

property



Speak for yourself

If you're planning a move to France, being able to speak the language can make a world of difference. **Natalie Walsh** attended Le Poiron Bonjour's residential course and discovered French lessons with a difference



For new students of French there's nothing more intimidating than uttering your first words in an over-populated night school classroom. Home study courses such as Linguaphone can save your blushes and allow you to fit in learning around work and family responsibilities but for confidence building and inspiration, nothing beats a trip to the motherland.

Why sweat over textbooks when you could be chatting about the price of fish in a real French market or learning to cook the perfect bouillabaisse? And for those looking to buy a home in France, isn't learning practical vocabulary to help you haggle with builders and plumbers of the essence? To prove the point, I headed off to Vendée in Pays de la Loire to check out Le Poiron Bonjour, an inspiring new residential school that aims to put the fun back into learning.

While French language courses catering for the British market are legion, Le Poiron Bonjour's six-day residential course comprising workshops on how to buy a property, all you need to know about the French



© AFP/© M. HILL



insurance system, banking, mortgages and finding the right school for your kids – in addition to language training at all levels – is thus far unique.

Set up by Françoise Duffell and her British husband Mark, the courses are held at the charming Château Poiron located on the outskirts of Pissotte; their aim is to give Brits looking to buy in the area everything they need to know to get their place in the sun and the language skills to integrate into the community.

I signed up for the full 'how to live in France' course, comprising lectures from visiting local bankers, insurance brokers and estate agents, hand-picked by Françoise, and joined fellow Brits, Barbara and Mike Potter and Joan and Ray Renwick for daily language lessons.

PRACTICAL HELP

The Potters and Renwicks were graduates of the course. They'd already done two stints at Le Poiron: the first saw them mastering social security and schooling while the second had given them the inside track on banking from Thierry Bouilleau and sorted building and car insurance with the help of Alain Delbove. They subsequently found their dream home with estate agent Linda Phillips and were now fully fledged Vendée residents.

They'd come back for extra language tuition and both couples said that the course not only helped them fast-track their way through the system but gave them the extra confidence they needed to make the move.

'When you're in your sixties, moving abroad can be very daunting but this course gave us all the practical help we

needed in just one visit,' said Ray Renwick.

Both in their 40s, the Potters were equally complimentary and for Barbara, honing her language skills is now her major goal.

'I don't want to just socialise with other British people,' she said. 'We love our new house but I want to be able to speak French fluently and be part of the community.'

And for new students, combining a one-stop shop of a course with a holiday has, according to Françoise, proved to be a winning combination.

'Most people can't afford the time or the expense of making endless trips over here in order to find their new home.

What we offer is the opportunity to get to grips with all the practicalities involved in one stay and in a relaxing setting,' she said. 'We've had many guests who have come for a holiday and also worked with our estate agent and mortgage broker and

bought properties on the spot.'

I had a one-to-one workshop with Linda Phillips who has not only got a large selection of choice properties in Vendée and Deux-Sèvres departments on her books but also has a growing band of happy British customers delighted to have been able to fast-track their way through the system with the help of an English agent.

'I don't expect people to buy on their first trip but what I offer is a good recce of the area with lots of speculative viewings,' explained Linda. 'It's then very much about building a trusting relationship. I make sure I understand exactly what they're looking for and they trust my judgement so when I tell them about a great new property they will jump on a plane at short notice. Obviously, the fact that I'm English makes them feel more secure.'

While property prices in the region

Opposite page clockwise from top: Château Poiron is a beautiful place to study; the pool looks out over lovely Vendée countryside; the guest rooms are welcoming and well laid out This page: Students sit down over a good cup of coffee and compare notes

Residential courses – the benefits

You can, of course, learn French with Linguaphone or sign up for a night class in the UK but a residential school will not only provide you with personal tuition but learning *in situ* brings the language to life. You will benefit from:

- One-to-one tuition and small groups (maximum six students per class)
- Listening and learning activities outside the classroom. Practise your French while shopping in the local market or taking a cookery course
- Confidence building. Practical

workshops equip you with skills for real-life situations from negotiating with a local plumber to chatting with the locals

- Meeting fellow students in a relaxed setting and enjoying social activities
- Combining learning with a holiday. During your freetime, explore the local area.

