





Relocation EDUCATION



Tired of the rat race and with vague notions of moving to France for a quieter life, **Rebecca Chappell** leaves the office for a week and joins a relocation and language course in the Vendée to help her sort the facts from the fiction

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK DUFFELL & REBECCA CHAPPELL

Stuck in commuter hell on a typically grey Monday morning, I tune out the blaring horns with daydreams of swapping smog for sunshine, supermarket savings for seasonal selections and "sod off" for "salut". Like so many other disillusioned Brits, I'm feeling the pull of France, renowned for its relaxed pace of life, not to mention better weather, tastier food and cheaper housing. So when I finally get to work and hear about a course in the Vendée designed to equip relocators for life in France, I jump at the chance to go along.

Combining language tuition with practical advice, Le Poiron Bonjour provides dreamers like me with the chance to brush up on our French and find out what's really involved in moving abroad before making the leap across the Channel. Set in 25 acres of peaceful countryside near Fontenay-le-Comte, the ivy-covered Château de Poiron is the idyllic setting for the five-day course and an enticing glimpse into *la vie française*.

LEARNING CURVE

I'm treated to a warm welcome from hosts Mark and Françoise Duffell, a tireless husband and wife team who packed in the UK in 2000. Native French speaker and qualified teacher, Françoise

handles the language classes, runs the on-site gîte and B&Bs, and looks after an assortment of animals, whilst British-born Mark tackles the various ongoing renovation projects around the grounds. So much for coming to France to take it easy – this is back-breaking stuff, but the couple clearly love it.

Over a glass of local wine from the vineyards of the unfortunately-named Pissotte, I'm introduced to my fellow classmates. There's Jane, a 62-year-old social worker from Yorkshire looking for a second home in La Rochelle, Lesley, 42, who has already sold up in the UK, and couple Mike Taylor, 48, and Shelley Van Wyk, 40, from London, still in the early stages of planning their move to France.

The following day, we make our way to the classroom with some trepidation – after all, for most of us, our school days are in the dim and distant past. Françoise instantly puts us at ease, "I'll let you into the secret for having a conversation with any French person," she says. "Just listen, nod and say, 'Ah bon ...ahhh bon? ...ah BON?!' from time to time," she advises with a twinkle in her eye, "and you'll get along fine!"

Down to the serious business of phonetics and basic grammar, Françoise gets us listening to recordings and speaking out loud to improve our pronunciation and confidence. With such small

Facing page: Moving to France is child's play as long as you plan ahead and take proper advice; **Top from left:** In the classroom with Françoise; The Château de Poiron has its own pool and jacuzzi; Tucking into a home-made *tarte tatin*

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groups, she gets to know us all very quickly and adjusts the speed of teaching to suit our low-intermediate level.

After lunch it's a trip to the nearby abbey in St-Vincent-de-Nieul accompanied by Françoise's trusty sidekick Dominique. Our task while we're there is to chat to Dominique about her family, but there's a small catch – she doesn't speak any English! Dominique smiles good-naturedly as we proceed to murder her lovely language in our efforts to find out about her life.

CLASSROOM CAPERS

Back in the classroom on day three and we're trying to translate French numbers from a recording, which for some reason, we find difficult and hilarious in equal parts. Françoise approves. "You must laugh at yourself to build up confidence," she says. A true bon viveur herself, she breaks up our lesson by getting us to help her make a batch of *troussepinette*, a Vendéen aperitif made with red wine, walnut flavouring, sugar and plenty of neat alcohol. School was never this much fun!

Next up, we meet with a banking representative to get our burning questions on bank accounts answered. It turns out that opening an account, overdrafts and all that malarkey is pretty straightforward, not really any different to the UK – and certainly not enough to put off the determined Francophile.

"There's one kind of people who will never starve and that's the Vendéens," says Françoise as we all sit down to tuck into roasted pork, a fish stew and, my personal favourite, *tarte tatin*. The *troussepinette* is a hit, too, but I suspect it's the type of firewater

that loses much of its appeal when drunk back home. "All the more reason to stay," says a little voice in my head.

Thursday is market day and we're sent off into the colourful market of Niort with a list of things to buy and a wodge of Euros. Looking down at the list, we're baffled – what on earth is an *andouillette* or a *crottin*? Luckily, the friendly vendors are familiar with Françoise and her hapless pupils, and before long we've sampled much of the local produce and completed all of the shopping with a few cents left over for an apple for the teacher.

After a leisurely lunch, it's back to the classroom to get to grips with our grammar. Maybe not everyone's *tasse de thé*, but the ever-patient Françoise keeps it simple and uses handouts to make sense of the illogical world of French tenses. As I struggle to remember the *passé composé*, I'm reminded of just how tricky it is to master a second language; it's not something that can be effortlessly absorbed simply by being in the country – you really do have to work at it.

