

# *La Maison du Bonheur*

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## IN VINO VERITAS

Probably most of us, at some stage in our search for the French idyll, have relaxed over a glass or two of wine and indulged our fantasies, dreaming of deep blue skies, hot sunshine, beautiful countryside, perfect peace, and the good life - no stress, no worries. As for the house, which, of course, is just waiting on every agent's books: edge of a village so we can take a gentle stroll to the boulangerie in the morning, the bar at lunchtime, and even the restaurant in the evening. We need three bedrooms minimum, definitely two bathrooms. A bit of land would be nice, but not more than a hectare. The price? Mmm let's say £50,000. Must start to ring round those agents.....

Now to the real world. Coming round from our daydreams, the truth kicks in, and after a number of calls to agents, our rose-coloured spectacles change colour as we begin to see that our expectations are unrealistic. Either that, or the agents are not being very helpful. Let's find out.

Mr. Right has read lots of books so he knows all about buying in France. 'What! I can tell those agents a thing or two,' he cries, 'they're not going to fool me!' No, Mr. Right. They will not fool you because they have no wish to, but it would be a good idea to take advantage of their local knowledge as they live and work there. 'I do assure you, Mr. Right, you CAN see the Pyrenees from this house, depending on the weather - I live here and I have seen them!' Unfortunately, Mr. Right forgot to read the paragraph about the 'bon de visite' form which he refused to sign, so the agent was unable to show him anything.

Mrs. Reverie would love to visit some properties, 'just to see what they're like', and makes various appointments. Eventually, she finds the house she wants but, alas, all the effort is wasted because she now discloses that she has to sell her own property in the UK. Sadly, it is a fact of life in the current buoyant market that you really do need to have your finance in place, or a good chance of obtaining a mortgage, so you are ready to act the minute you find the right property. No owner is going to wait whilst you sell another house. By all means check out the area and do some research on prices, but do not be surprised if an agent is reluctant to show you round - this is not out of impoliteness, but simply out of consideration for homeowners who should not have their hopes falsely raised.

Miss Hoppit is really keen to pack in as many viewings as possible in her 3-day trip and makes appointments with eight agents. Unfortunately, she has not given them the full picture. She has a busy schedule and has not allowed enough travelling time. In reality, any agent worth their salt who has enough property to show you will gladly devote at least one day, if not two, to any serious buyer. Agent-hopping is not to be recommended - it is fraught with logistical problems. It is tiring and frustrating for all concerned. Try to find two or three, depending on the length of your stay, and let them help as much as possible. You will know which to choose, depending on their response to your e-mails and telephone calls, and you will very quickly establish a rapport with the right person.

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Ms. Meander has a long journey to the south of France. It looks so easy on the map. At 2pm, just before her 2.30pm appointment she telephones her agent to say she thinks she might be another hour. 'I have just passed somewhere spelt L-i-m-o-g-e-s,' she says, triumphantly. Ah, but the Gers is another 4 to 5 hours! Perhaps we had better forget today's appointment and concentrate on tomorrow.

Mrs. Justin Case has agreed a sale and wants a survey. A bit of a sticky one, this. There aren't any chartered surveyors as such. The French don't seem to worry too much and seem to have a more relaxed attitude towards this than most foreign buyers from whatever country. A reputable builder will often be prepared to offer an opinion. You could also try a local architect. However, it is not usually a good idea to ask someone who is not familiar with local architecture, building materials, or building techniques. What passes for normal here could raise eyebrows elsewhere.

Mr. Cityslick is a busy executive who has just agreed a sale and he wants to move FAST. He can't wait to own his French property. Oh dear! The pace of life down here is a bit slower. (Isn't that why he bought?) He fires off endless e-mails instructing his agent to do this and that, and he generally tries to run the show. Sorry, sir. Your agent will be beavering away on your behalf, liaising with the notaire. There will be termite inspections to deal with, perhaps a 'bornage', and a submission to SAFER which will take about 2 months, and you did say you wanted us to check out planning permission for the barn. This all takes time, and these official bodies will not be rushed. Your agent will work very hard for you and keep you informed, but will not take kindly to being treated as a subdivision of your multi-national company.

So, if you are still game for an adventure after all this – good for you! House-hunting in France can be a rewarding experience, full of fun, and full of pleasant surprises. You will meet lots of charming and interesting people along the way.

As for the village house where we began – is this a realistic expectation? Many villages in France face the same predicament as those in the UK – the village shop and Post Office have closed, though there are usually travelling tradesmen to compensate. Village houses do not necessarily have a garden, or there may be a detached one. The two bathrooms are optimistic, and so is the price, certainly as far as the Gers is concerned.

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