Not sure if you're a beginner or intermediate? Le Poiron Bonjour's website now features a short language test that can be completed on line and your level assessed prior to booking

What the other students said...

Barbara Potter: 'I find small groups less intimidating and this course really boosted my confidence. I am now able to go out shopping and interact with people more easily and I feel a great sense of achievement.'

Joan Renwick: 'We've retired here and although I found it very hard at first and missed my family, my French is improving and I'm now really enjoying our new life in France. We have made

friends with our neighbours and I'm getting more confident chatting in French.'

Ray Renwick: 'We're in our sixties so it's years since we've set foot in a classroom! But this course was so helpful. It was like a comforting helping hand. We were able to get local know-how and all the practical information we needed to buy our property and get settled.'



A light-hearted cookery class held by a non-English speaking teacher forces the guests to speak French ... or go hungry



Shopping for ingredients in the local market and then cooking dinner in the château's vast kitchen is a great way to learn

have gone up by a good 30 per cent over the past five years, a budget of C100,000 (£67,728) will still get you 2-3 large double rooms albeit not in the most sought-after areas. A flip through Linda's large book of properties for sale revealed that upping your money to the C150,000-C200,000 bracket (£101,592-£135,456) will net you a home that's suitably large and very stunning.

During my workshops on banking and insurance, I gleaned everything I needed to know about mortgages – 30 per cent of net income is the rule of

thumb and anything above 40 per cent is frowned upon – to land rights and insuring my car. The language tuition under the ever-encouraging tutorage of Françoise was equally practical and informative.

COOKERY LESSONS

In our little classroom in the château, we learnt how to fill in a French cheque book and essential vocabulary including the French for dry rot, leaks and 'could you please repeat that, I don't understand' with frequent and welcome breaks for coffee and cake.

Having spent 17 years teaching French in England before moving back to her native Vendée, Françoise knows that the practical approach is the way to inspire shy Brits abroad.

'A lack of confidence is the biggest problem for British people,' says Françoise, 'which is why the practical exercises and fun tasks outside the classroom work so well.'

The fun tasks include a trip to nearby Niort market during which Françoise gives each member of the group a list of ingredients and quantities, with some obscure items thrown in for good measure and an hour to run around the stalls to ask for and buy them. And it was fun. Cooking dinner from the spoils of our treasure hunt back in the château's vast kitchen – a classic dish of the region, *mofettes jambon* (gammon and beans) – was even better.

Additional cookery lessons taken by local ladies who don't speak a word of English are also a feature of the week. Françoise makes herself absent, forcing the group to converse with the cook

entirely in French or, failing that, sign language.

A visit to the home of Jacqueline and Maurice Thibeaud, both in their mid-70s, for a game of cards or *boules* is also a delightful part of the experience.

'The Thibeauds speak the patois of the region and it gives our guests the opportunity to meet real country people and see how they live,' explained Françoise.

Yes, the course is intensive, but navigating your way through the vagaries of the French property market in a classroom in a château nestled in 25 acres of orchard and paddock adjoining the Forêt de Mervent can hardly be described as gruelling.

The school days are punctuated by wonderful meals and rounded off with a glass of the local apéritif *troussepinette*, or several, in the drawing room. And when school's out, the great French outdoors beckons. An ideal location for walking, hiking, horse riding and cycling, the Forêt de Mervent has 200km of marked pathways and a lake where canoes and kayaks are available for hire. Meanwhile, back at the château you can laze by the outdoor swimming pool or soak in the hot tub. Funny how grappling with French verbs doesn't seem so tough after all. ■

FACT FILE

Le Poiron offers three types of courses at all levels:

- French language tuition, activities and lectures (eg banking, insurance, estate agent)
- French language tuition and activities
- Tailor-made courses.

The six-day residential course costs £900 for two and £590 per person including full board, ensuite accommodation and all lessons and activities. French language courses are for beginners and intermediates. More advanced courses are available upon request.

For more information:

Visit: www.france4life.co.uk

Tel: 00 33 (0)2 51 69 20 27

Email: gite.du.poiron@wanadoo.fr ■