

Owner's Comment

We have always been attracted to the lifestyle in France and the space that properties here offered. We first began our property search in the Dordogne. However, whenever we viewed a property, we checked the land first, walking all over it, and found to our disappointment that it was not good grazing land. We also required a well or a spring that never dries up. We wanted to follow our dreams, I suppose. Life wasn't so bad in the UK as we had a small-holding there, with dogs and horses. So, the French property had to be right!

When beginning our property search we knew we wanted to have a substantial property with enough land for horses, a project to occupy my husband and somewhere with business potential for holiday lets. We were impressed with the potential of this property with its two houses. After several viewings in both summer and winter, during which time we negotiated for more land, we felt we had satisfied our main search criteria. We had a massive renovation project, enough land for grazing and haymaking, a ready-made gîte business and of course somewhere comfortable to live while the work progressed on our dream home.

Once we moved in, we realised how absolutely perfect this location is right on the borders of three of the most beautiful regions of France – the Gers, Tarn et Garonne and Lot et Garonne. The four historic “county towns” of Montauban, Agen, Auch and Toulouse and its airport are all within an hour's drive while the picturesque villages of St Clar and Auvillar are virtually on the doorstep.

We tend to shop in Agen for the bigger shops and locally we have small well-stocked supermarkets in Lavit de Lomagne and St Clar. With Valence d'Agen and Fleurance markets on a Tuesday, and Lectoure market on a Friday, there is never any shortage of good quality fresh fruit and vegetables, cheeses, meats and of course, local produce for which the region is so famous.

When we took possession of the property, the old farmhouse had not been lived in for over sixty years. It had been a working farm, that produced cereal crops and veal calves. We only came on the viewing to ‘humour’ the agent, as the photograph looked so awful. A grim black and white photograph taken at dusk, that made it look like something from a horror movie. We immediately realised there were in fact two buildings (there had only been one on the photo), so we were in effect getting two properties for the price of one: the old stone farm house and outbuildings and the more recently built, contemporary house, consisting of two completely separate units.

The agent opened the door to the stone house, to let in the light. The August sunlight flooded into the vast hallway, throwing light onto the mess within: old bed frames and dusty relics of the past and we were hooked. There was something about the energy of the house that pulled us in. Much later we met an old local farmer, who told us that during the Second World War, clandestine balls were held in the hallway, away from the Germans' prying eyes, and that he remembered dancing there. The old man said that it had always been a ‘happy’ place and we felt that too.

From the outset, we were fascinated by the old house and its history. We met the old village mayor before he died, who told us that those balls and times spent at the house, were some of the happiest of his life too.

The owners back in the 1960s were two brothers whose family had farmed in Algeria for several generations but who had to flee the country during the War of Independence, when the French were thrown out. They and their families were forced to leave in such haste that they arrived back on French soil with just a suitcase and what other belongings they could carry. As farmers, they bought this property in Gascony for the fertile land and it was they who constructed the more recent building to accommodate the two families. One of the sons, grown up now, returned to see us one day and talked nostalgically about the happy times he and his cousins had had growing up here. He showed us where there used to be a copse of oak trees, and a duck pond back in their day. Although he has lived near Geneva for many years he had travelled all the way back to the farm to show his own children his childhood home.

As we restored the two houses ourselves, we also found that the property worked as a magnet, drawing people to us from all over the world to spend the summer in our gîte, during the time in which we ran our business.

Family and friends also gravitate to us each summer. The grandchildren love the sense of freedom and the space to play and roam in perfect safety. And of course, the swimming pool with its easy-access Roman end is a huge attraction for them too.

The land size was ideal for us, because of the horses. A rural idyll far from other neighbours and with beautiful views.

The view of the horses grazing from the window of the old farm house is peaceful, with the rise of the land beyond, reaching to the woods, unspoilt over the generations.

There is plenty of practical space in the barns and workshop for the many projects we have undertaken.

When we have guests it is nice that they can have their own private living space, separate from the main house.

We developed the pool area for the children at a safe distance from the house.

The renovation of the houses has been an ongoing project, a real "labour of love". We hope that we can hand the property over to someone who will reap the benefits from the land and the two properties in the way we have done. "