

HOSTS with the MOST

Would you like to leave a hectic lifestyle behind to create your own niche business in France? **Annaliza Davis** explains how Claire and Andrew Bernard have done exactly that

On the western tip of Brittany, just outside the historic city of Quimper, a long gravel drive leads through stunning grounds to reveal a picturesque property complete with turret. This is Kisticin, home to the Bernard family. On this sunny afternoon, they are taking time to talk about their life in France, but as soon as the tourist season is in full swing, they will be on-call for guests in four properties, thanks to their business renting out stylish holiday homes in Brittany.

"I wouldn't say this was our plan, exactly," admits

Claire, "but each step seemed to make sense and here we are, 11 years later."

The couple met in 1991 at King's College London, where Andrew studied mechanical engineering and Claire studied geography. After graduation, Andrew took a job trading packaging and later became an oil trader with Total, while Claire developed her career as a television producer. They settled in London, often spending weekends in Cornwall, where Claire had grown up.

"Then came a couple of life-changing events," remembers Claire. "In 1999, our eldest daughter was born and next, Total merged with Elf, transferring



Claire and Andrew Bernard with daughter Lily on the steps of their château home

Andrew's job to Geneva. I was on maternity leave, so it seemed like a good opportunity to try something new."

Claire and Andrew moved to Geneva in August 2000, when their daughter Jasmin was 18 months old. Claire didn't have a work permit, but spent her time renovating their Geneva *maison de maître* as well as a chalet in the Alps that they'd purchased around the same time. It was a completely different lifestyle and a new experience living in another country, but it was far from ideal.

"My job was unrelenting, high pressure, and very stressful," admits Andrew. "I was on the phone all weekends and holidays, and there wasn't really much pleasure in the work any more, so we knew something had to change. The money kept coming in but it had no real value when it was taking such a high toll."

When the couple's second daughter, Lily, arrived, it became vital for them to think carefully about their next move. The decision to leave London had come through Andrew's job, but the decision to leave Geneva required a lot of thought. However, in March 2004, Andrew handed in his notice at work and they put their house on the market.

WHERE TO LIVE?

"We thought, if we sold all three properties, we would have a big enough fund to start again, but we weren't sure where to go," Claire remembers. "Because we'd left the UK four years before, we'd already cut our ties and realised we could go anywhere in the world."

"We considered London, but because the girls had started learning French, we thought it'd be a shame for them to lose that. We briefly considered Vancouver, and also Biarritz, but felt there was too much traffic for us. Finally, my uncle suggested Brittany so we came to explore, staying in Morbihan then heading west to Finistère. We found Kistinic on a glorious day in May and both thought we should go for it, if only for a year."

Falling in love with Kistinic sealed their choice: their offer was accepted and the moment they got back to Geneva, someone bought their house. The London home sold soon after and a work colleague bought their chalet. Everything was in place for a move to France.

EARNING A LIVING

After they arrived in France in August 2005, Andrew initially tried continuing as an oil trader,

This page: A view of Kistinic's turret and serene pool
Facing page: The stylish interior of Kistinic including the hallway, bedroom and dining room



BE PREPARED

When the Bernards first arrived in France, The Gatehouse was being rented out for €7,000 a year. The moment they arrived, they received an invoice for €3,800: that was the minimum basic charge to start running a business in France. "Everyone says to seek professional advice," says Claire, "but bear in mind that French laws change and even an expert cannot predict the law in three years' time. Essentially, you need to be realistic: this is another country, laws about owning second properties here are not the same as in the UK"



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commuting to London and to Geneva, but he soon realised that he was happier out of this career than in it.

"I felt I'd done what I needed to do career-wise; I didn't need to prove myself," says Andrew, who spent more and more time on their own house, landscaping and chain-sawing, happy to be outside an office but unsure what to do next. Three factors made their decision.

Firstly, when they bought Kistinic Château, its gatehouse was already being rented out as a holiday home, so it felt natural to continue this and consider expanding it into a business.

Secondly, Claire recognised that she enjoyed 'rescuing' neglected properties. "Our previous homes had sold really easily, with people commenting on the décor and wanting to buy all the furniture and fittings, so I seemed to have a flair for that sort of thing," she says.

