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PART THREE: everyday living

The facts of life... in France

In the final part of our series, Eleanor O’Kane looks at readers’ concerns about living the dream and highlights what you really need to know to make the most of life in France

It’s easy to get caught up in the excitement of new beginnings but when you start to break down the details, the prospect of a new routine in a different country can be nerve-wracking. In this series, we’ve already looked at making plans for the move and have lifted the lid on the infamous French bureaucracy. Now we tackle your worries about a new way of living and get tips from those in the know.



YOUNG MINDS

1

Q

“My children will automatically grow up bilingual, won’t they?”

A

For families, one of the biggest attractions of a new life in France is the chance for the kids to become as comfortable in French as they are in their mother tongue when they enter the French education system. Often parents assume their children’s English will continue to develop because they are speaking it at home. However, a child’s English written skills can stagnate, according to Sue Aitken, founder of Blackhen Education, an educational company in Charente-Maritime (www.blackheneducation.com). “Children forget how to spell certain words, or get them confused with French words,” she says. “Their sentence construction suffers and they have little experience of creative writing because so little is done in French schools.”

The crunch often comes when expat students want to continue their education in the UK and find their written English is just not up to scratch. “Most UK universities require a student to have evidence of a good level of written English,” says Sue, who has more than 20 years’ experience of teaching in the UK education system. “This means they will need to have either an International Bac or the Edexcel IGCSE English Language or Cambridge IGCSE English Language.” The level of English taught in French schools often falls short in the preparation for these assessments. “Students need to acquire certain skills in order to study for IGCSE English, which are not taught in French schools,” she says. “In addition, expat schoolchildren are often bored in English lessons here in France, because the language is taught at such a basic level.”

If it’s important to keep your children’s written English on a par with their French, Sue recommends encouraging children to read books, comics and newspapers as well as writing letters, postcards and thank you letters in English back to relatives in the UK. English lessons are a more formal approach and, Sue says, have an added bonus. “Lessons not only help maintain your child’s English skills, but they can also maintain and encourage an awareness and understanding of their cultural background,” she says.

2



SETTLING IN

Q

"I'm determined to integrate - should I steer clear of any expats?"

A

Arriving on French soil with a steely determination to integrate is admirable but even the most gung-ho Francophiles have days when their adopted culture leaves them feeling baffled or, worse, like an outsider. It can take time to settle in, especially in rural France where families often live for generations in the same village and French inhabitants from other regions can be considered intruders.

Mixing with those who really understand your frustrations doesn't mean you're not serious about integration. Across France, some of the most dynamic and social associations are comprised of a mix of international members, creating a true *entente cordiale*, so don't rule out accompanying other expats along the journey to integration.

English in Toulouse is a social group that draws together people of all nationalities who want to speak English (www.englishintoulouse.com). Many members are British expats who have made the south-western city of Toulouse their home. However, they find the group helps assimilation rather than hinders it. Nicola Coley joined the group after moving to Toulouse in 2005. Despite being married to a Frenchman, she says making friends was a challenge in the early days and found the group invaluable. "Joining definitely helped me to settle in Toulouse," she says. "We have people from all over Europe. Some French members have lived abroad and have an international outlook, others are simply keen on improving their English. I have made lots of French friends, although I probably speak to them more in English than French." Nicola says those who are determined to improve their French often arrange one-to-one conversation exchanges away from the group activities, which include social get-togethers, wine tastings and days out. Now one of the group's event hosts, Nicola plans 'French Fridays' where members can gather in bars and cafés to speak both English and French.

3

SPEAK EASY

Q

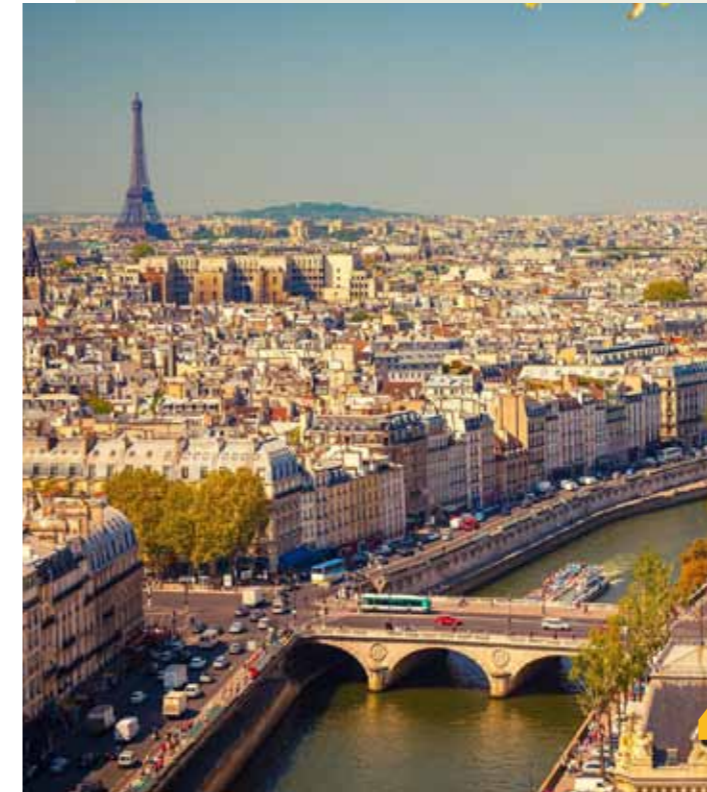
"Do I have to be fluent in the language to really get the most out of life in France?"

