

A sense of belonging

Clare Rolt delves into some tried-and-tested ways of integrating into the local French community

One of our basic human needs is to belong. Gaining a sense of place, connecting with people and developing friendships - according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs - is one of the most important things for people to be able to feel motivated and, above all, happy.

So, how do you do this in a new country where you may not speak the language and you perhaps don't know anyone? You may be leaving behind the place you grew up, close friendship groups and family, to start your new life in France. So where do you start trying to gain that sense of belonging that is so important for well-being and mental health?

It's something I had to do more than 16 years ago with my husband and one-year-old daughter. We decided to leave our home town, where we'd grown up, where all of our family and friends were, to start out in France. With the house chosen and work established, we set about meeting people and embracing the French way of life. Here are our tried-and-tested ways of getting to know people and gaining a sense of belonging in our new home.



GET TO KNOW THE LOCALS

This is the first step towards starting to feel integrated and showing that you want to become part of the community. It could be that first smile and hello to a friendly face while out walking the dog, a brief exchange as you see each other in the village or inviting your neighbours over for an aperitif to introduce yourselves.

However you choose to take that initial move, showing that you're friendly, willing to make the effort, regardless or not of whether you speak the language, is really important.

PARTICIPATE IN LOCAL EVENTS

Most villages hold regular events as a way of bringing people together and raising money for the local commune. When we first moved to France, our neighbours invited us to all sorts of village get-togethers, which we consistently went to. From *moules-frites* to paella evenings, and from summer barbecues to winter *cassoulet* - all delicious meals served in the local *salle des fêtes* while listening to the local band.

We found it was a great way to begin to build relationships



€195,000

FONTIVILLIE, DEUX-SÈVRES

A rural location for this lovely two-bedroom, one-bathroom renovated property and just five minutes from the bustling market town of Melle. The property is set in nearly 5,000m² of land with a wildflower meadow, fruit trees and vegetable patch.



€413,400

LA CHAPELLE-MONTBRANDEIX, HAUTE-VIENNE

This gorgeous five-bedroom property with two-bedroom guest house, pool and potential studio flat, is situated in a small village in the heart of the Périgord-Limousin regional park. There is a bar/restaurant and small delicatessen within walking distance.

with the people in our village, who evidently saw us as new people willing to embrace their way of life. Such events are often advertised on posters at the town hall or around the village, on social media or in magazines at the tourist office. From tea dances to organised hikes and bingo, there's plenty going on whatever the season and size of village.

EVERYONE LOVES A VOLUNTEER!

As time goes on and you get to know the locals, you can become part of the committee that helps to organise village events, or just simply offer to lend an extra pair of hands.

Friends of ours who retired to France always help out at the local get-togethers, whether to serve drinks, wash dishes or clear tables. They are proud to be part of their community, and as such are welcomed with open arms. They make an effort to speak French; sometimes they are understood and sometimes they aren't, but they are always willing to try.

EMBRACE FRENCH TRADITIONS

Joining in events held for the national holidays is a good idea too, to show you understand and embrace French traditions - the main one being the Fête Nationale for Bastille Day on



€236,500

BOUILLES-ST-SÉBASTIEN, DORDOGNE

A pretty three-bedroom, three-bathroom stone property set on the edge of a village, with stunning views from its terrace. There is a large well-equipped kitchen, living room, study and more than an acre of land for you to put your stamp on.



€250,000

ST-SAVINIEN, CHARENTE-MARITIME

Set in a tranquil location, this beautiful three-bedroom, two-bathroom Charentaise stone property is only 7km from St-Savinien and not far from the coast. The property has wonderful country views and a quarter of an acre of mature gardens.



€141,700

CASTILLONNÈS, LOT-ET-GARONNE

A 13th-century historic property situated in the heart of a town, it has a lovely terrace that is perfect for watching the world go by. The two-bedroom, two-bathroom house has an open-plan kitchen/diner/living room and the potential for a third bedroom.



€599,000

POUILLÉ, VENDÉE

Enjoy the space at this stunning six-bedroom, five-bathroom 'maison de maître'. It has 7,300m² of gardens, a heated swimming pool and numerous outbuildings. Set in a pretty village just 10 minutes from a town and 30 minutes from the coast.

14 July, where there may be an organised dinner, celebration and firework display. There is also always a memorial for Armistice Day on 11 November, where villagers get together at the local town hall or cemetery to commemorate the signing of the Armistice. A wreath is often laid and the French flag is raised, and people join together to mark the event. Respecting these traditions and wanting to be part of them shows you understand their significance to France's history and people.

