

A veritable den of antiquity

I AM LOOKING at a small metal contraption with three holes looped beneath its curved top. Although I can push my fingers through these holes, I don't have a clue what it's for.

My host, Antiques Roadshow expert Marc Allum, is beaming expectantly. There are no spikes but I suggest it's a 19th-century 'knuckleduster'. "Nope!" he replies. "How about a primitive knitting machine?" asks another.

A shake of the head meets audible sighs. Marc produces a small stone. A few strikes across the steel surface causes sparks to appear and suddenly it all becomes clear. It's an old steel fire-maker.

We're two days into our Antiques Absorption break hosted by Marc and his fellow Roadshow host Lars Tharp. There are seven of us, including Margaret and Maurice, who collect miniatures and antique glass; stamp dealers Martin and Pearl; and Desmond, a retired engineer with a passion for oriental rugs.

All of us are amateurs, which doesn't matter as Marc and Lars are inspirational and knowledgeable. Even better, we're staying in Marc's home, the late 17th-century Château Coyé, in the Chalosse region of south-west France, an hour's drive from Stuted with fascinating knick-knacks, you're as likely to find yourself sitting in a comfortable Chinese upholstered armchair that once belonged to Roger Moore as studying a 6,000-year-old flat carved fish that Egyptian women used as a make-up palette.

Marc, his wife Lisa and their nine-year-old daughter Tallulah moved here three years ago. "The château hadn't been lived in for 50 years and there was masses to do. Luckily we had plenty to fill the house with," Marc says.

Some understatement. In my bedroom, I find a bronze sphinx, tiny Chinese embroidered slippers, chemists' bottles, a glass statue of Napoleon, a chaise longue and an Empire-style "bateau" bed. With such delightful treasures, it's hard to know where to settle your gaze.

Our days unravel in a gentle rhythm of convivial meals, talks, excursions and gossipy snippets about the Antiques Roadshow. During our stay, we visit the Louis XIV château at Gaujacq, where period-garbed showroom dummies sporting turquoise eye shadow

FOCUS ON FRANCE

Enjoy a fascinating antiques break in Chalosse, where you'll stay in a grand château brimming with ancient treasures. **LOUISE RODDON** explores the absorbing world of timeless collectibles



PRICELESS: Hunt for bargain antiques at France's many markets

add a comically eccentric note. I particularly enjoy Saint-Sever, a pretty Roman town of grand sandstone buildings that was an important stop on the pilgrims' route to Santiago de Compostela.

It's also home to an amazing Gallo-Roman mosaics collection housed in a privately-owned

18th-century townhouse. Owner Christine Moitry reveals the origins of the mosaics before we enjoy aperitifs in her garden where Lars explains the complicated world of antique china. A natural comic, he describes luxuriantly patterned Chelsea pottery as the equivalent of "ceramic sex".

SO WHAT do I come away with? Well, an expanded stomach, thanks to Lisa's delicious meals; the revelation that antique glass is affordable – a pair of 19th-century decanters, for example, can cost less than a modern version; how to detect fakes; tips on reaping bargains by buying old jewellery and watches at auction and above all, how to trust your gut and eyes and not collect purely for monetary gain.

As Marc summarises, buying new things is boring. Collecting, after all, takes recycling to astonishing new heights.

EXPERT: Stay with Antiques Roadshow host Marc Allum and learn from the best

● **GETTING THERE:** French Connections (01580 819303/www.frenchconnections.co.uk) offers a five-day Antique Absorption break at Château Coyé from £825pp (two sharing), including accommodation, all meals and entrance fees. Rail Europe (0844 848 4070/www.raileurope.co.uk) offers return rail travel from St Pancras to Orthez from £102. French Government Tourist Office: 09068 244123/www.franceguide.com

Pictures: ALAMY (left); REX FEATURES (right)



INSPIRATIONAL: The Château Coyé is home to many hidden gems