

La Maison du Bonheur

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ARE WE REALLY TRYING?

Gabrielle Cleasby reflects on the need for effort and understanding when living in a foreign country

A recent visit from a friend from London gave us a good excuse to play truant from the office for a few days to show him our beautiful corner of Gascony, the Gers. We also strayed over the border to Pau, now very popular with clients for cheap flights and easy access to the Gers. I am not about to promote the many assets of this town, attractive though it be, but I do want to reflect about a leaflet which I found quite thought provoking which we picked up at the local tourist office.

The leaflet sets out a 'mission statement' about attitudes towards, in particular, British visitors. In a nutshell, certain businesses in the town belong to what is, in effect, a 'be nice to the Brits' scheme, a 'welcome charter', and they agree to do the following:

- Be particularly welcoming to British visitors by respecting their customs
- Speak English whenever possible
- Accept payment for goods and services in £ sterling if necessary, using current exchange rates
- Translate into English as much documentation as possible (eg bilingual restaurant menus)
- Be able to give basic tourist information in English

At a time when some areas of France have witnessed anti-Brit slogans daubed all over the place and some British have reported a cool reception, this comes as a pleasant surprise and a welcome relief. Or does it? Why should the town go to such lengths to accommodate us? Granted, there is a strong British presence in the area with many permanent residents as well as holidaymakers, but do they need this kind of nursing and should they expect it? The answer to the first should be 'no' but could be 'possibly'. The answer to the second should be a resounding 'no'.

I recently read an article in a Sunday newspaper where Sir Trevor McDonald was quoted as asking why immigrants to the UK bothered to come at all if they were not prepared to integrate. This is a daring but valid question at a time when one can scarcely speak on the subject for fear of accusations of racial discrimination, so it was refreshing to hear this view from an immigrant from Trinidad. But think of that from the French point of view, when increasing numbers of British – and other nationalities for that matter – are settling permanently in France. If people are not prepared to adapt, to learn the language to whatever degree of proficiency, to integrate, to respect the customs of their adopted country, what is the point of being there?

It's one thing to take up temporary residence, perhaps because of work commitments. If all you see is the airport arrivals and departures at weekends with the office in between then there is less chance to mix with the locals and practise the language. Even so, a few keywords and a little effort would go some way towards convincing the locals that your intentions are honourable. It's altogether another thing to take up permanent residence. One of the most frequently asked questions is, 'do the local people resent the Brits buying and living in the area?' Our standard reply is that here in the Gers we and our clients have never experienced any such problem and if you make the effort to approach the French they will begin to accept you. It really does not matter if your French is bad and your accent indescribable – the point is you are making a big effort, and the French are usually so pleased and appreciative. This, in turn, can lead to many a harmonious and long-lasting friendship.

Most of our clients are charming, lovely people and it is always a pleasure to help them. However, we did have one proverbial client from hell some years ago who verbally snapped my head off when I asked how his French was. (This was so that we would know whether or not to intervene with a translation when he met French owners.) Bearing in mind that he was seeking a permanent home, he told me in no uncertain terms that of course he could not and would not speak French, would not try even a few words, and fully

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intended to speak English to the French! So much for *entente cordiale*! Fortunately, this rude, aggressive and blinkered attitude is rare, but it does show how resentment can arise.

So, to return to the leaflet, it is, I suppose, a commendable effort on the part of the town, but I personally think it is up to us as foreigners to overcome our fears and inhibitions and get stuck into the language and the new lifestyle, no matter how feeble our efforts at the start. I write as someone with a husband who is a graduate of French who is totally fluent and bi-lingual. You might think that is a bonus, but it was actually several years before I would utter any French in front of him, let alone in front of the French! He craftily put me in a situation where I had to fend for myself. I quickly learnt that it did not matter about the mistakes I was afraid of making – it's the effort that counts. It also helped that Martyn did not correct every mistake – he simply let me get on with communicating. There is no doubt that since we moved to France permanently my French has improved tremendously. I don't claim to be the world's best but my morale has certainly been boosted and I hope that those of you who have fears about the language or the way you will be received will be similarly encouraged by your effort and experience.

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