

# How not to buy a house

WHEN YOU'RE DREAMING OF BUYING A PROPERTY IN FRANCE, IT'S VERY EASY TO GET CARRIED AWAY – HELEN AURELIUS-HADDOCK WARNS OF THE PITFALLS

**W**e bought our first home in France nine years ago. Seems like a lifetime... so much cement dust has blown over our lives since then.

I used to help find property for some of my husband's business associates, mainly as the go-between across the Anglo-Franco language barrier, and although it was an interesting experience, it's certainly not one I would want to continue indefinitely.

There were times when I felt my patience was exhausted, and I was left wondering why I bothered doing it, especially on hot, sunny days. While there were some who had thought the whole thing through, there were others who clearly had not. I thought they had lost sight of all practical considerations and in some severe cases, they seemed to have let go of reality altogether.

I never felt that, as a go-between, it was my role to offer my opinion – the choice was ultimately theirs. It did, however, lead me to the theory that there existed somewhere, an archetypical house that all British people wanted.

By and large, the ideal house in France for the majority of British buyers seemed to have many common 'must haves'. This is the list I have drawn up:

- A big place – the bigger and draughtier the better. A dodgy roof is good as well, as that allows room for tenacious negotiation; and of course lots of water leaks into bedrooms, to give the place that *Year in Provence* vibe.
- Outbuildings to convert for various projects – animal sanctuaries, retreats, meditation centres, gîtes, games rooms, guest quarters, work areas, and occasionally dance or art studios (oh yes!).

- Land – lots of it – generally to gaze at. No other particular use is required other than for it to cause a persistent headache due to the constant pressure of having to keep on top of the grass cutting
- A place on its own with no neighbours – a bit like Napoleon had on Elba or St-Helena. Nothing as far as the eye can see with no facilities and limited access is high up there on the wants list. Happy days if it is in a natural conservation area or within sight of one of the many *monuments de la France*. This helps manacle every attempt at renovation, but makes for great dinner party conversation
- Old, old, old; country, country, country – you get my drift here
- Never, ever located on a road. Perish the thought.

## IN AT THE DEEP END

The first property we bought here saw us trekking a few kilometres down the lane away from the house – "It's not far," claimed the owner – to view a sprawling plot with extremely bad drainage, no access for vehicles of any kind and thistles that were, let's say, well-established. Sort of sunflower-sized.

We were horrified to see that the property itself stood on an overly large piece of land with a small, overgrown wood. In short there was a heck of a lot of work there, which clearly wasn't being done by the present incumbents.

At the time, I had the particular problem of not



Sitting pretty: Do your research before looking for your dream home

having my husband here during the week, a situation that is actually still ongoing. It made me quickly realise that I was going to have to organise the renovation of a home and look after what amounted to a smallholding-sized piece of property mostly single-handed. That notion came at a price. We would have to pay to get it maintained.

It took me little time to reassess our needs.

We needed a place with all the elements of French country charm but without the hassle, and for that reason, we chose a *maison bourgeoise* located in the heart of the same village.

We have land, about five acres, which runs alongside our mature walled gardens. It is flat and manageable, and is maintained by our farming neighbour, who uses it for hay production.

We are on a small road, with virtually no traffic, but we are discreetly tucked away from this thanks to our small front garden and huge gates.

Our gardens are to the side

and back of the house and both are well-hidden, flat, easily tended and laid mainly to lawn.

We have some handsome outbuildings in the form of a small stable block at the end of the garden and an impressive coach house that straddles the front boundary along with the main house. The buildings are all sound and dry, with good roofing. Doubtless we will concoct a project for one or two of them. I am seriously thinking of a soundproofed padded cell/flat for my teenage daughter and her noisy friends.

The house needs re-decorating and a wiring upgrade but is centrally heated – a home-from-home comfort that should never be underestimated.

I know it's easy to get on your high horse about these things. Many people do have a second move in France once they have fallen into some of the traps I have outlined here. We did.

So do yourself a favour when property hunting. Do your research, ask friends who have already bought in France, keep a sense of proportion on the whole thing, choose wisely, and enjoy. ■

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