

TOP Santé



'I LEFT ENGLAND BEHIND FOR A NEW START IN FRANCE'

Karen Foster, 46, moved her family abroad to start a new business

'Three years ago, my husband Will and I were more than happy with our life in the UK. We'd worked hard to buy our four-bedroom house in Sussex, my two daughters Maddie, then 10, and Tilly, nine, were settled in good schools and I was doing the job I'd always wanted – working as a fashion stylist for women's magazines. For us, the life plan was to simply maintain the status quo, making the most of what we'd built for ourselves.

Then, that Easter, we went on holiday to France and were enjoying a break, seeing the sights and soaking up the culture, when one day we got talking to an elderly couple in a local café. They were former estate agents and told us about an old run-down chateau 30 minutes east of Toulouse which needed someone to restore it to its former glory.

With time on our hands, Will and I decided to go and take a look at the place.

We felt more curious than anything else, but as we drove up to the imposing entrance we were astounded by the beautiful setting and how much potential the property had. As holidaymakers, we could see how the views would be a huge draw and the chateau's outbuildings would make ideal holiday lets.

When we returned to England, we couldn't get the chateau out of our minds. We talked about the possibility of buying it, but the logistics were daunting. How would I continue with my career? Where would the girls go to school? How would we communicate if we couldn't speak French? Who would do the work on the property? There was so much against it, but the thought of not making the move seemed even more awful than failing. So we put our house in England on the market, made one more trip to France to make sure we were doing the right thing and signed on the dotted line. Telling our family was the hardest part. I was worried Mum would

be upset, but she was very supportive, which made our decision much easier.

The hard graft began the moment we arrived in France. The chateau has 12 bedrooms, which all needed renovating, whilst the stable blocks and tool shed had to be turned into luxurious gîtes, with their own kitchens and terraces. Will had given up his job as a tree surgeon in the

UK and, with the help of a local tradesman, set about learning the skills he'd need to do it up and even put in a pool.

I flew back and forth to the UK to keep working as a stylist, but visited antique fairs to hunt out beautiful furniture for the gîtes in my spare time.

Three years later and, unlike the girls, who are thriving at the local school, I still struggle with French and there's more work to do, but we've built a home for ourselves, as well as a very successful business. Moving to France was never part of our life plan, but it's the best decision we ever made.'

• For more information about the gîtes, visit gites-chateaudemontoussel.com. →

“WE VISITED THE CHATEAU OUT OF CURIOSITY. I NEVER IMAGINED WE'D LIVE THERE”