A

Thousands of Brits move to France with basic language skills and in some cases, no knowledge of French at all. Despite this, when it comes to the lingo it's a case of the more you put in, the more you'll get out. Sally Green, of French Bliss, which offers French language tuition, interpreting and translation services (www.frenchbliss.co.uk), recommends you at least get to grips with basic grammar to help you to structure sentences. "Studying a phrase book is a good start but it's not enough," she says. "Get private tuition or try evening classes. There are also some good study guides out there if you want to work alone."

Attuning your ear before moving will accelerate the learning process. Try watching French TV or online video clips, listening to French radio or podcasts or even chatting to stallholders the next time a French market visits your UK town. "A great, free and fun way is to find a language exchange partner in your locality and meet at a pub or café once a week," says Sally. "If you can incorporate learning into your social life, it will seem less of a chore. Look out for local conversation groups that don't take themselves too seriously too."

Those long-forgotten school French lessons could also pay dividends when you finally move. "You'll be surprised by how many words you recognise once you are over there," says Sally. "Words you didn't know you knew but which were buried deep in your mind are awaiting an awakening!"



BRIGHT LIGHTS

Q

"I love city life - will Paris be out of my price bracket though?"

A

Unless you've got very deep pockets, being a Paris property owner means sacrificing living space in return for becoming a resident of one of the most exciting and cultural world capitals. If you do decide to go for it, the good news is the average price of a Parisian property fell between April 2013 and April 2014, albeit by a modest 1.6%, according to the Notaires de France organisation.

Susie Hollands, of Vingt Property (www.vingtparis.com), says Paris can be affordable, especially if you know where to buy. "You can get a one-bedroom or a small two-bedroom apartment for around €300,000-€400,000," she says. "The 11th arrondissement is lovely to live in. It's where all the new restaurants are opening and has great markets and nightlife. It's not too touristy either; it feels like real Paris." What's more, if you play your cards right, you should have a great investment on your hands. Alternatively, why not soak up the bright lights of a more modest metropolis? Vibrant cities such as Bordeaux, Toulouse, Nantes and Lyon offer the charms of city life but are more laid-back and compact. Property prices are cheaper too, leaving you spare change for enjoying weekend visits to the capital.

4

AWAY FROM IT ALL

Q

"My wife and I really want to get away from it all, but should we buy in a rural location?"

A

It can be very tempting to cash in your semi-detached chips and become lord of the manor in France, surrounded by hectares of your own land. You'll never have to drive round the block for a parking space or endure your neighbour's heavy metal music. However, splendid isolation is not for everyone and being miles outside an established community can make the settling-in process tricky.

