

Article Nancy wrote for the *Wall Street Journal* about moving to France, published Oct. 22, 2012

THE JOURNAL REPORT: NEXT

DESTINATIONS

Moving to France

A New York couple finds a new life in the valleys and ridge tops of the Périgord

By NANCY DAWSON

This is part of a series of travel stories in which retirees living overseas, full time or part time, profile their adopted locales. Send us your suggestions at next@wsj.com.

My partner, John, and I first visited the Périgord region in southwest France in 2006, spending New Year's at a friend's medieval castle. We had both traveled through France when we were young—John on a motorcycle in his 20s, I as a 16-year-old exchange student. Returning together in our 60s as a new couple was romantic. The long weekend in the castle was magical.

We spent evenings around a fire, drinking local wines and discussing the culture and history of the Périgord, famous for prehistoric cave paintings and Romanesque architecture. During the day we explored gray-green valleys and ridge-top medieval villages. Our friend's castle dated to the 13th century, and every room was steeped in the past—a mantel covered with photos, hair ornaments and books with pages marked by ribbons; a rack of straw hats above a wire basket of walking sticks. We were enchanted with it all.

Today we live in the Périgord full time, a decision we made slowly. For three years we visited often and began to wonder what it would be like to leave our apartment in New York and move to France. We started looking at—and falling in love with—one charming ruin after another: a 12th-century farm with stone buildings clustered on a hillside, and no electricity, plumbing or central heat; another with stables and breathtaking views, but no amenities—not even a passable road.

A Small Farm

On a rainy morning in November 2008, our real-estate agent took us to a small farm near St-Avit-Sénieur. The house featured light ochre limestone and a steep roof of mossy tiles. It sat

high on a bank above a 12th-century pilgrimage route to Compostela in Spain.

Across the courtyard from the house was an imposing 100-foot barn, big enough for studios for John, a guest apartment, and a writing room for me. The owner was the mayor of a neighboring village. He was an elegant man, and when he met us, he bowed slightly and said, "Enchanté." We made an offer of €200,000 (about \$254,000 at the time), and he accepted.

Most of our first year was devoted to renovating our new home, a task we have in common with any number of expats. First we opened up the kitchen fireplace that had been built over with cabinets, uncovering a lovely limestone hearth. The mayor told us that his wife's grandparents used to sit inside the fireplace in the winter. I could see them—cozy, rosy-cheeked and smiling. But when we tried to build a fire on a cold and wet afternoon, we were quickly disabused of our romanticism; there was more smoke in the kitchen than there was going up the chimney.

Open Space

We solved our biggest problem when friends from Paris visited us on Easter weekend. Patrick is an architect, and we had long admired the light-filled, airy apartment he designed for his family. Patrick walked the house and showed us how removing a few walls would give us a long sweep of southwest windows. His solution was brilliant. The house was too dark, and eight small, low-ceilinged rooms became two open, luminous spaces: one for living, cooking and eating; the other for work, reading and sleeping.

A living-room fireplace that we wanted to construct out of massive limestone blocks became a lesson about life and commerce in rural France. Our resourceful contractor, Dale, invited members of a local soccer team to help us. On a December morning, six strong, red-faced, groaning, staggering men ("À gauche, non, non, à droite?"—"To the left, no, no, to the right?")

shouldered the stones into place. Afterward they beamed; we toasted each other with Armagnac (Périgordian brandy), but they refused to take any pay. We took them to lunch—five grand courses and many bottles of wine. The memorable meal cost more than the new fireplace.

With the renovation completed, our life in France officially commenced. Now, almost three years later, we take weekly French lessons. We go to one bakery for bread and another for croissants. We shop at farmers' markets for fresh eggs, cheese and garden vegetables. Our neighborhood cafe welcomes us on winter evenings at the zinc bar, and on starry summer nights on the terrace on the square, which we share with tourists as the weather warms.

