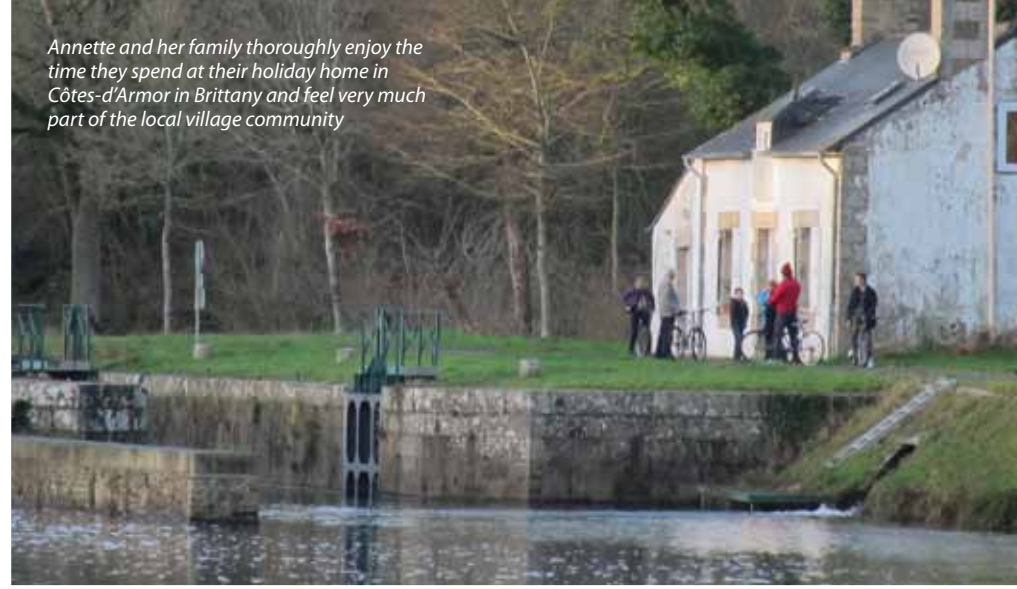




Annette and her family thoroughly enjoy the time they spend at their holiday home in Côtes-d'Armor in Brittany and feel very much part of the local village community



enlist help from the barman and one of his customers (no doubt hoping for a quiet drink) to escort him home.

We announce our arrival every holiday by hanging either a Christmas or home decoration on our front door for all to see. This usually brings a flood of visitors to welcome us back, often bearing gifts of warm fresh goat's cheese, farm eggs or freshly picked flowers. This generosity always overwhelms us.

For our part we support our village *tabac*, local butcher and café as much as possible. We have also purchased all our house furniture, white goods, garden items and clothing from local shopping areas. We feel so thankful that we are able to experience all the amazing cultural, historical, natural and gastronomic wonders of France that we try and reciprocate wherever we can.

Time to treasure

It is with sheer pleasure that we walk the surrounding countryside, pick wild flowers, complain about the vast number of flies that want to share our outdoor summer meal, admire our elderly neighbour who still tends to her vegetable patch in the winter snow, and enjoy our family mealtimes eating all the fresh produce France is famous for. And it is with admiration that we watch the hard-working farmers rumble down the narrow main street, with only inches to spare, on their huge harvesters and tractors late into the still quiet summer nights.

I wish my brave, adventurous Romanian grandmother was alive to share some of our experiences. She would have been delighted to see us travel the globe and fulfill our dream, regardless of how inappropriate or unlikely it seemed to others at the time.

So that's how our Australian family ended up buying a holiday home in rural Brittany, filling our days in France with adventure and experiences and our days in Australia working to keep our dream alive and growing together as a family. I encourage you to embrace life and remember that for a dream to come true, you must first dream it. ■

Annette Charlton writes about society, culture and all things French on her website afrenchcollection.com

A dream come true

She'd never even been to France but Australian **Annette Charlton** had always dreamt of buying a holiday home there, and the reality is even better than she imagined

You just know when something is going to be perfect, don't you. You get that confident feeling deep down that it will be 'just right'. Well, as I expected, France has lived up to my expectations for our family.

Ask me to explain exactly why I needed to buy a holiday house in France when I had not even set foot in the country and I live on the other side of the globe, and I can't give you a straight answer. I do know, however, that when we are in France we relax and know we're where we belong.

Our purchase fulfilled a dream of mine that had been secretly bubbling away as I read books about others relocating to France; watched British reality TV showing others

renovating châteaux or rebuilding piles of rubble into barns; cooked French cuisine for my family and learned French at a nearby college. I couldn't get enough of French music and films; all the while dreaming of what it would be like to own a small home in France.

After deciding that if others could do this then so could I, my thoughts turned into action and I got down to the business side of things. I searched property sites on the internet, read property magazines, talked to international mortgage brokers, questioned my accountant and found a translator.

My property research enabled me to create a wish list: the house needed to be relatively close to both Heathrow and Charles-de-Gaulle Airports for easy access, not

have a huge garden to maintain, not require major renovations (this would not be possible on holiday trips with three young children in tow), and have an attractive price tag as our Australian assets would not be taken into account by our mortgage broker.

I also wanted a rural village setting with at least a local shop, as I believe this or a café keeps a village dynamic and alive. It also ensures you never run out of the essentials: fresh baguettes, cheese and cold wine.

The journey begins

So, with my husband agreeing (albeit still a bit skeptical) to at least have a look at the homes I had shortlisted, finance approved, and one child in tow, we headed over to France.

We decided to spend a few days in Paris and this is where disaster first struck. My husband's wallet was stolen at a Métro station on the first day, leaving us with a mess to sort out with our banks and no cash.

This did not bode well for me as my husband would have preferred to buy in the south of England, and was accompanying us more to see my research through than to definitely buy a house. I was sure this unfortunate incident meant we'd never convince him that France was for us.

With matters sorted after

lengthy international phone calls made while sitting in the courtyard of Notre-Dame, we continued on with our plans.

We drove all over the countryside from our base at a quirky, quaint family-run hotel in Côtes-d'Armor in Brittany, looked at lots of houses, and eventually chose the very last one we viewed. The agent cleverly kept the best for last and we fell for it hook, line and sinker – or rather chimney, garden and village! Dating from 1889, the three-storey stone-built cottage only needed a little work in the attic but otherwise fulfilled all my essential criteria. The village was pretty and vibrant, nestled among rolling hills and numerous chicken, cow and wheat farms.

A warm welcome

After a very lengthy process we finally stepped over the threshold of our new home in Brittany. This was a welcome achievement as family and friends had all committed to a huge Christmas holiday with us, and we only completed three days prior to us all boarding our flights from Sydney. Talk about stressful.

I was dreading the possibility of receiving a huge hotel bill for accommodating all of our guests because we hadn't completed on the house in time and they'd already booked their travel.



It is with sheer pleasure that we walk the surrounding countryside, pick wild flowers and enjoy our family mealtimes eating all the fresh produce France is famous for