



Call of the Wild West

Cheshire-born author Karen Webb turned a new leaf when she traded Paris for the perched village of Lectoure in deepest rural Gers

Why did you choose Lectoure?

I had been working as an English teacher in Paris for 16 years and wanted to escape the city. My teenage daughter was growing up too quickly and I wanted a garden for my little boy, then a toddler. At the same time, my father was selling his property in Brittany, so the plan was to move to a family house in a warmer part of France.

We looked at Biarritz, then Montpellier, but the prices were too high. One day, trawling the internet, I stumbled upon the Gers in Gascony. None of my Parisian colleagues could place it on a map, let alone understand why we wanted to move to such a remote place. We came down one weekend to explore and bought a house.

I also wanted to concentrate on my writing and sit an MA in Creative Writing - bath of which I was able to do. Funnily enough, once in rural France I wrote a book about all the comic, and sometimes tragic, mishaps of my early years in Paris. The first two books in the trilogy are about city life; the third will be about rural Gascony.

What aspects of village life do you enjoy most?

I discovered it is possible to find absolute tranquillity in a village. Our nearest neighbour is a convent, and the loudest noise comes from the church bells! Our house is 17th century with a 12th-century watchtower. I love my walled garden, with shrubs, roses, and hydrangeas. Between my house and the garden there is a private courtyard. I love the contrast between the silence within and the buzz of the Friday market, and knowing that everything I need is just down the street. We finish dinner, pop to the cinema next door, and are back home in two minutes. I love that.

All the joys of long, warm springs and hot summers mean that much of our lives are spent outside, apart from January and February. And I get to indulge in my passion for writing and run literary retreats.

Did you struggle to find work initially?

In Paris I ran a language school but in Gascony 16 years ago it was a little like the



Once the main residence of the Counts of Armagnac, every inch of Lectoure speaks to its rich heritage

Wild West as far as finding a job.

Like many people, my career in France took a very different turn. I am now a full-time author and also the owner of the Bliss Immobilier real estate agency.

In Paris, I often wrote at night and had a day job. Here it is easier to live a simple life and carve out 'atone time' for writing and spend more time on things that matter to me. Meeting new people and making friends is very easy; there are people from all over the world here.

Is there any local produce you've taken a particular shine to?

My favourite finds come from the host of fresh open-air markets where we get all our vegetables, herbs and spices. Lectoure has a very good market on Friday mornings. Foie gras is a regional delicacy - though I struggle with the ethics of it.

What about the local architecture and history?

I love the cathedra! in Lectoure, perched up high on the hilltop that can be seen for miles around. It's a wonderful, cool place to sit and meditate on a scorching day. The town's

position is magical, soaring high above the others around it. When there are mists, Lectoure appears to float like a mystical city on a carpet of clouds.

Was the language barrier an issue when you first moved to France?

When I arrived in Paris from the UK my O-level French was minimal. The story of my struggles with my atrocious French is the subject of my first book *A Stranger in Paris*. In my last year at university I dated a Frenchman. It's certainly one way to improve your language skills!

I now sometimes feel like a combat veteran who remembers a time pre-internet, pre-Eurostar, when it was impossible to find a newspaper in English, never mind Marmite or Cheddar cheese. Where I live, it is now possible to do anything in English: from getting a haircut, to having your septic tank installed... But where is the fun in that? It is only after a few bad haircuts that you perfect your vocabulary. ■

Karen Webb is the author of *A Stranger in Paris*, published by Impress Books and available on Amazon.