Thirdly, the Bernards had realised from their own experiences that there was a shortage of quality holiday homes in Brittany and the French approach to renting holiday homes remains very different from that in the UK. Guests often have to complete an inventory on arrival, perhaps pay separately for electricity and are usually expected to clean the property themselves at the end of their stay - or pay a cleaning charge.

"At the time, France was flooded with inexpensive but not very pleasant gîtes," explains Claire. "We felt there was a market for well-furnished, well-presented properties with no extra charges, so people could just come on holiday and relax."

SETTING UP THE BUSINESS

"We certainly didn't move to France thinking 'we'll run a holiday-rental business', but as there was no clear path, we followed the one that emerged. In 2005 I fell in love with a seaside house in Primelin needing total renovation, which took a lot of time and project

management. We also bought a new-build rental on the French island of Corsica but it was too hard to oversee housekeeping and gardening from so far away, which taught us a tough lesson. We sold it within a year."

The couple finished renovating the Primelin house, then bought two more houses in the next two years, spending autumn and winter on renovations and maintenance, then spring and summer greeting guests and managing changeovers, maintaining the grounds and cleaning the properties.

Under the business name of Frenchberry, the Bernards now rent out four holiday homes: The Gatehouse, Ty Traez and Ty Bili in Primelin, and a cottage called Lostmarc'h in the Crozon Peninsula. They also occasionally rent out their own home, Kistinic Château.

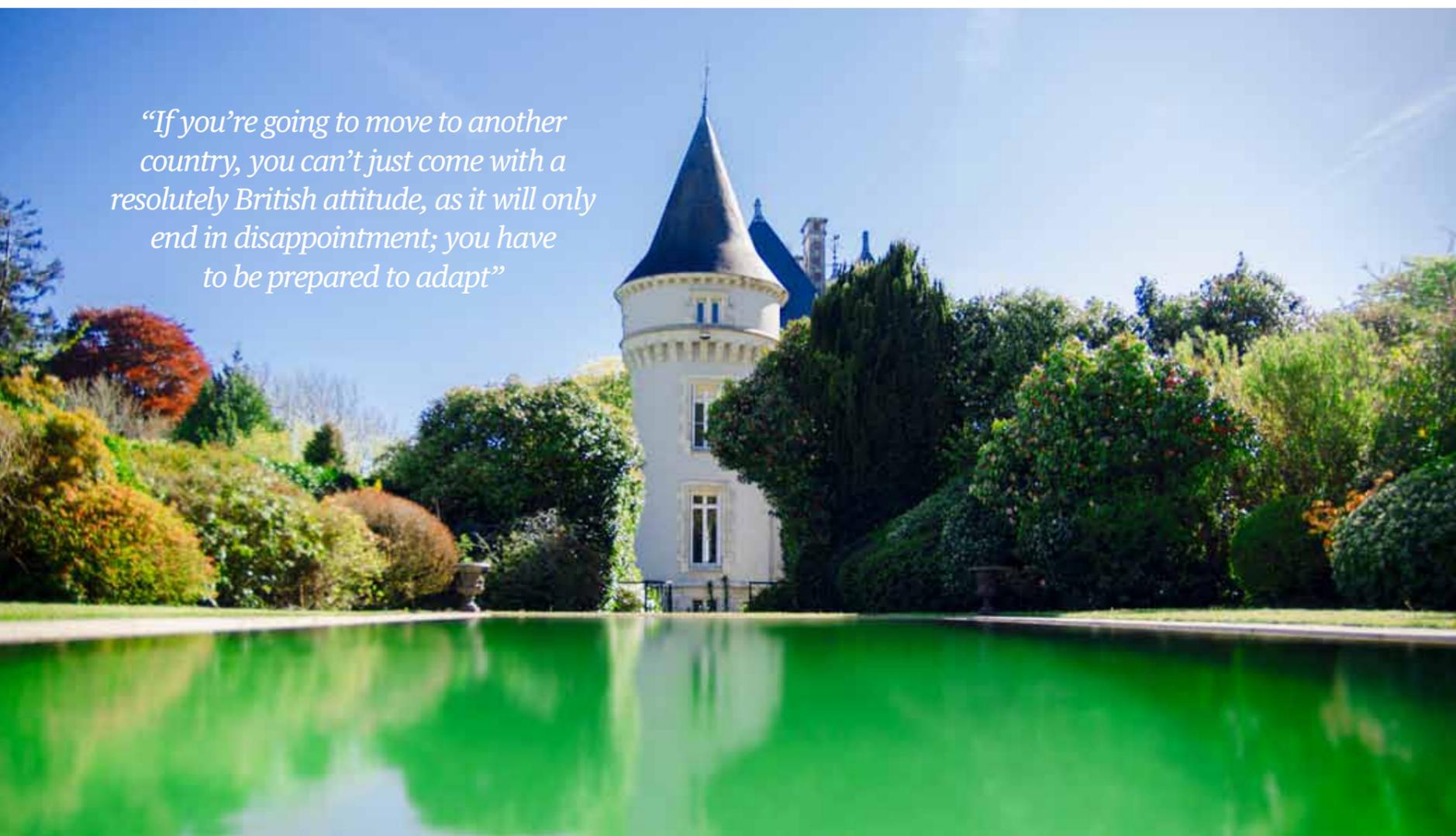
"What we offer isn't excessively luxurious, but it is different from the rest of the market," explains Claire. "We aim to offer guests an experience that's a step up, so when they come on holiday they feel pampered and comfortable."

