

We had no idea of the scale of the project we were taking on and it was a world away from our

original brief to our estate agent." I imagine there may be a few knowing nods at this point among those who had a similar experience when buying their first home in France. Not only is the property they ultimately bought a world away from Rebecca Randall and husband Greg's original brief, they're not even sure how they struck upon France in the first place.

"We decided we wanted to move to France about five years ago - in the pub over a bottle of wine!" laughs Rebecca, a barrister who still works in London and commutes between the city and her new home in Dordogne. "I can't even remember how France came up, although I had spent a lot of time there when I was younger as an au pair and as part of my degree course. We knew we were getting to the stage where we were fed up with London and wanted to do something different. We didn't want to still be doing the same thing in 20 years' time, so we thought we'd just try it."

Rebecca admits they "didn't really take it seriously to begin with", using it as a reason to spend numerous holidays in France instead, but they did start to explore different areas to get an idea of where they might want to buy. Good travel links with London were vital as Rebecca intended to continue working in the city, and by now the couple had also decided that they wanted to set up a gîte business.

Having first considered Dordogne they cast their nets wider to include Charente, Charente-Maritime, Lot and Lot-et-Garonne, but found themselves drawn back to their original choice.

FROM CITY TO COUNTRY

"We spent as many weekends and weeks as we could in France and probably saw 50 or 60 properties in total over a period of about two and a half years," says Rebecca. "We found a brilliant estate agent, Lisa, who understood exactly what we wanted and we hit it off immediately; she's since become a very good friend. She framed our original brief to her and we now have it hanging on the wall!"

Ah yes, back to that brief. So what exactly did they have in mind - or not, as



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WORDS: VICKY LEIGH
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WHO:
Rebecca and Greg Randall

WHERE:
St-Avit-Sénieur, Dordogne

WHAT:
A former paper mill that has been renovated and converted into a home and luxury gîte

WHY:
To escape the fast pace of London life and try something different

The former paper mill has been completely transformed and a swimming pool with a striking black liner has been added in the grounds



Rebecca and Greg sold their London home and moved to France last winter

the case may be? “No major renovation. Don’t mind a bit of painting and decorating. Nothing too big. Obviously we ended up with the complete opposite!” says Rebecca.

A former paper mill located half an hour from both Bergerac and Bordeaux, Fontalbe was a derelict shell with no internal walls, bathrooms or kitchen, and many of the floors were unsafe to walk on. Rebecca and Greg have preserved and made a feature of a well in what is now their kitchen, which they only discovered when Greg fell into it!

However on the day they viewed Fontalbe, they had also been to see another property that morning which fitted the bill perfectly.

“It was absolutely incredible and as far as I was concerned, it was the one. It didn’t even need a paintbrush,” recalls Rebecca. “When we told Lisa about it she said she could show us something similar, and she brought us here. I didn’t like it at all and it was a miserable day too because it was pouring with rain, but Greg loved it. We went back to the hotel and over a bottle of

wine convinced ourselves that it was the right property for us. We went back again the next day and the sun was shining, and of course everything looks better in the sunshine, so it was a done deal.”

The Randalls put in an offer that very day and the sale went through in September 2016. And that’s when the hard work really started.

GRAND DESIGNS

Rebecca and Greg had stayed at Château Le Merle several times during their house-hunting trips to France and were introduced to Joris Van Grinsen, the designer responsible for creating the hotel’s beautiful interiors.

“Joris came to see the property and he couldn’t believe how big it was,” says Rebecca. “We still hadn’t fully appreciated how large it actually was, but he said it would be the biggest residential project he had ever worked on. He project-managed the whole renovation and found an amazing team of builders who worked here for over a year because it was such a big job to bring Fontalbe back to life.”



The contemporary interior provides a striking contrast with the exterior



The living area in the six-bedroom gîte can comfortably accommodate a large number of guests

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With the renovation costs mounting and work needed that they hadn’t budgeted for, Rebecca and Greg had to find a way to spend more time on site without spending even more money on hotel accommodation, and that’s when they came up with a rather innovative solution.

“The builders seemed to have a question every five minutes so we really needed to be here and we couldn’t afford to keep staying in a hotel, so we bought a caravan and towed it down here from London, which was awful!” says Rebecca.

“However once we got here it was

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brilliant because it saved us a fortune, and it was great to be on site for the builders, and to actually be living here, even if it was in a caravan.”

