

Chasing the dream in rural France

Adrian and Karine Meadows were working for BA when they fell in love with a château in a French village. So they left their jobs to turn the ruin into stylish accommodation

Peter Murtagh

This will be the entrance," says Adrian pointing towards the first floor French doors set into a rubble stone wall. "There'll be a small balcony there; stairs over to that side," he says pointing. "You really do get a lovely view of the countryside from up here."

And so you do. It rolls away before you – a landscape sculpted by millennia of French farmers. Nearest the building, there's a field of brown grain, sun-dried brittle now and ready for harvesting. Then there are some woods on the right and more over beyond to the left. There are more crops in fields dipping low before the horizon and running gently up again to yet more woods. And so this pastoral patchwork quilt interspersed with hedgerows repeats itself across the southern Lot in the southwest Aquitaine region.

If you stand here long enough, especially at dusk, you will see large barn owls, their wings at full span, swooping low across the crops and into the woods, their hideout while hunting. They share the night air with bats and armies of flying insects attracted to any light.

Adrian pads past in crumpled shorts and T-shirt, slips off his battered Crocs and steps gingerly over the newly-stained floorboards. Ladders, cables, saws, dust, plastic sheeting, bits of insulation – the detritus of builders – are strewn about the place.

"The stain?" he says repeating my question. "Eh, erm . . ."

"Walnut!" shouts a voice, unseen from behind a kitchen unit spanning one length of the wide open space. "It's walnut."

Karine, the woman behind the voice, surfaces, screwdriver in hand, and wipes her brow. She's engrossed in securing cupboard doors to each of the Ikea units that make up the kitchen. It will be ready, alright. It has to be – it's booked for use in a few days' time.

I am inside a little bubble that is the world of husband and wife, Adrian and Karine Meadows, their happy, bouncy four-year-old daughter Nina and their three Labrador dogs, who loll about, snoozing in the shade.

It's a scene straight out of Kevin McCloud's *Grand Designs*, a world of dilapidated buildings, a vision of what could be, if only. The world of two determined people who are making the "if only" a reality.

Château de St Paul offers gîte and chambres d'hôtes accommodation (ie self-catering and bed-and-breakfast accommodation) on the edge of the tiny village of Beaugard between the lovely bastide town of Monflanquin and the regional capital of Villeneuve-sur-Lot in Aquitaine.

The Romans built a road passing here and there is evidence of settlement from that era. From the early 12th century, the Château de St Paul was a priory of the community of St Paul le Jeune whose priests administered to the surrounding villages. After the French revolution, the priory was home to local nobility and more recently a Catholic sect.

For reasons not entirely clear, sometime after the turn of the new century, that community decamped to Lourdes. . . which is about the time that Adrian and Karine – then two British Airways cabin crew from Surrey and Provence respectively, but living in Switzerland and commuting to Heathrow – were on holiday in the area.

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"We saw it and fell in love with it," says Karine.

"I fell in fear. . ." quips Adrian. After extended negotiations, they finally managed to secure ownership in April 2007 for about €600,000. Since then, they have sunk about another €500,000 into the place.

The transformation is stunning. "We offloaded assets in London at a time when, luckily for us, people were paying silly prices, going around outbidding each other," says Adrian. His philosophy was to restore the building to its original state, in terms of structure and materials, and in an eco-friendly way.

"I wanted to be eco-conscious but I wasn't going to live like the Flintstones." So there is geo-thermal under floor heating throughout and the interiors of the external walls have been insulated with baled straw, but there is no shortage of modern conveniences.

The décor is a blend of old and new: exposed ancient beams, whitewashed walls and rustic French furniture is mixed with pieces from Ikea and some rather ornate chairs, mirrors and light fittings.

It sounds odd but it blends really well. Karine has taste and imagination, and she is not afraid to be individual and take a few risks. The soulless decor and fittings from the 1950s and 1970s have all been banished.

