

A local's view

Jennifer Dewar moved from London to Gers and runs newly renovated gîte, Chai Gascon, which has stunning views over the Pyrénées



The Dewars standing outside Chai Gascon

Where are you originally from and what were you doing before you decided to move to France?

I'm originally from Durham in the north of England but lived in London for 15 years before moving to France. I worked for two large agencies in the PR industry and later for a credit card company.

What attracted you to Gers?

My husband Andrew and I wanted an adventure, something new to discover. A friend had suggested Gers as it has a reputation for being really beautiful, but often overlooked. We really like that it's close to the Atlantic coast and also to the Pyrénées.

What is your village like?

Termes-d'Armagnac is a medieval village which sits on a crest overlooking the Adour valley and faces the Pyrénées.

There are some 150 inhabitants. It boasts a long, rich history and was home to the Armagnac nobility with connections to Joan of Arc and d'Artagnan (the famous musketeer).

Are the locals welcoming?

Gascons are incredibly welcoming - and they definitely enjoy their food and wine! Almost as soon as we'd arrived, we were invited to huge, long lunches with four or five courses, always rounded off with a glass of armagnac. Social life aside, people have been really helpful to us.

How did you go about learning French?

I had a basic knowledge from school and my husband is fluent, which helps when I'm stuck. I've been taking French lessons since I arrived with an organisation called Natif and

an excellent teacher called Roseline. I watch French television and listen to French radio as much as possible. My language really started to improve when I began using it at work. When you're forced to speak the language, you really make progress.

What inspired you to run a gîte?

We had the most incredible property next to our house - an old armagnac barn - and thought it would be lovely to renovate it. We wanted to create something unique and encourage visitors to explore the region. The gîte is perfect for people who want to experience a completely different lifestyle, away from cities and office life.

What restorations did you do?

The old barn had been left full of machinery and even a few

bottles of armagnac. It was incredible - as if someone had just decided to stop production one day and locked the door. We'd met a builder in our village and had seen his work, so we were delighted when he said he could do the renovation. He was very creative and helpful with finding solutions to all our problems. I think the fact that he was a local really helped - he knew everyone and everything.

We had to do it all from scratch, starting with the roof to secure the building. We've used recycled materials as much as possible and put in a floor made from plane wood. The walls were plastered in a warm honey tone using traditional techniques. To create more light, we put in windows, skylights and an enormous glass sliding door out onto the garden. The entire project took six months.



The Dewars' house



The White Garden next to Chai Gascon



There are lovely views onto the garden



Jennifer with Sammy the dog



The spacious living room of Chai Gascon

How did you go about setting up the business?

Setting up a gîte in France is relatively straightforward. We registered with the *mairie* and were given a tax code for the business. The main challenge is to make the gîte attractive throughout the year. The holiday season is quite short here - mainly July and August - so you need to find other ways to raise your profile and find opportunities. We work closely with the local tourist office and try to gain visibility via social media websites.

What makes your gîte so appealing?

It's really spacious inside and well decorated. Visitors from cities seem transformed after a few days. It's really peaceful and comfortable, like a retreat in a way. Plus, it offers spectacular views of the mountains.

How do you make your guests feel at home?

I try to think of what I would like if I was staying in a gîte! We use top-quality cotton bed linen and towels. Guests will find fresh flowers from the garden, homemade bread, a selection of vegetables from our *potager*, eggs from our chickens and a bottle or two of the excellent local wine.

What are some must-sees for people visiting Gers?

There are lots of summer festivals going on throughout the area, among them Jazz in Marciac, an international jazz festival with big names as well as less well-known but very talented musicians. Previous line-ups have included Gregory Porter, Sting, Santana, The Jacksons and Joan Baez.

Lupiac (birthplace of d'Artagnan) is worth a visit,

as are pretty *bastide* villages (including Bassoues, which has a spectacular outdoor market) and towns such as Lectoure, Auch and Condom. You can also enjoy wine-tasting tours at the local *domaines*.

What advice would you give to anyone thinking of running a gîte?

Work with your local tourist office, as they will have a good idea of the profile of visitors to the region - don't just focus your marketing efforts on one nationality, for instance.

Try to make your offer unique and use social media to transmit the look and feel of the place. If you're in an area that doesn't have many visitors outside the main summer season, try to think about how you could work with local businesses that receive visitors for courses, conferences or events.

How has your life changed since moving to Gers?

We're now looking to downsize (as Andrew isn't as young as he used to be!) so we've put Chai Gascon on the market. But we're definitely staying in France and in this area too. I'm less well-groomed nowadays and buy fewer clothes! It's easier to work online now, especially since the pandemic. I exercise daily, even if it's just walking the dogs. I cook meals from scratch and make an effort to use local produce.

I've also spent time pursuing hobbies such as writing and art, which I never really got around to in a city. Basically, my life is less frenetic and I appreciate the simpler pleasures. ■

Chai Gascon is on the market for €495,000, exclusively with Agence Le Bonheur le-bonheur.com