When the work was completed in March 2018, the transformation was nothing short of spectacular. Rebecca and Greg now have a beautiful two-bedroom home plus a gîte with six bedrooms, six bathrooms, a salon, kitchen and dining room, which they plan to start renting out this year. They have also planned ahead by creating a space that they hope to use in the future as a yoga studio and for workshops and exhibitions, as a way of extending their rental season and also integrating into the local arts community.

LAP OF LUXURY

The couple trusted Joris and his taste implicitly, and were happy to follow his advice on working with the building’s industrial past and retaining as many original features as possible, while Rebecca also had a clear idea of the style and look she wanted to create.

Externally the property is everything you would expect from a traditional Dordogne building, while the inside is minimalist with open staircases, wooden struts, expanses of glass and crisp white décor. The sharp lines inside juxtapose



À LA MAISON

with the greenery outside, providing a striking contrast that works beautifully and is entirely unexpected.

One of Rebecca's favourite parts of the gîte is the 60ft-high entrance, although that did create its own challenges when it came to choosing furniture.

"Because it's so big everything has to be on a grand scale," says Rebecca, "even in our own kitchen. We had a dresser that looked absolutely fine in our dining room in our three-bedroom semi in London, but when we put it in the kitchen here it looked like a piece of doll's furniture!"

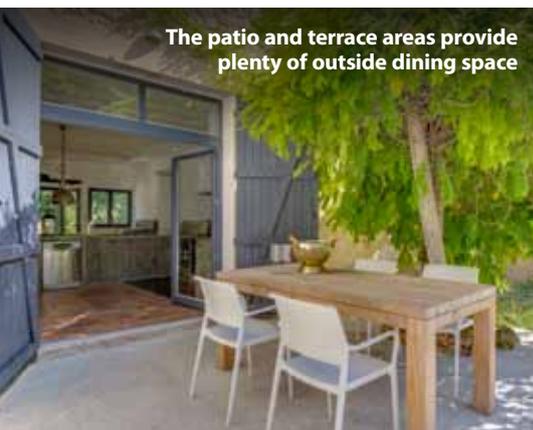
With luxury a priority in the gîte, Rebecca has chosen high thread count Egyptian cotton sheets and quality towels, and provides Honest skincare toiletries in the bathrooms - in full-size bottles.

"I used to hate going to places that provided miniature bottles of shampoo and shower gel - how is that supposed to last for a week?" says Rebecca. "I've also made sure there are enough hangers in the wardrobes and enough cutlery and bowls for the number of guests in the kitchen."

"We bought the crockery in Ikea because I want people to feel comfortable rather than worry about breakages, but we've invested where it counts and spent money on items such as quality mattresses, pillows and bedding."

COMING SOON

The couple sold their London home and made a permanent move to Dordogne in November 2018. Rebecca has been commuting as planned for trials, although it hasn't proved to be as easy as she first thought due to the nature of her work as a barrister, while oil broker Greg took early retirement. With their home and the gîte now complete, Greg will be turning his attention to the outside space and there's certainly plenty to keep him busy.



The patio and terrace areas provide plenty of outside dining space



Rebecca has prioritised high-quality bed linen and full-size toiletries in the bedrooms and bathrooms



Designer Joris Van Grinsen worked with the building's industrial past when creating the new look

"There were times when we wondered if we should have bought a little holiday home but then we look at what we've got and realise how wonderful it is"

"There's so much work to do outside - the whole place is about 60 acres - but luckily Greg is very handy. This house throws us curveballs all the time. Apparently there used to be a trout farm here which the builders only discovered when they began digging for two new septic tanks and kept hitting more and more concrete. What should have been a straightforward job meant churning up 90% of our rather nice lawn, which now looks like a warzone!"

Rebecca is enjoying the view of the new swimming pool though, which has a striking black liner that provides another modern touch. Surrounded by a terrace equipped with sun loungers and umbrellas, there is also an outdoor dining

area overlooking the river which runs along the side of the house.

Rebecca and Greg are only a few months in to their full-time French adventure but already they can't imagine being anywhere else.

"The other day Greg asked me, 'do you think we'll be in France forever?' and I said 'yes I do, do you?'" says Rebecca. "He said he did too. It's just glorious and I think it's actually better than we could ever have imagined. There were times when we thought we wouldn't do it - and couldn't do it - and we wondered if we should have just bought a little holiday home, but then we stand and look at what we've got here and realise how wonderful it is." **LF**

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