

Mediterranean DREAM

Meet a couple who have mastered the art of creating the perfect holiday destination. **Deborah Curtis** discovers Bastide Avellanne in Var – their latest success story

When Steve and Valentina Dixon pulled up outside Bastide Avellanne, they knew their search was over. The fortified *mas*, built in creamy Provençal stone and dating back to 1616, was just what they'd been looking for; the perfect setting for the next chapter of their lives in France.

"As soon as we arrived, we wound the windows down and just sat in the car for a moment," Steve says. "There was no wind, and it smelt of the Mediterranean - pine trees and wild herbs. Within minutes of arriving, Valentina said: 'This is the place.' It was just one of those things; they say when you buy a property, you know within 30 seconds if it's right, and this was the one."

Their journey to Bastide Avellanne, which nestles in three hectares of grounds, near the village of Besse-sur-Issole in Var, and which they now run as a luxury *maison et table d'hôtes de charme*, has been an adventure.

Fifteen years ago, Steve was living in a two-bedroom bungalow in the suburbs of London just inside the M25. He had a thriving, successful graphics business and absolutely no spare time.

"I had a life-changing moment in the year 2000," he remembers. "I'd organised a sailing holiday with 16 of my friends and at the last minute I couldn't go. They went without me and I went two weeks later on my own. It was a wake-up call: if I couldn't have one week's holiday with my friends, something wasn't right. On that holiday, I had time to reflect on life, and I had this crazy idea that I was going to sell up in the UK, get a couple of boats and a commercial sailing licence, and do charters around the Greek islands. And that's what I did."

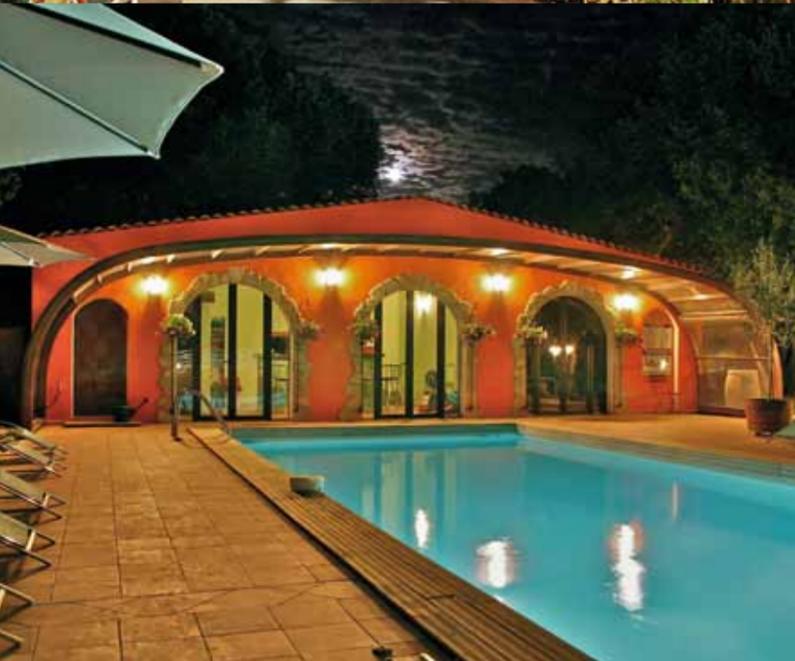
He met Valentina, who is Italian, during his first year on the boats and they ran the business together for five years; spending their summers in Greece and their winters in Haute-Savoie where Steve had a chalet. Eventually, a tough economic climate forced them to make a choice and they



These pages from above:
Steve and Valentina Dixon;
Bastide Avellanne



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These pages clockwise from top left: Each bedroom has a different character; views over Cassis; all meals are cooked by Valentina and served in this sumptuous room; with such incredible weather the pool is popular with guests; the nearby market of Cotignac

decided to sell the boats and the chalet, and buy a renovation project in the mountains to run as a luxury mountain *chambres d'hôtes*.

"It was a ruined Savoyade farmhouse built in 1776," says Steve. "At the time, we were a little bit crazy. We spent €750,000 on a ruin on the advice of our French agent. He said: 'If you do a good job on the renovation, it will be a very good business.' And he was absolutely right because although the chalet was in poor condition, it was only 300m away from the best, quickest, most popular lift for the resort of Morzine. It wasn't in Morzine itself, it was in the village of Ardent, but the lift went to the hub of the whole of the Portes du Soleil system."

Steve project-managed the renovation, employing mainly local French *artisans* to carry out the work, with assistance from a carpet-fitter and a carpenter from the UK when the pressure was on.

"We got the chalet finished the day before the first guests arrived, which was a little bit stressful," says Steve. "The day before they arrived, we didn't have a staircase to the upper floor. We had an English carpenter who came to finish off. He was confident it would be done and he did it, but it was quite a bit of pressure at the time!"

They went in at the high end of the market, offering fully catered holidays exclusively to single groups. It was a gamble but it paid off.

"We'd spent a lot of money on the chalet as a ruin and a lot of money on renovating it, so we had to go in at the high end," says Steve. "It was a fantastic location and completely different to anything else in Morzine. The advice we got from the agent was spot on. We were fully booked during the ski season for the whole time we were there."

