

# Drop anchor

Wanting a sea change in their lives, **Jane** and **Graham Innes** bought a property in France



Lots of people dream of packing up all their goods and chattels and heading off into the sunset to sample life in another country but, for whatever reason, many don't actually go ahead with it. Graham and I were determined that, come hell or high water, or in fact both, we were going to give it a go.

When you tell people that you are going to move to another country, you are normally met with one of two reactions: "what on earth do you want to do that for? It will be much harder than you think," or "I wish I had done that when I had the chance".

Nothing was going to stop us. Our house in the UK had taken four years to sell due to the economic downturn but during that time our plans of moving to France had never wavered, so we decided to view this as a good omen.

For those four years we felt our life was on hold. It was as if we were being pulled back in a catapult – having all the plans, the hopes, the ideas of what we wanted to do next – but not being able to do any more than think about them and dream of the day when things would finally change.

**Moving on**  
When the house did eventually sell, it was like someone releasing the catapult and launching us into the next chapter of our lives with four years of catching up to do. And oh boy, did we do some catching up.

Within three months we had bought a yacht and had viewed over 20 houses in four regions

of France, before eventually falling in love with one of them. Fortunately, we both fell in love with the same house and the same yacht.

The summer was a whirlwind of driving and flying over to France to finalise everything with the new house and to generally get acquainted with the area in which we would be living, not to mention finding a marina and a berth for Gryphon, our yacht, to reside in.

While we were still resident in the UK, we tried to race or sail every weekend, to learn as much about our new acquisition as we possibly could in the limited time. We invited friends of ours from the yacht club (CYC at Amble – a very friendly and helpful bunch of people) to sail with us and help with improvements and suggest modifications: instrument requirements, sail trim, car positions for the various headsails etc.

Of course, there was also work – did I mention the work thing? Yes, that vital money-making exercise which finances all the fun, while often getting in the way of the fun. We aren't doing the retiring thing just yet. Oh no, we still need to work for the foreseeable future but there is no reason why we can't enjoy the occasional adventure along the way.

## Fleet dream

Autumn was approaching, the completion date was fixed, and as our sailing days diminished, we were gearing up for the furniture to be sent over to France.

The signing of the *compromis* had been done



Jane and Graham were determined to make their dream of buying a home in France a reality and are now enjoying a new life in Lot

## and a gleaming yacht and set sail for a life of adventure in sunny Lot

several months earlier, so now it was time to make sure our last-minute personal items, the cycles and the summer tyres for the car, were delivered to the removal company, ready to join us over there the day after signing at the *notaire's* office. The moving in of our bigger items of furniture is all a bit of a blur.

The removal van was in fact more like an articulated wagon with a 40-foot trailer attached; it couldn't quite make it up the last 300 metres of the the winding hillside to our house entrance. This meant that we had to load everything onto sack barrows, wheelbarrows and anything else with wheels and manhandle all of our belongings up the last part of the meandering road, the type of which seems to lead to every French property.

Graham had a week off work and then it was up to me to get cracking on the unpacking while he returned to the UK – a wise move on his part, as the heating was a little unpredictable and would stop working when it got really cold. It's all character-building stuff though, and once we found a good heating engineer everything was fine.

My role in France was to get the house ready to rent out as a holiday retreat over the summer months while we moved out to live aboard Gryphon. This involved lots of unpacking, painting, moving around furniture and hiding clutter while taking the photographs. I don't know how many times I had to retake photos because there was a stack of packing boxes which managed to sneak into the camera shot.

We wanted to call the property a different name for the rental, so it was a toss-up between Bongo Tree Barn (the land of the Bongo Tree as famously mentioned in *The Owl and The Pussycat*, who went to sea in a pea green boat) and Bijou Barn, our jewel in the French countryside. It was a tough decision but Bijou won in the end – mainly because it was easier to say and quicker to explain, especially in another language.

At the turn of the year we set a date for sailing Gryphon to France, and as it was six months away, it felt like we had lots of time. However, as five months passed, it suddenly became very real and very exciting. To be fair, we love sailing, and even a trip out into Alnmouth Bay overlooking the majestic ruins of Warkworth Castle is exciting enough, let alone setting off on a journey that will take us down the east coast of England then across the Channel and round to the Atlantic Coast.

### Feeling listless

Life became a selection of to-do lists subdivided into to-buy and to-pack lists. As time went on these became to-do, still-to-do and must-be-done-now lists.

Graham was in charge of the yacht-related lists, from getting the engine serviced to lifting her out and anti-fouling the hull, plus sourcing all the necessary spares, together with the paperwork, before sorting out the dinghy and life raft, not to mention the supplies needed for the journey.

Then there was organising the crew (friends were going to help us on various legs of the adventure) and the passage plan itself, outlining how we would actually get to a destination, the best time to leave and approximately how long it might take to get there in different states of tide and wind.

I also had a list in France which involved getting everything ready for our first guests at Bijou Barn. The huge pile of non-iron bedding and fluffy towels kept on growing, while I started packing up items that I had just unpacked, plus collating information about the area, as well as my biggest challenge at that time, which was getting to grips with swimming pool maintenance.