JOIN LOCAL CLUBS

Look out for local clubs and activities that interest you. Perhaps you enjoy sewing,

“Where do you start trying to gain that sense of belonging that is so important for wellbeing?”

playing rugby, or being part of a choral group? Whatever you enjoy, you will find something to suit advertised in the local tourist office, sports halls or Facebook groups.

Sometimes, the most daunting step is approaching the clubs and getting started, but once you have, you'll soon be able to practise your skills and feel part of the group.

I have a friend who joined the local ping-pong club, and goes to training and matches. Now at every local event we go to, he always stops to talk to his friends from ping-pong. (Turn to page 86 to read more about joining clubs in France.)

TAKE UP A NEW HOBBY

Learn something new and integrate into your local

community at the same time! Why not take up hiking? Or learn to salsa? Perhaps you always wanted to improve your photography or art skills? The more open you are to trying new activities, the easier it will be to get to know new people. There are French language lessons for all levels too.

If you're thinking of making France your home, have recently moved or even visit regularly, there are lots of ways to integrate - just go for it! ■

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€176,550

CASTANET, TARN-ET-GARONNE

A charming stone three-bedroom home set in a quiet hamlet in the heart of the Rouergue countryside, and not far from one of the most beautiful villages in France. The property has been beautifully renovated, while retaining lots of original character features.



€390,000

YOUZAN, CHARENTE

Nestled in a fantastic country location, yet just a short drive from the city of Angoulême, is this detached five-bedroom, three-bathroom modern property. It has a large garden, lovely 8x4m salt-water swimming pool and village amenities are close by.

CASE STUDIES

Many of my colleagues at Beaux Villages have made the move to France and worked hard to integrate into their community. Here are their stories:

Rachida Low, property consultant in Charente, and her husband David



I moved to France over 20 years ago with my husband, having run a pub in England. We sold our business in the UK as we wanted a new challenge and I've worked in an estate agency ever since.

I took a language degree at university so am fluent in French, but David not so much. He gets by because he loves talking to people and takes the time to chat as he is retired. He finds Google Translate a godsend!

When we first moved over to France, we found having our dogs was a great icebreaker. We would walk them in the village, and people would often stop to talk to us and fuss over the dogs. We would then invite our neighbours over for an apéritif

and find that the labour would be quickly returned. Now, we'll regularly dine at each other's houses. I've helped out with English lessons in the village too, and take part in yoga and pilates.

I'm now president of the village association and help to organise village functions. David often finds himself volunteered for the setting and clearing up! Recently, I've been asked to be on the village council, so have become a French citizen to allow me to do so. Joining sports clubs and helping out at local events are great ways to integrate.

Alice McCall-Judson and her husband Justin, both independent property consultants in the Dordogne



I live in the north of the Dordogne with my husband, Justin, our two little girls, who are three and five years old, and various cats and chickens! We've lived here nearly five years now.

We have great neighbours and that has helped France feel like

home really quickly. If we need help or support in any way we can call on our neighbours or a wider network of people to come to the rescue - and it's nice being able to do that for others too.

Having children has made integrating seamless - it happens so naturally when they first start going to school. You get to know everyone over time as it's such a small community and I can't drive from A to B without waving at someone in the car, which I love!

Justin is bilingual, while I take lessons and have built my confidence by speaking to other French mum friends. As well as this, we frequent the boulangerie nearly every day and go to the weekly village market. Justin also volunteered as a pompier when we first arrived and we got to know everyone through that.

I've found that there are always clubs to join - the choir, walking/ cycling or sports clubs. We've just joined the tennis club and are meeting even more new people through that. If you're stuck for ideas, ask your local mairie or look at Facebook groups.

Jacqui Reddin-Williams, independent property consultant in Charente-Maritime, and Maynard, her husband

I've lived in France for 20 years now, having moved over with my husband and two children, who were five and nine years



old at the time. We wanted to give our children a simpler, more old-fashioned childhood.

I've always spoken pretty much fluent French, but Maynard didn't speak any. He learnt quickly how to speak fluent but very bad French! It isn't about accuracy - it's about making the effort.

It was very important for me and my family to integrate into the community and even now I still help newcomers get introduced to their neighbours. When we first moved over I gave free English lessons in exchange for help with French for my kids and that helped us get to know people quite quickly. French people think we drink tea every day at a o'clock, so invite them for tea and they will invite you back for an opérol

I also show dogs and volunteer at the local refuge and I think that is great for integrating - getting a hobby or becoming a volunteer. I would say to others wanting to integrate, just smile and say bonjour - a smile is understood in every language!