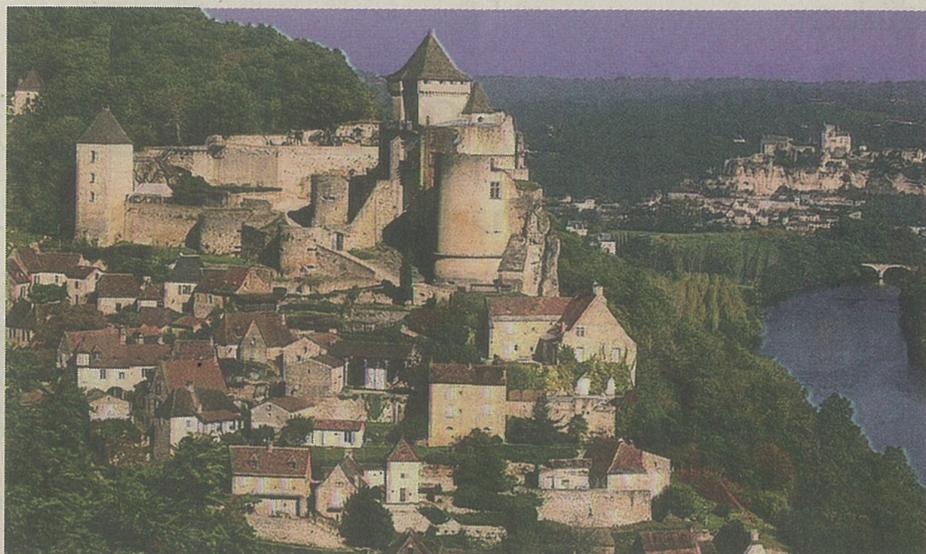
Périgord villages depend on tourism, and from June to September the roads are clogged with caravans and cars; visitors throng the squares, churches and castles. There is an event every evening in nearby villages: a night market with live music in Beaumont where we eat and dance; a Bach cantata performed in a 12th-century abbey in Cadouin; jazz saxophone on the square in Molières.

But it is the local people who mean so much to us. Our neighbors' generosity eased our way: gregarious Bertrand, a former stonemason who reads Socrates and plays jazz piano, and his warm, lovely wife, Mathilda. No question is ever too complicated or ill-timed for them.

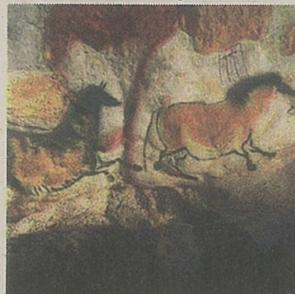
Our home is full of friends from around the world; we share big meals and talk long into the night. As an artist, John has fared well with the publication of a bilingual book and an exhibition of his sculptures at an 11th-century castle keep. I have honed my writing (I once worked as a public-relations director) in my room in the barn with a view of flower-filled fields.

Bureaucratic Roulette

That's not to say there aren't problems. The French bureaucracy is every bit as bad as its reputation. Moving here, John



ENCHANTING ENVIRONS The Castle of Castelnaud above the Dordogne River (top), the market town of Sarlat (below left) and replicas of prehistoric cave paintings from the Lascaux II cave.



Sights to See

If you plan to visit the Périgord region in southwest France (also known as the Dordogne), take time for:

The Middle Ages

Monpazier is a classic example of the "bastides," medieval commercial and defensive towns. Also on the list of the most beautiful villages in France.

francethisway.com/places/monpazier.php

Castles and more castles

The Périgord has more than 1,000 medieval castles; 45 are open to the public, notably Beynac and Castelnaud on the Dordogne River.

castelnaud.com/uk/

Off the beaten path

Rent a canoe and float down the Dordogne past castles and riverside villages; hike a Bergerac vineyard and taste one of the 12 varieties of wines; savor the famous Périgordian cuisine in a village bistro.

Renaissance market town

Sarlat is renowned for its wonderfully preserved steep-roofed limestone townhouses that line narrow streets. Visit during the colorful Saturday market.

sarlat-tourisme.com/en/

Prehistoric cave paintings Lascaux II is a replica of the world's most famous prehistoric art, with breathtaking surrounds of bulls, horses, bison and cattle. lascaux.culture.fr (click on the lower left side of the home page for English)

Plus: For a good look at goings-on in the region, go to: uk.rendezvousenfrance.com/en/special/dordogne

Source: WSJ reporting

Laughey Bordeaux (top); Sarlat; Office of Tourism (left); Semitour (right)

got a three-year renewable visa for artists, which allows him to work in France. I received a one-year visa that requires me to re-apply each year for a residency card, the qualifications and regulations for which change just as often. After I fulfill the endless list of supporting documents, I make two three-hour round trips to the state capital. One year the office was closed even after I called ahead. "*Aujourd'hui est exceptionnel*," I was told. "Today is exceptional." Humor helps us keep our perspective.

The weak dollar has eroded

some of our buying power, but we feel the quality of life in France more than compensates. Our living expenses—for food, utilities, property and local taxes—are still less than they were in New York. And some things cost far less. Health care, for instance. Until we qualified for the national health system, I paid €23 (\$29) for a doctor's visit with no insurance. Now we pay a small percentage of our income, which covers most of the cost of office visits, prescriptions and hospitalization. Cultural events are generally free or

less than €15 (\$19). The biggest expense is visiting the U.S. once or twice a year. We miss our family and friends but love having them in our guest apartment during summer months.

There are times I wonder what the future will bring when we are really old, and whether we will stay here forever. Right now, our life is just right, and we are grateful to live in such a wonderful part of the world.

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