

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Photographs: Colin Usher

Our creation story

Seeking a challenge, artist **Julia Douglas** and drumming photographer husband **Colin Usher** explore France's south west

If you're interested in visiting France because it's famed for its high quality cuisine and wine, laid-back lifestyle, bustling markets, lush landscape and extremely good chance of warm sunshine from early spring to late autumn, Lot-et-Garonne will tick all your boxes.

You'll need to be organised though... even the shops that sell lunch here close for a two-hour lunch.

Colin and I started planning our move to France in 2014. We were living a nice wee life in our rented cottage in the countryside in East Lothian, but were feeling frustrated that a good chunk of our income was paying off someone else's mortgage.

We were also eager for a new challenge in our work life, a new venture we could get our teeth into, that built on our passions, knowledge and contacts, that was sociable and helped other people develop new skills and ideas, and also, that would be an investment for our future.

We met and married in our late

thirties and, being self-employed, with no existing property purchase or inheritance, we had little chance of buying a house in or around Edinburgh, where the average house price at the time was over £400,000.

We have both been working in Scotland in the creative industries for many moons now, Colin as a digital media professional, photographer and drummer, and me as a textile and mixed media artist, web designer, and Administrator and Exhibition Coordinator for the Society of Scottish Artists.

We love what we do and because of this, our work and play often overlap. We spend much of our free time on cultural pursuits, or volunteering to help friends with their own creative businesses by making promotional videos for them, taking their

"We had little chance of buying a house in or around Edinburgh"

Nérac, above, near to where Julia Douglas and Colin Usher are setting up a creative retreat

headshots or building their website for example. Truth is, we both get a kick out of knowing that we have helped another creative person progress their business.

With this in mind it suddenly struck us... What about trying to get our hands on a property that provides a year-round residency programme for creative professionals? Somewhere where we could provide a supportive environment, a change of pace and the space to create.

Where should this be located and how could we raise the deposit required for the premises?

With the Central Belt of Scotland being so expensive, we started looking at property prices further afield and, after some considerable searching, noticed what you could buy in some parts of France, where house prices were averaging €125,000 in the last year (about £100,000).

We decided to start looking in earnest at the south west of France as the destination for the next chapter in

our lives. Everything looked amazing from Scotland, but we didn't want to risk choosing an area that wasn't going to be right for the business so we needed a closer look. It needs to be picturesque and peaceful for our visitors, so they can focus on research and development time for their creative practice (be that art, design, craft, writing, music... tightrope walking!). There also has to be enough around to stimulate those who need a little external boost of inspiration, be that stunning architecture or landscape, bustling market squares or extraordinary people to talk to.

There are three locations with direct and cheap flights from Edinburgh: Bergerac, Bordeaux and Poitiers. By drawing three circles on the map with a 150km radius around these three cities, our location research began. Our map took in the regions of Aquitaine, Limousin and Poitou-Charentes and we were soon planning a few trips over with a long list of suitable properties to view.

A short drive south east of Bordeaux took us to Nérac in the Lot-et-Garonne and, following a trip to the Saturday morning market where we sampled organic Armagnac, drooled over mountains of fresh strawberries and drank coffee outside a local café while basking in the sunshine, this was a clear contender.

Don't get me wrong, the Dordogne department, just a wee bit further north, is absolutely stunning. If you're heading that way be sure not to miss the village of Beynac, built on the cliffs along the Dordogne River and Sarlat-la-Canéda, with its maze of 15th-century buildings. However, it is referred to as Dordogneshire for a good reason. The majority of voices you will hear are English. One of the huge attractions of the Lot-et-Garonne to us is that it feels authentic. Yes, you hear English being spoken, but the main language is most definitely French, with many locals speaking little or no English at all. Colin and I are learning French but, as yet, are not really at a conversational level. Despite the language barrier, the locals really are extremely friendly and welcoming down here, with an introductory conversation often going like this:

"I'm sorry but I don't speak French very well. I am learning – slowly."

"That's OK; I don't speak English very well either! Are you English?"

"NO, Scottish!"

"AH, BREXIT! You stay with us and tell the English to push off!"

The Auld Alliance is clearly still in force.

It's not a wealthy area. People seem to value time over money here and socialising is a vital part of daily life. These people love to party. May offers an abundance of excuses for bank holidays and during July and August you can go out every single night to a town or village market to buy fruit and vegetables grown on your doorstep, eat freshly roasted meat, drink locally produced wine and generally make merry with your neighbours.