Roofs removed

In restoring the complex to its former glory, the big jobs were tackled first. Almost all the roofs were dismantled and rebuilt, including the twin dove cotes, *pigeonniers* in local architectural parlance. Interiors were gutted, which in some instances meant digging out whole floors to remove centuries of accumulated rubble. Crudely created openings, windows and doors, were torn out and replaced.

"You should have seen the courtyard, it was like Verdun," says Karine, who did much of the project managing when on maternity leave, while Adrian carried on working. (They both quit BA at the end of June.)

Gone is the rabbit warren of small rooms in the main long house, which had been created by partitioning what were originally fine, open spaces. Wooden windows and doors appropriate to the size and shape of the buildings have been installed. Bricked up or altered openings have been re-opened to their original. Suspended ceilings that should never have been put up have been torn down to reveal thick, fat sturdy oak beams. And most of the entire complex has been re-roofed.

Behind the main living area, a large lake was dug, which is now filled with lilies, fish and several families of rather vocal frogs. A swimming pool was also installed and the pretty church, a climbing rose garlanding its entrance door, made good for blessings.

Large, open spaces in former barns or store rooms of one sort or another are being transformed for use for banquets, conferences, seminars and specialist classes in cookery, painting and suchlike.

The aim is to create a source of income that is not wholly dependent on tourists using the gîtes and chambres d'hôtes, which when completed will comprise 10 double bedrooms in total and capacity for further "put-me-up" beds.

"If we can keep the high season for holidays and use the larger halls during the winter for other activities, we'll be making money," says Adrian.

He and Karine have put their hearts and souls (not to say most of their assets) into the project. With perhaps 80 per cent of the project finished, it looks simply wonderful.

"It's the hardest thing I've done in my life," says Karine.

Has it been worth it?
"I don't know," she replies. "I'll tell you in a couple of years."

Peter Murtagh and his wife Moira stayed at Château de St Paul for €105 per night for bed and breakfast. A week's gîte accommodation, including cleaning and bed linen for three or four double bedrooms sleeping between seven and 10 people, costs €1,500 in the high season; chateaupaul.fr



■ Top to bottom: Château de St Paul (top); Karine and Adrian Meadows (above left) and their four-year-old daughter Nina (above right); inside the château (right); the church (below), which has been made good for blessings; and the pool at the château (below right).



CoMeath €875,000

Homestead with flair and detail

Blackwater, Ratoath, Co Meath

Description Five-bedroom architect-designed detached house on 1.5 acres
Agent REA Coonan

ALANNA GALLAGHER

The five-bedroom detached house on 1.5 acres in Blackwater, a townland about one and a half miles outside Ratoath in Co Meath, has taken advantage of its 1.5 acre setting to create a home with many theatrical flourishes.

The cut limestone property was designed by architect Fergal McGill, built by the owner in 2005 and decorated by his wife to create a home with acres of living space that is inspired by historic country residences.

The front door (double doors with a gothic-style fanlight) sets the tone for the interior. A double-height entrance hall has a sweeping staircase that leads the eye up to a galleried landing. The handmade staircase, designed by Joseph McNally, make an opening statement.

The drawingroom to the left stretches the full depth of the house and has a set of French doors to the rear that open out

to a south-facing patio. A door takes you through to a panelled formal drawingroom where another set of French doors open out to a west-facing patio that gets the evening sun.

The handmade kitchen is a brilliant example of a contemporary take on the country classic. The warm room has sage green walls, a four-door Aga and salvaged red brick to add texture to the oven's surround.

The couple invested in hand made sash windows with shuttered-effect surrounds to emphasise the country house feel.

The dwelling measures 390sq m (4,200sq ft) and is asking €875,000 through agents REA Coonan.

Upstairs, there are five bedrooms, all with vaulted ceilings. The room that was designed as the master bedroom has a Juliet balcony and an ensuite shower room. A second sizeable room, with compelling views, has an ensuite bathroom with a roll-top bath that they found while out riding and had re-enamelled.

The house comes with a double floored garage that the present owners use as a games room and tack room but it could easily be converted into a stand-alone home office.

Access to the property is via a tree-lined avenue with limestone gate pillars and electronic gates.