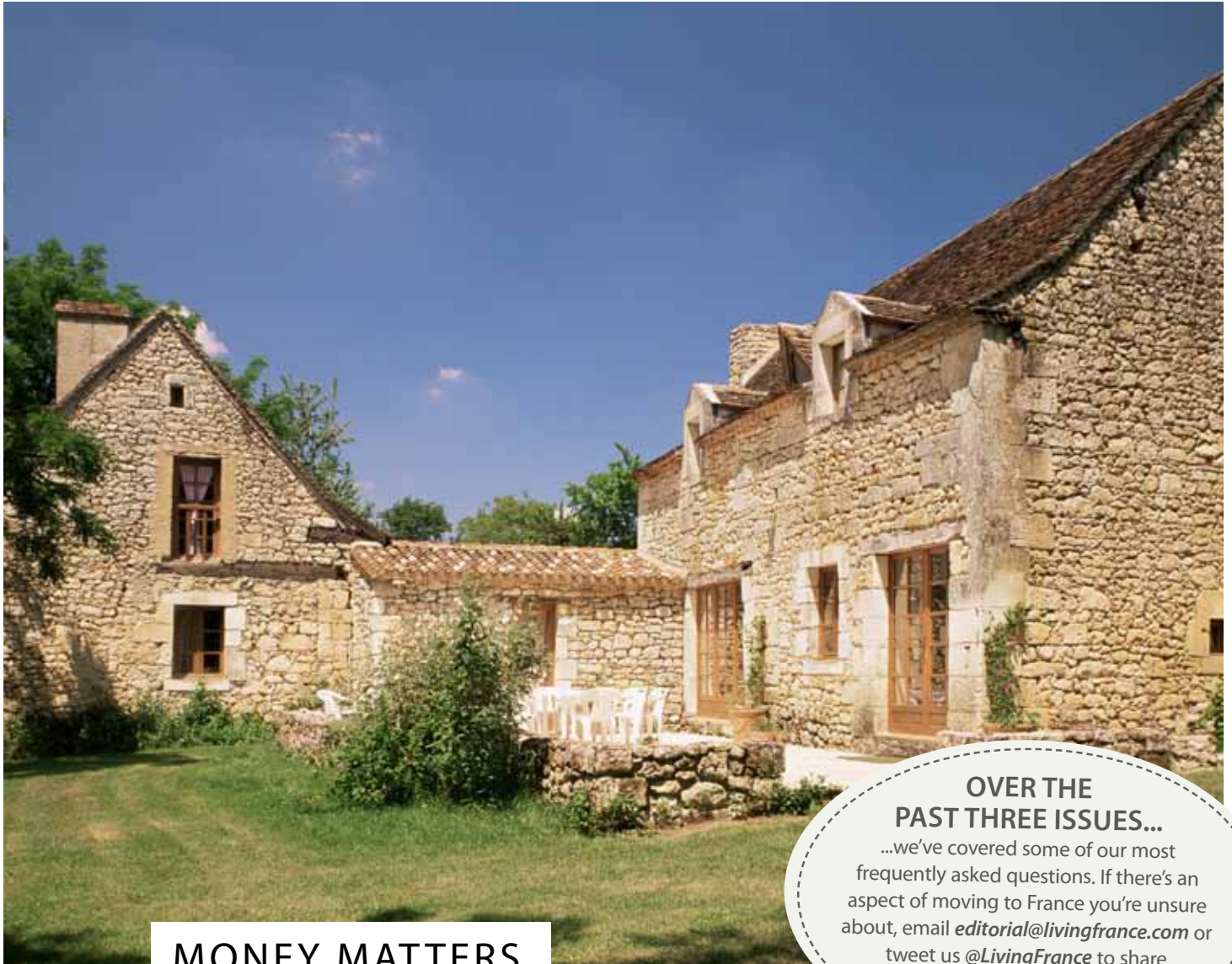
Chris Slade, of A House in Brittany, sells houses in a region where the population per square kilometre is 111 compared to the UK's 400 (www.ahouseinbrittany.com). He finds that it's retirees seeking peace, quiet and room to move who are most drawn to rural French properties.

Most of his clients are looking for a property at the edge of village or within walking distance of amenities. "A property on the edge of a village tends to allow for more land than one within a village," he says. "This makes sense as the buyer will easily be able to access local amenities such as the *boulangerie*, pharmacy, doctor's surgery and local shops." Situating yourself in a village can make integration easier than living miles from your French neighbours; you'll be out and about every day among your new community and might even become a local celebrity if you're the only Brit in the village!

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MONEY MATTERS

OVER THE PAST THREE ISSUES...
 ...we've covered some of our most frequently asked questions. If there's an aspect of moving to France you're unsure about, email editorial@livingfrance.com or tweet us [@LivingFrance](https://twitter.com/LivingFrance) to share your thoughts and questions

Q

“We’ve bought a property with B&B or gîte potential. Does that mean we’re going to be quids in?”

A

The purchase of a large property with extra rooms or an old barn ripe for conversion often leads UK buyers to embark on a new career in the hospitality trade. Running a B&B or gîte can be a rewarding – not to mention exhausting – way to make a living in France, but counting on it to fund your lifestyle from day one is a risky strategy.

As with every other aspect of moving to France, you need to do your homework before making any major decisions. Enquire at the local tourist office to find out whether there's a shortage of accommodation in the area and, if so, what standard and style is most likely to fill the gap. Think about your potential customers, and remember that with gîtes, it is generally accepted that for the UK market certain features, such as a dishwasher, television, and Wi-Fi should be considered as standard.

6

If there is a demand for holiday accommodation, you may be welcomed with open arms and even given support from the local *chambre de commerce*. If the market is already saturated, think laterally about how else you could use the extra space. Do you have a passion or hobby that could lead to you running activity holidays for paying guests? Some UK property owners report that letting a gîte for longer-term lets is preferable to struggling to attract holidaymakers all year round.

COMPLETE FRANCE FORUM

You can get in touch with other expats for help and advice on moving to France on the Complete France forum: www.completefrance.com/community-forum