Small-scale farming is abundant here. A meander along a quiet road will take you past fields of sweetcorn, orchards of fruit trees, vineyards and sunflowers galore. The views are spectacular. You can see all the way to the horizon past this patchwork of coloured fields, occasionally just making out the Pyrenees over 200km away. Skies are high and huge and blue – and space feels unlimited.

We decided this was definitely the place for the creative retreat and so we were on to the next challenge. How could we raise the money for the deposit? We developed a three-pronged plan of attack: Spend less and save, make more and save, ask for support and save. How could two frugal people spend less and save? Well, we could move to a cheaper rental property, for a start. It seemed silly to look for a new rental in Scotland, so we found a place to rent in the Lot-et-Garonne that is £172 cheaper per month. As this house is in a village we can also manage with one car and, being in France, our wine budget has automatically reduced by half. Now, a mission to work on those other two lines of attack, whilst searching out the ultimate property to purchase for the creative retreat we call Studio Faire... ■

To contribute to Julia and Colin's crowdfunding campaign at Indiegogo during August, visit www.studiofaire.co.uk



Julia Douglas and Colin Usher are getting creative in south west France

POSTCARD



Alpine route

Switzerland now has the world's longest, deepest rail tunnel. Danya Bazaraa takes a look

Wandering past a stall at the opening festival for the Gotthard Base Tunnel, I grin at different slogans emblazoned on merchandise for sale. "We love shortcuts," reads one T-shirt, a reference to the reduced travel time the new rail route through the Alpine Gotthard massif will afford both residents and visitors. The journey from Zurich to Milan, I'm told by an enthusiastic stallholder, will now take less than three hours.

I'm visiting during a two-day festival to mark the grand opening of the 57km tunnel, which is set to begin a full service at the end of the year. A brass band plays at one of the celebration sites in Rynacht as part of the entertainment, interactive games help visitors learn about the tunnel, and there are food stalls aplenty selling Swiss cheese and meats.

Seventeen years in the making, the world's longest and deepest railway tunnel is clearly a cause for celebration and the patriotic Swiss are relishing the opportunity to honour the country's 1,800 workers, whose blood, sweat and tears went into its creation.

Dining solo in a cosy wooden restaurant on my first night in Alpine village Andermatt, which lies on one

side of the Gotthard Pass, I get talking to one of those workers. "I helped build that tunnel," says 26-year-old Patrick. "I worked on the skeleton four years ago. For six months, I would start at 6am and finish at 8pm every day. I wouldn't see daylight and it would be 35 degrees down there."

The next morning, I ride through the tunnel from Rynacht to the quaint village of Pollegio, and try to picture what it might have been like to work on the project. I feel a surge of adrenalin as we zip along at 250km per hour and spend the rest of my 20-minute journey feeling dreamy as lights illuminating the route merge into one. In the darkness, I almost forget where I am.

Yet, as I hurtle back into daylight and a magnificent mountainous landscape, the realisation of being engulfed in nature exhilarates me.

The flat, hi-tech Gotthard Base Tunnel may lack the same scenic appeal, but by being more energy efficient and also alleviating the burden of traffic from the Alpine area, it's helping to preserve the environment and fresh Swiss air.

Besides, travellers still have the option to make a return trip on the original Gotthard train line, which links Immensee in the north to Chiasso in the canton of Ticino.

right on track

Completed in 1882, it's one of Switzerland's most historic tourist rail routes, climbing 1,100m and meandering across 205 bridges.

I hop on to sample part of the route from Zurich to Goeschenen, and sit next to a beautiful, fresh-faced grandmother for most of the one-hour and 40-minute journey. She tells me how there's nowhere else where you switch so frequently between hills, lakes, mountains and greenery when travelling. She lived in Paris for six years but used to dream about the green grass of Switzerland.

I'm told to look out for the Baroque church in Wassen, which can be seen three times from different angles

The realisation of being engulfed in nature exhilarates me

along our way, demonstrating how the rail routes curve.

Luckily I have my Swiss Travel Pass (from £154 for three days) which allows me unlimited travel on trains, boats and most buses across 75 towns and cities. I take the opportunity to explore different routes from my base in Andermatt. Traditionally a ski village, Andermatt is sleepy and quiet in the spring – although in July and August, it's full of mountain bikers, hikers and rock climbers.



