay about half the price in Charente or Dordogne as they would for a similar property in the south.”

Summers are shorter in Charente than they would be on the Riviera, however, so it’s worth doing your homework before you buy. The Météo France website has a handy climate comparison tool (see ‘Other useful links’ on page 40), which allows you to contrast average temperatures, rainfall and hours of sunshine in different towns and cities.

Top tip: Many estate agents in France live right in the heart of their patch so when you start to narrow down your property search, ask them what the weather is like year round.



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PRIVATE MATTERS

Q

“I’ve seen houses advertised for private sale, but people say I should stick with an estate agent. What’s the difference?”

A

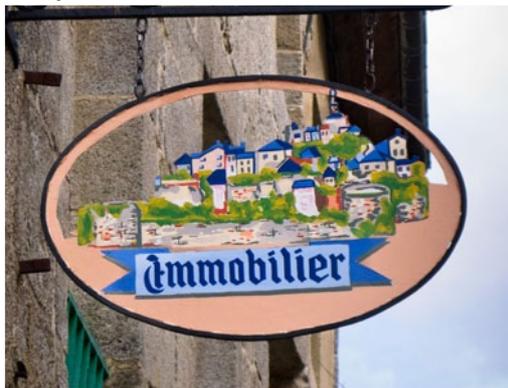
Buying through an estate agent is a wise option if your French is less than fluent or your knowledge of the area is patchy. Furthermore, an agent’s local knowledge makes them invaluable for recommending local artisans or introducing you to the *maire*.

In France, though, it’s fairly common to buy property privately; you’ll skip the agent’s fees, although you will still be obliged to use a *notaire* to manage the conveyancing. The *notaire* can act for both the vendor and buyer, asserting whether the vendor actually has the right to sell the property, and ensuring all the legal tick-boxes have been checked before the new owners takes possession of the keys. The *notaire* will also be knowledgeable about property prices in the area, which can be handy if you’re going down the private sales route. To find properties for sale privately, try website De Particulier à Particulier (www.pap.fr).

If you’ve already set your heart on an area, check the classifieds in local newspapers for private houses for sale. If your language skills are in excellent shape, you could consider buying by auction; again search regional newspapers for upcoming events and make a few visits strictly as a bystander until you feel ready to jump in.

In reality, most UK buyers prefer to rely on the skills of an English-speaking estate agent (whether French or not), who has experience of working with overseas clients and will be able to guide them through the buying process.

Top tip: Website www.francepropertyshop.com has homes for sale privately and from estate agents.





SOCIAL CIRCLES



“I’ve done my research and it looks like France is a family-orientated culture. I am single and don’t have kids – will it be impossible to make friends?”



The school gates are often the ideal place for making new friends but there is another facet of French life that brings people together: the *association*. A not-for-profit club and group, the *association* is part of the fabric of life in villages, towns and cities across France. Often centred around – but not restricted to – sport and leisure activities, joining an *association* is an ideal way to meet like-minded people or, if you’re feeling inspired, a way to learn a new hobby or skill.

When Jo Harrison suddenly became single while living in Vienne in Poitou-Charentes, the onus was on her to create a new social circle, especially as she works from home as a virtual assistant (www.writersblockadminservices.co.uk). It was a women’s business networking group called Les Dames de FER that helped Jo to increase both her professional and social circles.

“I went to my first meeting only a couple of weeks after I became single,” she explains. “I met lots of like-minded women and even though the group is business-related, it has given me a great network of contacts, some of whom have become good friends.” Although it’s tempting to stay indoors when you’re feeling lonely, it’s important to get outside and chat to the neighbours, even if your language skills are basic at best.

“In the summer, France comes alive with so many free local events,” says Jo. “Try and get to as many as possible and you’ll meet lots of friendly locals.”

Top tip: Visit the local *mairie* to find out more about *associations* in your area.

ANIMALS ON BOARD



“We’re fearful for our Labrador, who’s getting on in years. How do we make sure he’s ok with the move?”



France’s proximity to the UK means your pet will spend less time in transit than those heading to far-flung climes. Brian Faulkner, in-house vet at pet insurance provider Petplan (www.petplan.co.uk), advises easing a dog’s journey by providing a comfortable flat bed.

“Avoid beanbags as many dogs struggle to balance on these especially while going around corners,” he says. “An older or arthritic dog will definitely benefit from extra bedding.”

Under the Pets Travel Scheme (PETS), if you’re flying or taking the ferry, you must use an approved carrier with experience of transporting animals. Graham Boyes is Brittany Ferries’ Port Operations Manager at Portsmouth. “On most of our crossings, your dog remains inside the vehicle, but you can visit during the crossing,” he says. “When you check in you’ll be given a big, bright sticker for your windscreen so that all our staff in port and on board know that you have a pet in the car, and they will arrange for your car to be parked in a cool, well-ventilated area of the car deck.” Brittany Ferries also offers pet-friendly cabins, kennels and open-deck walking areas on some services.

Once you arrive, visit a local vet as soon as possible to ask about any local diseases such as canine leishmaniasis. If you’re taking your dog to France for shorter periods before you take the plunge, ensure any pet insurance provides cover while abroad. “Not all pet insurance includes travel,” says Brian. “So do check first.” (for more from Brian on taking your pet to France, turn to our Expert Q&A feature on page 72.)



Top tip: If your pet doesn’t like being left alone, plan one of the shorter ferry routes or take the Eurotunnel where your pet can stay with you in the car. 🐾



OTHER USEFUL LINKS

- **Private property sales**
De Particulier à Particulier
www.pap.fr
- **Météo France Climate Comparison**
www.meteofrance.com/climat/comparateur
- **PETS Travel Scheme**
www.gov.uk/take-pet-abroad/overview
- **Brittany Ferries advice on taking pets to France**
www.brittany-ferries.co.uk/information/PETS-travel-scheme
- **Complete France forum**
Ask our community on the Complete France forum
www.completefrance.com/community-forum

PASTURES NEW

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“With so many great old properties for sale, why would I ever consider buying a new build in France?”



Living in an old stone farmhouse is the dream for many but in recent years more UK buyers have been snapping up new builds. Old houses are charming, but they can come with a range of problems that can eat into your savings, from damp to thorny boundary issues.

Buying a brand-new home can be as simple as purchasing an apartment in a development complete with pool and on-site amenities. If you're after a project, buy a plot of land and employ an architect and builder to realise your creative vision.

Notaire's fees are lower for properties of less than five years old and with a new house you'll enjoy a 10-year structural guarantee; thanks to energy regulations your fuel bills should be reasonable too.

You don't always have to sacrifice authenticity as many builders use local materials and traditional styles.

“The spaces we create have to respond to us, not the other way round,” says architect Nicholas Adams (www.adamsdesign.org), who is based in Deux-Sèvres but works all over France. “New builds provide the opportunity to do this. Character can come in other ways too, such as materials and reclaimed stone lintels/fireplaces or even sensitive landscaping around the building.”

Top tip: Make a note of local materials and styles in the region and talk to builders and developers to find out how you could incorporate those into a new build.

NEXT ISSUE: We address common legal, financial and medical concerns generated by a move to France