

A TALE OF TWO HOUSES



Rachel Johnston is in Corrèze exploring a property with a colourful past and serious quay appeal

A building being “probably the most photographed” in its department is an accolade indeed, but not one that would necessarily move you to buy it. Images of irksome tourists clamouring as they pass and trampling all over the tranquil surroundings in pursuit of the perfect shot could go a long way in dampening your French property dream

Except, of course, I was one such tourist when I first saw this house, and as much as I did capture it on camera, it was as I glided by on a boat, with little clamouring necessary to snap away to my heart’s content.

Two become one

Facing the quay of Argentat with a spectacular view of the Dordogne river, this postcard-adorning property is actually two buildings joined together, each covered by a traditional *lauze* roof. It sits a few metres above the water, sky blue shutters and swathes of crimson geraniums heralding each boat’s arrival and putting Argentat firmly on the mind map of iconic French towns. Current owners Philippe and Esméralda fell in love with a picture of the house before they’d even seen it in the flesh, and resolved to buy it despite having no prior connection to Limousin.

As I talk to Philippe it becomes evident that the property is not only picturesque, but historically significant – and that the two houses started life rather differently. “The one with the balconies is the oldest, dating from 1701 and built for the customs officers so they could check everything that was sailing on the river,” Philippe explains. “The other house was built over a century later, in 1819. It was a former hotel for travellers and sailors and, at

the end of that century, it became an officially registered brothel. This means that our walls could say a lot!”

Whatever their shady past, the houses were fully restored in the 1980s and, when Philippe and Esméralda took them on in 2006 and 2009, they embarked on a major project of renovation which included installing high-quality heat and sound insulation, something that its former *raison d’être* may have benefited from. “Let’s just say that we kept the walls and changed everything inside, including the floors! We used local contractors who did a great job.”

“Great job” is certainly an understatement in this case. The finished property boasts living spaces that will make jaws hit the floor – especially the sitting and dining rooms, which groan with beams and exposed stone but manage to be classy and elegant rather than rustic. Doors from the dining room and kitchen lead out to the balcony and it takes little imagination to picture the parties you could throw here. Spread across the two upper floors are four plush en-suite bedrooms, each with wooden floors and one with a spacious mezzanine area suitable as a further sleeping area. The house even has its own small garden and vegetable plot, and there is a cellar as well as private access to the river below.

Picture perfect

Peter Elias of Allez Français, the agency marketing the property, points out that its photogenic appeal has in fact been channelled into a highly successful *chambres d’hôtes* business. “With luxuriously appointed rooms and such an enviable location, you’re almost

guaranteed to be full whenever you want to be open,” he says. “Guests just have a short stroll over the bridge to visit bars and restaurants on the quayside of Argentat, or in the town centre.” Accessibility is great too, with the town only an hour’s drive from the airport at Brive-la-Gaillarde.

Argentat itself is something of a gateway, not only to the Dordogne valley but also to other regions; although in Limousin, it lies close to the borders with Auvergne and Midi-Pyrénées. It has a resident population of around 3,000 and buzzes with life all year round but, of course, the summer months in particular see restaurant and café terraces awash with visitors soaking up the river views, and numerous concerts and festivals are held here. Attractive medieval buildings line the streets but the highlight is arguably the quay itself, constructed in the 19th century and affording the very best view of the pretty houses opposite – which include this one.

The view is pretty good from this side too; Philippe is quick to declare the loggia as their favourite place in the house, a chair in which must be like a seat in a theatre box, with the river as the stage. But the couple’s long-harboured travel bug has now struck them again and, regrettably, suitcase packing has led to house marketing. Recently reduced to €682,500, this property would be a fine choice for those who like their interiors meticulously and luxuriously planned, but their outdoors totally unspoilt. ■

Allez Français
Tel: 0033 (0)5 55 28 46 40
allez-francais.com