Of course, running this number of properties requires staff, and that is far from simple. "Anyone will tell you it's hard to find housekeeping staff who'll clean and present a house to the same standard as you would yourself," admits Claire. "When you've got guests arriving the same day in four different properties, you have to be able to rely on your team and thankfully, we now have great staff, but it took ages to find them and we look after them."

"Andrew does all the landscaping work at Kistinic, that's 37 acres, and I'm always involved in the changeovers and cleaning. Plus, we're on-call for any guest queries that might come up at any time - and it really can be at any time!"

When they're not working or answering emails, Claire makes the most of her art room overlooking the gardens, while Andrew plays 

"If you're going to move to another country, you can't just come with a resolutely British attitude, as it will only end in disappointment; you have to be prepared to adapt"





Claire and Andrew relaxing at home

piano or explores the Breton countryside on his bike: a keen cyclist, he'll happily cycle 400km a month, given the chance!

SETTLING IN THE CHILDREN

As for the girls, they are at school in nearby Quimper, and are both bilingual.

"Looking back, the girls did well settling in, but as we spoke only English at home, it took longer than I anticipated for them to get used to the French environment. School is far more academic here, with long days and regular evaluations, but standards are high, there's more respect for teachers and I like that everyone sits down to a three-course lunch.

"There are often subsidised activities like cinema trips, skiing and sports, and it's great hearing them talk French, reciting poetry or chatting with friends. Only now that Jasmin is 17 and Lily is 13, do they really appreciate the advantage of being bilingual, although they both talk about trying life in the UK later."

WAS IT THE RIGHT MOVE?

"While there have been some tough moments, I love doing what we do; preparing the houses, improving them each year, and welcoming back guests," says Claire. "I've even thought about a hotel, but maybe not the day-to-day running

WORKING WITH YOUR SPOUSE

"Truthfully, it's not always easy as we're always in the same space, even if we're working on one of the houses. It is hard not to talk about work whenever you have time together, but it's unavoidable, especially as living abroad means you have less chance to let off steam with other members of your family. I'd recommend creating separate work areas, and also respect your own separate areas of expertise – that helps!"

of one. I feel we've learned something from the French attitude that it is possible to slow down; you don't have to run full speed all the time. And it's still a joy to eat breakfast and see deer on the lawn, or pop to the sea – you never tire of exploring this part of the world."

Visiting their properties, you'd have to admit that Claire and Andrew have achieved their goal, undoubtedly through hard work, impeccable taste and a genuine desire to provide the best possible service. Each house feels utterly inviting, more than a home from home; a place you can unpack, unwind and feel pampered. No wonder so many of their guests return year after year: this really is the best of Brittany. **LF**
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