In fact, the whole process of settling in another country can be fraught with difficulties – something that Françoise is keen to point out. Having seen many Brits (including some of her own pupils) make the move, only to end up heading back with their tail between their legs a few years later, she wants to make sure we know what we're getting ourselves into. "I do feel very protective," she says. "Some people are so enchanted by the prospect of living here, they don't think it through properly – they take on ambitious projects and run out of money, or find it hard to fit into the community."

Top: The ivy-covered château dates back to the 19th-century; Facing page, clockwise from top left: Helping out in the kitchen is a fun way to learn the language; Grammar time with Françoise; Rebecca makes sure she's not short-changed in Niort market

LANGUAGE COURSE IN FRANCE

One couple who have successfully made the transition are Tina and Stuart Miller, who left Gatwick in 2005 to renovate a tumbledown property in the Vendée. "It's been hard work," says Tina, when she stops by for a chat. "We took on a lot and have spent a freezing winter with only one oil fire for heating." Determined to integrate properly, the couple signed up for French lessons – with Françoise of course – from the start and have made a wide set of French and British friends. "The quality of life here is wonderful, especially the friendliness of neighbours, but you'll always be an outsider," warns Helena Boyle, another of Françoise's ex-pat friends. Speaking to people who have gone through it all is an eye-opener and while not entirely discouraging, forces me to take off my rose-tinted spectacles and think things through a bit more rationally.

In between our last few hours of lessons, we get a visit from Linda Philips, a local estate agent, who talks us through the buying process. A worldly-wise ex-pat herself, Linda advises us on the potential pitfalls of moving before enticing us with a selection of dream homes from her books.

By the evening, wine in hand, the general mood is one of gung-ho enthusiasm – not only do we speak the language a little better, but we also have a much clearer idea of what's involved in relocating to France. It's agreed that it won't all be plain sailing, but that the pros of setting up in this beautiful country definitely outweigh the cons. Both Jane and Leslie are heading straight off to house hunt the following morning, whilst Mike and Shelley are returning to the UK to think things through. As for me, I'm also back to the daily grind, but the seed has been planted – and I'm sure I'll be joining the thousands of plucky Brits settling down across the Channel before too long. **fm**



Right: Hire a boat to explore the Poitevin Marshes, also known as Venise Verte (Green Venice)

LE POIRON BONJOUR ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

AIR Ryanair (0871 246 0000; www.ryanair.com), flybe (08717 000 535; www.flybe.com) and easyJet (09058 210 905; www.easyjet.com) all fly to La Rochelle, which is just 45 minutes drive away from Fontenay-le-Comte, while Air France (08701 424 343; www.airfrance.com), GB Airways (08708 509 850; www.gbairways.com), Aer Arann (www.aerarann.ie) and Ryanair fly to Nantes. Ryanair also flies to Poitiers. Both Nantes and Poitiers are only one hour's drive from the Château le Poiron.

CAR It's quite possible to drive to Fontenay-le-Comte from St-Malo or Caen ferry ports – it can be accessed from either the A10 or the A83 main roads.

TRAIN Take the Eurostar to Paris and connect with a TGV to the nearby town of Niort.



WHERE TO STAY

Le Poiron Bonjour (Château le Poiron, 85200 Pissotte, Fontenay-le-Comte) provides French language tuition at all levels. The four-day courses include full board accommodation plus all activities, tuition and lectures. Visit www.france4life.com for more information or contact Françoise Duffell in France on 00 33 2 51 69 20 27 or Lorna Ditchburn at the UK bookings and enquiries office

on 01494 529 152 or 07742 967 775. Lorna can also be emailed at lorna@france4life.co.uk.

WHAT TO DO

Aside from language learning... If you have time between lessons or decide to stay on at Le Poiron for another week on a B&B basis, there's plenty to do in the southern Vendée area. Surrounded by lush forests and canals, the Poitevin Marshes covering over 90,000 hectares are well worth exploring by boat, by bike or on foot. The seaside resort of La Tranche-sur-Mer can be reached in about an hour and boasts 13 kilometres of fine sandy beaches, perfect for surfing, sailing or soaking up the sun.

For culture vultures, there are the nearby picturesque villages of Nieul-sur-l'Autise with its beautiful abbey, Foussais-Payré and Vouant, famous for the legend of the Fairy Mélusine.

CONTACTS

Visit the official Vendée tourist website, www.vendee-tourisme.com for more information about what to see and where to stay in the Vendée department.

WHERE ELSE TO LEARN FRENCH IN FRANCE

- The family-run Coeur de France (www.coeurdefrance.com) in Sancerre offers a variety of packages, including group and one-to-one tuition and even a wine introductory course.
- Cactus Language (www.cactuslanguage.com) runs language holidays all over France, from the glamorous locations of Nice and Biarritz to cultural hotspots Paris and Lyon.
- Whether you choose a two-week break or a three-month stint, CESA (www.cesalanguages.com) provides intensive language learning in a classroom environment.