### A thousand miles with a thousand smiles

Sailing Gryphon to France was the final part of our plan, the leaving of one port to sail to a completely new one. Our last few belongings were safely stowed to be carried to the next place by one of the oldest forms of transport.

There is something quite magical about sailing as it gives you the ultimate freedom, which seems quite fitting as we were setting off in search of a new life. Leaving somewhere, no matter how exciting the prospect of your new life to be seems, can be tinged with sadness, as you say goodbye to a place and community you have really enjoyed being a part of.

And so the lovely sunny morning was clouded by a soupçon of regret as we left a ▶





**Clockwise from top:** Avoiding rocks off the French coast; Jane in her element at Gryphon's helm; Jane and Graham on board; Gryphon in the harbour of Le Palais on Belle Île

marina and yacht club we had loved being a part of. The beauty of sailing though is that it doesn't allow you much time to be sad, as you must focus on what lies ahead and the fun and adventure that will unravel as the journey unfolds. How much like life itself sailing is.

The first leg of the trip was going to be the longest (37 hours in total) including a night sail but it all went well, aided by our pie diet (yes it is possible to eat 12 pies in one day, but that was between four of us!). The night sail wasn't too difficult with help from the silvery moon and a drop in wind speed providing a peaceful passage over an unusually calm North Sea. Lowestoft came and went, and this was soon followed by a rainy sail past the Thames Estuary to Ramsgate.

The next part of the trip would include the passage across the Channel, a notoriously busy stretch of water where you really need your wits about you. As we approached Dover, we prepared for the onslaught of ferries and cargo ships, but were surprised as there was very little shipping leaving from Dover and none arriving from the French side. Then we heard on the news that an unexploded bomb had been found just off Calais and all traffic had been suspended. It was certainly our gain as we enjoyed a very relaxing sail.

### Bienvenue en France

We were excited as we approached the French coast but nothing could have prepared us for the wonderful welcome that awaited. We were heading for a marina a few kilometres up an estuary. As we approached the mouth of the estuary we had a visitor – a large and very playful dolphin leapt out of the water right

beside us as if to say welcome to France.

It was quite a spectacle which lasted over 10 minutes; the dolphin swam playfully at the bow and actually nudged the boat as we sailed along as if it was trying to guide us. Then when it felt we were safely on our way into the estuary, it disappeared as quickly as it arrived.

Brittany has a very impressive coastline which we had never experienced before, with lovely seaside towns and villages such as Roscoff, Camaret, Benodet and Piriac, all selling wonderfully fresh seafood. The sailing

was great and Gryphon was certainly looking after us, in both calm and choppy waters.

We ate and drank on board at times as well, and I even made ham, cheese and chilli muffins on a day sail – it was funny having the smell of baking coming from the cooker as we were sailing along. What wasn't quite so funny was when I spilled four gin and tonics in the saloon all over me and a friend's sleeping bag – however, Bill did say he

slept well among the gin fumes that night!

When you are sailing you get the opportunity to reduce the technology you use as you embrace this very old mode of transport, where nature takes charge of your pace of life. However, sometimes technology allows you to experience unique ways to communicate, which until recently would have been impossible. One such event was a FaceTime connection with one of my best friends who was celebrating a special birthday. We were sailing aboard Gryphon off the French coast on a grey and choppy day, while my friend was in a peaceful mountain retreat in Japan – we talked for 10 minutes across a good quality video connection, amazing!

The beauty of sailing is that it doesn't allow you much time to be homesick, as you must focus on what lies ahead and the fun and adventure that will take place as the journey unfolds

### Southward bound

With every day we discovered a new place to explore, each destination offering something unique. As we travelled further south and our attire became more summery, it was hard to remember that not so long ago we were sporting several layers topped with winter sailing jackets, woolly hats and waterproofs.

Although we were travelling pre-peak season, popular destinations were starting to get busy and finding a berth or even a mooring was becoming more of a challenge. We were never turned away though, as the harbour masters and marina staff always found somewhere for us as if it were a personal challenge to squeeze in every vessel, in order to maximise revenues and tourists for that particular area.

To say some marinas were cosy was an understatement, but it all added to the fun, and once moored up we had the freedom to visit some quintessentially French ports and marinas such as La Rochelle and St-Martin on Île de Ré. We will definitely return.

After a five-week trip from Amble covering 1,000 fun-filled miles, we finally moored up at Gryphon's new home, Port Medoc, an hour north of Bordeaux. It was hard to believe that this amazing trip had come to an end but we had learned so much.

We had seen parts of the UK and France that we had never seen before; from the Isles of Wight, Alderney and Guernsey to the many varied seaside destinations of France. Whether it was a quiet mooring or a berth in a busy marina by a lively town, we made the most of every atmosphere.

As we drove back to the house, we couldn't help but smile as we recalled our adventures – an unforgettable experience etched in our memories forever. ■

[bijoubarn.blogspot.co.uk](http://bijoubarn.blogspot.co.uk)

**Next month**  
Jane shares some great advice for those starting afresh in a new location