Four ski seasons and five years later, they were again ready for a change; this time turning their sights on the south of France in search of warmer climes.

"It is a dream living in the mountains; to be in such a nice location," says Steve, "The views are spectacular, but we were living at altitude and it was cold. Even in August, you couldn't have a BBQ because in the evenings, it was maybe four or five degrees. It was a beautiful place to live for five years: the fresh air in abundance, the water coming out of the taps was pure. The quality of life was very, very good, but after a while you yearn for warmth."

They looked initially in Languedoc, and although they loved the countryside and were impressed with what they'd be able to buy in the region, the shortness of the summer season and modest visitor numbers eventually prompted a major re-think.

In the end, after a fruitless two-year search and with money in the bank following the sale of the Ardent chalet to a wealthy international buyer, they struck lucky.

"Valentina found this property on the internet," says Steve. "It was being run by a manager as a B&B, and it turned out it was for sale. We came to stay here and then we came down for a second visit and met the owners, who



were Belgian. We ended up owning it after three months, and we bought without an agent. It was all very easy. The *notaire* handled everything."

They bought Bastide Avellanne on 1 October 2010, began a six-month renovation that Christmas, and welcomed their first guests in May.

"The renovation included a new roof; plus we did 14 bathrooms, five kitchens and redecorated and re-furnished the whole property," says Steve. "We had difficulty buying furniture because it is such a big property. We looked locally and we couldn't find anything. In the end, we found a company in Italy that sold Provençal-style furniture. We went to see them on Christmas Eve, with a list of the things we wanted, and they opened the showroom for us. We spent a day there and we bought everything in eight hours. We came away feeling so relieved."

They reconfigured the guest accommodation and now have five *chambres d'hôtes* rooms and four apartments, plus their own private accommodation at the rear of the house.

Their guests come from all over the world to enjoy Steve and Valentina's hospitality, and the service provided is more along the lines of a boutique hotel. They are open from April to October and offer breakfast, lunch and, most days, dinner too, with the menu combining traditional Provençal flavours and a mix of French, Italian and Mediterranean styles. All meals are cooked by Valentina in their semi-professional kitchen with Steve's help, and in high season, they get through a lot of food.

"Forget the idea of shopping in Provençal markets," chuckles Steve. "It doesn't happen. It's difficult to buy

Bastide Avellanne is only 30 minutes from the beach between Saint-Tropez and Hyères



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“The weather here is exceptional. We get more than 300 days of sunshine a year”

100kg of fruit, and vegetables, and get back to the car without dying or having a stroke! If you're on holiday in a self-catering apartment then, yes, use the markets, but we can't do that on a professional basis. I spend one or two days a week just doing the shopping in peak season because we get through a lot and nobody will deliver here because we are too remote.”

Yet despite being 1.5km from the nearest neighbours and completely surrounded by forests and vineyards, Bastide Avellanne is only 30 minutes from the beaches between Saint-Tropez and Hyères on the Mediterranean coast, and is within easy reach of Nice, Marseille and Toulon airports. And it is this perfect blend of accessibility, peace and tranquillity that makes the yoga and artists' retreats they run in spring and autumn very successful with guests who want a themed break in a relaxed setting.

“The yoga retreat visitors are nearly all Americans,” says Steve. “We did the first one three years ago, three last year and eight this year; and we have already got 10 booked for next year. They come here; they do yoga every day; they enjoy the food; and they enjoy the ambiance. We look after them and we are always thinking about what we can do to make it good for them. It works very well.”

In fact, things are going so well that Steve is beginning to get a strong sense of déjà vu. “I'm beginning to feel like I did 15 years ago when I had my life-changing moment,” he says. “Between April and October we do not have one day off; we work seven days a week, 16 hours a day. Having said that, it's very rewarding because we've built this up from nothing, and now we're doing more than double the business that the previous owners were doing.

“You may have noticed that things go in five-year cycles with us; it's that kind of business. It is so peaceful here and the weather is exceptional. We get more than 300 days of



This page: Waterfall in the nearby mountains

TIPS FOR RUNNING A BUSINESS

- Do your research and make sure that the property you are interested in is easily accessible: close to an international airport and with good road links.

- Go to the regional tourist office in the area you've identified and ask for the tourist statistics – where the clients come from, where they stay, where they visit – for us it sealed the deal because they were so promising in this stunning part of Var.

- Think carefully about how long the season is: you may see a bar for sale on the seafront but don't forget, it's a holiday resort – it will be busy during the holidays but during the winter there is often no trade.

- You have to be practical. You have to be able to do most of the work yourself.

- The off-season isn't downtime. Valentina spends five months marketing and I spend five months maintaining the property.

- Find a good French accountant who understands this type of business for help and information on how to set up your company in the most tax-efficient way.

sunshine a year; but you do sometimes think: “We could do this job somewhere else.” Once you've learned how to be hospitable to people and you know what they want and understand how to make them smile, then it's a transportable skill.

“If someone came along and made a sensible offer, you never know, we might take it. Having said that we really love it here; it is such a fantastic place to live.” **LF**

www.bastideavellanne.eu