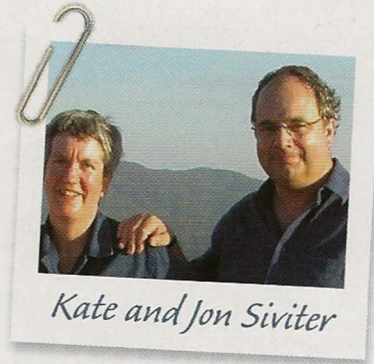


## live the dream

## Spice of life

After living and working all over the world, Kate and Jon Siviter now run a luxury *chambres d'hôtes* in Araux in Béarn. John spoke to **Gillian Thornton**



Kate and Jon Siviter

#### Why did you move to France?

I'd been a deputy head or headmaster of British schools around the world for 14 years and Kate had been senior HR manager for Shell before she gave up to spend time with our daughters, Clare and Helen. We've lived in South America, India and Sri Lanka but always spent our annual leave in France as a family and decided to put roots down in the south-west.

#### How did you find this property?

We looked at houses every day of our summer holiday and found this one in Araux on the last day of our stay in 2003. The oldest part dates back to the mid-17th century and it was all pretty dilapidated. The elderly owner lived into two rooms and the roof had gone at the back, but it had huge potential.

#### How did you tackle the restoration?

We sold our house in England to fund the project and with three months off between contracts, I sat down to work out what we wanted to do, how much it would cost and who we could use to do it. I did all the wiring myself and supervised the installation of the underground services. Looking back, there are only very small things we would have done differently.

#### So why this particular area?

We like sailing, skiing and horse-riding, and we could do all three easily from here. In fact there are very few outdoor activities you can't do. The climate is pleasant and not too hot or too dry in summer.

#### How well did you speak French?

Kate was pretty fluent but French was my worst and most hated subject at school! When I lived overseas before, I had huge teams of people with me but I knew I was on my own in Béarn. Things either work very quickly and efficiently here or they don't work at all, so I learnt French out of necessity and now I can manage most situations. Clare and Helen were 13 and 11 when we first came here and are now fluent, despite going to boarding school in England.

#### Why did you open a *chambres d'hôtes*?

I'm 53 and always intended to stop work at 55, but I've seen too many people enjoy the first couple of years of retirement and then go downhill, so we knew we needed another interest, whether it was something academic or running our first business. We thought it would be stimulating to meet lots of different people and introduce them to an area we have come to love deeply.

#### How quickly did the business take off?

We welcomed our first guests in August 2008 – Parisians who found us on the internet – and from spring 2009 onwards, we've seen a steady flow of visitors, around 30% of them French, 30% British, and the rest from as far apart as Norway and Japan.

#### Are you involved in village life?

There are 80 houses and 116 people in Araux, so it's a small community. I'm on

various local committees and I've put my teaching skills to use by organising Saturday courses in subjects such as photography and astronomy. I also go into French schools to talk to them in English. Kate and I have a number of classical music contacts too so we organise concerts both here at the house and in local venues like Laàs and Navarrenx.

#### Any regrets?

Not being able to send the children to school locally, but Clare was in the middle of GCSEs when we moved here; otherwise nothing at all.

#### What advice would you give to other Brits thinking of moving to France?

Learn basic French before you arrive, and if you are going to do up a house, remember that planning is everything. Oh and insist that you don't pay anybody until the job is done properly!

#### Where do you send first-time visitors?

I'd send them to Navarrenx first, which is within walking distance, then to Pau and Bayonne by car. You can explore the coast of the Pays Basque on a day trip, visit the mountain villages, or cross the Spanish border to Pamplona. But there are all kinds of leisure activities very close to the house too and some lovely village restaurants.

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