

At the speak easy

When **Janet Daniels** decided that she wanted to improve her rusty French, a residential course gave her the kickstart she needed

I had always wondered how much a kickstart from a total immersion course would help to improve my rusty, schoolgirl French. Visiting the France Show at Olympia in January, I was drawn by a stand offering a week's total immersion course in French at a language school in the Dordogne. The property looked beautiful in the photos and, when I chatted to the owner at the stand, she was very helpful. French would be spoken throughout the week and every morning would be spent in a three-hour French lesson. I signed up on the spot!

Then, with only a few weeks to go, I began to get nervous; would I find a whole week too exhausting? Would my middle-aged brain cope? Should I start to swot up? Nice idea but most evenings I preferred chilling out in front of the TV after a long day at work. Still I put my French CDs on in the car, listening to them on my daily commute. Soon I was getting my summer clothes out and packing my suitcase ready for my flight to Bergerac.

Arriving on a Saturday at the tiny airport in Bergerac is a small adventure in itself because of its charming, slightly makeshift, colonial air while it undergoes renovation. We had to retrieve our luggage from a temporary shed and the luggage carousel had to be wound by hand by the passengers! I hadn't spotted any likely fellow students on the plane, so I stood in the warm evening sunshine and waited alone. I began to feel a bit uncertain when one by one everybody else was picked up, but soon afterwards Jane Hanslip, the language school proprietor, turned up and introduced me to two fellow students. We piled into a minibus and within 15 minutes arrived at Le Bourdil Blanc, our home and college for the week.

The minibus turned down a long, straight drive past a barn towards a large, golden stone



house with white shutters, which was almost entirely covered by a bright green creeper. The house, with a *pigeonnier* tower, dates from the late 18th century. A tour revealed four, interconnected stately rooms on the ground floor and a curving, chestnut staircase leading from the grand salon to four *en suite* bedrooms on the first floor and four more in the converted attic above, all decorated in a charming mix of classic French and English country house style.

The house has large grounds, overlooking a lake behind the house. There's a swimming pool, tennis court and beautiful gardens with views of a château on the opposite hill and, with the fragrant roses and irises already flowering in mid May, it was stunning.

Meet and greet

When we arrived, we could see some of the other students were already taking refreshments on the terrace outside in the sunshine, so we started to introduce ourselves. Jane's two large black Labradors thumped their tails in greeting from under the table. I met two interesting couples, one who already owned



Le Bourdil Blanc: the language school is held in Jane's beautiful late 18th-century house, complete with *pigeonnier*, swimming pool and tennis court

a house in France and another who were wondering whether or not to buy. We had a delightful octogenarian on her second visit to Le Bourdil and three friendly women guests travelling independently like me. Our standard of French varied from beginner to intermediate.

On the first full day we were divided into two groups after an initial assessment based on a conversation and short dictation

After time to unpack and settle in it was time for an *apéritif* and dinner. All our meals were taken together in the formal dining room at a magnificent table that seated 12 comfortably. Jane has a French cook who served delicious, freshly prepared and typically French meals throughout our stay. The wine was also unlimited but sensibly poured into smaller glasses, so it didn't



The afternoon excursions were an opportunity to get a real taste of France



The wine-tasting was inspiring, with local wines under the spotlight

“ The week at Le Bourdil convinced one couple, who had been wondering about a move to France, that they really could and should go for it ”

affect our studies the following day! Jane, our hostess, invited both French and English friends for dinner every night so we always had somebody new to talk to. One of the guests was a television celebrity who owns a house in the locality; this caused quite a *frisson* in the conversation at the dinner table.

As is often the case in France, the vegetarians in the party were initially disappointed with the choices offered, but after they explained this to Jane she immediately upped the range of vegetarian options.

Give us our daily croissant

We settled into a morning routine of breakfast – fresh croissants always provided – followed by our French lesson. We had two tutors, Alexander and Brigitte, and the two groups swapped tutors after the mid-morning coffee break on the terrace. Alexander stayed at Le Bourdil throughout the week and acted as tour leader and host at mealtimes. He has his own organic vineyard near St Emillion, and gave us a fascinating insight into

winemaking when we were preparing for our visit to a vineyard. Alexander's teaching style was based on his love of the language. He enjoyed answering questions and telling us about the roots and origins of French words and was rather strict about pronunciation, rhythm and intonation trying to make our lazy English mouths work harder to sound French. Brigitte, who had a touch of Parisian elegance, prepared group exercises in advance and was very encouraging, making sure that everybody got an equal chance to practice.

After a leisurely lunch, we set off every day for a tour by minibus. There was no compulsion to join the trips, so alternatively you could stay at Le Bourdil and use the pool. While with our tutor, we were encouraged to stick to French even in the minibus. The excursions were carefully planned to show us the area. For our first lunch, we even had a proper picnic with everything packed into capacious wicker hampers. We went to a wine tasting at a château, visited markets, stunning *bastide* towns, Romanesque churches and châteaux, and had a guided tour of both Périgueux and Bergerac with plenty of time for shopping.

Two of us also managed to fit in a cross-country walk with the reward of ice-cream on a terrace by the Dordogne river. Bliss! I thought I already knew the Dordogne quite well, yet I really enjoyed the afternoon excursions and I left wanting to see more.

I found the wine-tasting very inspiring. In an ancient, stone-walled room the owner of Château Belingard, the Comtesse de Bosredon,

explained in French and English all about the *appellation contrôlée* Bergerac wines and how they were made. We learnt how to swirl the wine in the glass and smell and taste it correctly using the spittoon or *crachoir*. We tasted more than 10 very different white, red and rosé wines, plus the delicious sweet Bergerac Monbazillac.

Once Alexander had shown us the main points of interest, we always had free time to explore by ourselves and look in the *immobiliers'* windows. Apparently window shopping is called *lecher les vitrines* – literally to lick the windows. There were certainly some beautiful properties to drool over.

We usually returned to Le Bourdil at around 6.30 – 7pm and then we were free to have a swim, read a book etc. *Apéritifs* before dinner were served from 8pm in the *salon*, with its grand piano, though sadly none of us could play. On some of the cooler evenings, we enjoyed the warmth of a log fire laid in the large stone fireplace.

At first we all found it tiring and difficult to speak French to one another but as the week progressed, you could hear the improvement in everybody's French, especially the beginner's group who started to be able to hold a conversation in French. We all learnt a lot of new vocabulary and improved our confidence in speaking.

We also talked a lot to each other about the pros and cons of buying properties in France. One of the couples on the course had looked at over 50 properties before finding their dream home in France. The week at Le Bourdil convinced a second couple, who had been wondering about a move to France, that they really

- If you want to improve your French, there's no better way to explore all the options than to visit the language pavilion at The France Show.
- Attend one of the free seminars and talk to exhibitors for tips on how to improve your French, whatever your current level of ability. From beginner to fluent, there will be a course for you.
- The France Show will be held at Earl's Court 9-11 January 2009 www.franceshow.com

could and should go for it. They loved the lifestyle and the climate and were able to talk to Jane, the tutors and the dinner guests about the whole process.

A number of my fellow students had tried other similar language holidays and gave a few tips on choosing a course: it's important to check the ratio of students to tutors and the numbers and level of the other students before booking, or you could find yourself not making much progress.

I found the week a tremendous kickstart for improving my French and plan to do another week in the future. It was very relaxing, a real holiday in glorious surroundings and everything is included so you don't need to worry about budgeting during your stay. With the excursions and facilities, the language course at Le Bourdil manages to be at once an enjoyable holiday and educational. It is great preparation for planning to live or buy in France. □

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