



## a house in the (other) country

Sharon and David Stratford have such a passion for France, they bought a house there this year. They've set up a website to share the love.

**What are your day jobs?** Sharon is a manager with WorkCover Queensland and David runs his own franchise business.

**Why France?** We both answer with 'je ne sais pas' (I don't know)! It's many things combined: architecture, culture, the countryside, the language, the romance... the list goes on. Right from our first trip 10 years ago, we knew there was something special about the place. More than half our photos from that time contain shots of France, despite us spending less than a quarter of our round-the-world trip there.

Do either of you speak French and, if

**so, how did you learn? If not, how do you cope?** David speaks French reasonably well. He learnt at school but since then has had lessons at Alliance Francaise and now, with a few friends, has a private tutor. Sharon has never learnt French but has picked up enough from our trips to get by.

**What prompted you to buy property there?** A few years ago we saw 16th Century houses, 10 minutes from the beach, for \$25,000. We could've bought one on our credit card! We were very tempted but didn't know the French foreign property ownership restrictions (now we know they're non-

existent) and were trying to sell a property in Brisbane at the time. A few years later, Sharon read a Mary Moody book in which (besides having affairs), she buys a property in the south of France with little difficulty. We checked on the internet and those houses we saw for \$25,000 were now \$75,000. It prompted us to buy before the prices rose any further.

**Tell me about your house.** Probably built in the early-to-mid 1800s, it's a three level townhouse in a beautiful "three flower" village (the flower system is used to rate the

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prettiness of villages in France). The bottom floor is the living area, on the middle floor is a large bedroom, and the top floor has an attic which converts into another large bedroom.

It's standard size for village houses – not huge but big enough for a family holiday for a few weeks or month a year. From our terrace we can look up our cobblestone street to a 12th century stone church and beyond to the ruins of a medieval castle.

We love the character of the house but mainly its location, around the corner from boulangeries, cafes and weekly markets in the town square. The part of town it's in looks over the countryside, but the lower village has an indoor swimming pool and cinema. It's an hour from the seaside.

The purchase price was a little more than similar houses in the village, but ours has central heating, is fully insulated, has two bathrooms and does not require any work other than a little prettying up.

We only purchased recently but we know the local pizza restaurant owner from previous trips. He'd never met anyone from Australia before, he so treats us like VIPs. We're yet to meet the local mayor but this will be an important visit. We need to make it as part of being accepted by the locals.

**What are the advantages of buying property there?** Besides the fact it fulfills many people's dreams, property in France is still

relatively cheap in smaller villages – particularly in certain regions – despite property prices rising. We expect prices to continue rising, especially with the Rugby World Cup in France next year.

French financial institutions will lend foreigners 100 percent of the purchase price at three-and-a-half percent, fixed for 15 years. This means you only need to rent your place for five weeks a year to repay the interest.

During the summer, houses in good villages easily rent for the whole season and long-term rental leases in France can run for many years, not six to 12 month periods like here. As such, rental returns are in the order of five to 10 percent and most properties can be run cash positive.

**What are the pitfalls?** The purchase process is low risk, as it's handled by government-employed notaries paid by the existing owner, but the contract period is long and involved. Three months is standard and there are at least three legal documents to sign along on the way.

Contracts are reasonably easy to get out of on both sides so it isn't until the final document is signed that you can be confident the property will be yours.

Language can also be a barrier throughout. Sometimes family issues arise as French inheritance laws don't allow property to be left to only one family member.

**Any advice for someone considering it?**



David and Sharon in the French Alps

Go for it – fulfill your dream. It's cheaper than you think to own your own piece of the most visited country in the world, and it could be a good investment.

**How did the French Desire website come about?** It's main purpose is to share our love of all things French with others. Since its launch on Bastille Day, we've been inundated with people who have a similar desire. Our information night (September 12) will be an opportunity to meet others who love France.

**Think you'll move to France permanently?**



We love France but we also love Brisbane and Australia. Our ideal is to spend a few months every year in our house (or, hopefully, our many houses in the future) in France.

[www.frenchdesire.com](http://www.frenchdesire.com)

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