Photographs: PA

Clockwise from main: Andermatt; view from the train from Zurich to Erstfeld; Danya Bazaraa watches the train exit the tunnel at Andermatt

There's lots of development taking place here – the new Chedi hotel is a high-end chalet-style block of apartments located next to the train station, which I find a good balance between modern and quaint.

On my final morning, while tucking into delicious cheese from the region, I share reflections from my weekend with a waitress at the Hotel Monopol-Metropol, where I've spent a relaxing three nights. She tells me she loves how restful Andermatt is, but at some point, she will move back to a city as she "misses the sparkle" of city life.

I understand what she means, but as I gaze at the dusting of snow high on rocky peaks, I draw a different conclusion. The mountains, lakes and valleys have their own special sparkle, which could easily keep me here for a few more days. ■

Danya was a guest of Ffestiniog Travel (www.ffestiniogtravel.com), which offers tailor-made holidays and escorted tours by rail to Switzerland. A nine-night escorted trip with B&B accommodation, all rail travel and first class Swiss Travel Pass costs from £1,655pp (two sharing), based on a 5 October departure. For SWISS flight reservations, visit www.swiss.com; www.myswitzerland.com

48 HOURS IN

Opatija, Croatia

Friday, midday
Check in to the Hotel Bevanda right on the Adriatic waterfront (doubles from £150, www.bevanda.hr), a stylish retreat that is a favourite with the Croatian cognoscenti. Splash out and book a room with a hot tub.

1pm
Tuck into a pasta or fish feast at the family run Kaneta (tel: 051-712 222). A standout is their roasted octopus main, though you can just have a little grilled as a starter, too.

3pm
If you're interested in the history behind what is now Croatia's biggest industry, head to the Croatian Museum of Tourism (www.hrmt.hr), where the grand belle époque building is as much part of the appeal as the tourism exhibition.

7:30pm
Dine in at the Bevanda, where Croatian Master Chef star Andrej Barbieri works wonders with Croatia's fine local produce. Book a window table for epic Adriatic views.

Saturday, 10am
Stroll along the lungomare promenade to the waterfront village of Volosko, looking out for dolphins.

1pm
Volosko is renowned amongst Croatian gastronomes as a foodie hideaway. Enjoy fresh seafood given the molecular treatment at award-winning Le Mandrac (www.lemandrac.com).

4pm
Back in Opatija, relax and smell the



roses – or rather, the myriad exotic flora – at the Angiolina Park, a lovely quiet corner full of bright colour and deep scents.

7pm
Istria is famous for its truffles, which you can enjoy in various dishes at Istranska. They stage live music in summer, too.

9pm
The delicious cherry-flavoured Maraschino makes for an ideal digestif, best enjoyed with a sea breeze on the terrace at Hemingway (www.hemingway.hr).

Sunday, 9am
The Bevanda has a speedboat which you can rent out for a few hours for an unforgettable Adriatic boat trip. It will help you fully appreciate this old Austro-Hapsburg resort's dramatic setting between mountain and sea. ■

Robin McKelvie

Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies to Pula from London Stansted from £66.58 return. Hire a car at the airport from Holiday Autos (www.holidayautos.co.uk), with Opatija an hour away.

BARGAIN BREAKS

You can see the woods

To celebrate its 10th birthday, Forest Holidays is offering a 10 per cent discount on all summer stays in its luxury woodland cabins during August, across all nine locations. Prices including discount start from £445 for a three-night stay in a luxury cabin with a hot tub for four in Cropton, Yorkshire.

Call 03330 110495 or see www.forestholidays.co.uk

Wine be the glory

Book before 31 August for Uniworld's eight-day all-inclusive Bordeaux, Vineyards & Chateaux river cruise tour from £1,535 per person (was £2,935). Depart 4 or 18

September and sail on the Garonne, Dordogne and Gironde rivers. It includes seven nights' twin-share onboard accommodation in a Riverview Stateroom, all meals and beverages, onshore excursions and transfers. Flights not included. Call 0808 281 1125 or see www.uniworld.com

A berth in Berlin
Fly from Glasgow to Berlin on 23 August and stay for two nights at the four-star Leonardo Hotel Berlin City West on a room-only basis, all from £170 per person based on two adults sharing. Call 0844 412 5970 or see www.thomascook.com