

Getting plastered in the Charente

When I revealed that I was paying to sleep in a tent and get filthy on a *chantier école* (or ‘building site school’), people looked at me as if I were – to use that delightful French euphemism – a trifle *brave*.

Of all the options I could have chosen in this land of multifarious activity holidays, I had to choose this one. I could have spent a week studying *haute cuisine*, sketching in Provence, potting in Brittany, screenwriting in Dordogne, or even walking with a donkey along the leafy bridal paths of the Corrèze.

So you need a pressing reason to commit yourself to a week of hard labour. In return for helping André and Coralie de Bouter complete their *maison-en-paille* near Angoulême in the Charente, you feed copiously on Coralie’s excellent wholefood meals and you learn from André about the idiosyncrasies of building with straw bales. Among other things: how to cut, shape and re-tie straw bales, how to mix and apply a rough base coat of earth and chopped straw, and how to make a flour paste to stabilise a sumptuous finish of fine clay/sand plaster.

Me, I am intending to build a straw bale house of our own. My four fellow ‘holiday-makers’ were also selected for equally compelling motivations. So we were all, so to speak, plastering from the same bucket. A small but eager band of helpers, ready to rough it in return for some invaluable theory and practice.

Nevertheless, I drove west on the quiet Sunday roads with some trepidation. What would the group be like? Would we get on or just get on each other’s nerves? Leaving the *route nationale* and following the D-road that leads you over the gently undulating landscape of oak woods and stumpy cognac vines to my destination, I felt like a little boy going to a party. That same combination of excitement and panic.

On arrival, the garden was already full of cars. A moustachioed man came to greet me. Not *mein host*, but Arno: a Dutchman from the Puy de Dôme. We were both relieved to discover that we could chat in English when the French got too much for us. Together we joined the group of family, friends and participants gathered around a makeshift table, swapping tales, drinking tea and eating cake.

Discreetly left to our own devices, The Five soon began to gel. Two French women, a Swiss woman, a Dutchman and a 9 stone English weakling, united by a common language. Clearly – and thankfully – no chance of the week turning into some macho ‘Muscle-Fest’. As the grey evening clouds threatened, Arno and Virginie helped me struggle with a flapping fly sheet and put up my shelter before the heavens opened. An *esprit de corps* was already emerging.

The routine for the week quickly fell into place. Breakfast on the hoof at eight; then some tuition and work for three hours; a traditional communal lunch; question time and more work till six. Then showers all round in the outside straw ‘facilities’, followed by dinner with the de Bouters and an evening in the caravan, relaxing with some of the technical books and videos at our disposal. Volunteers in turn would help Coralie prepare the meal, and tidy up afterwards. With arms aching from the effort of mixing mud and straw plaster in a plastic dustbin, I made some curries to celebrate Virginie’s 34th birthday.

The Five got on famously. If something in the conversation eluded Arno and me, then André – a multilingual Dutchman – and Esther, who had spent ten years in London, were able to translate. To participate in the cultural exchange of national customs and philosophy was, of course, to endure the usual jibes about British cuisine. Yes, we eat baked beans and coloured jelly (but not together). And I found myself shouldering an expatriate’s guilt for contributing to the relentless rise in house prices.

But came Friday afternoon – when we surveyed our achievement – it was high-fives and hugs all round with a commitment to help on each other’s projects. My hands were pitted and scabbed, but my head was clearer. I knew more about what was ahead of me and felt buoyed

by my colleagues' faith in my venture. 'Brave' in the literal sense of the word: courageous, even audacious.

And would I do it all over again? With a similar motivation, you bet your heavy-duty work gloves I would. But if it were ambience and repose I sought, then that trek with the donkeys might be rather more tempting.

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On Thursday evening, The Five shared their experiences of the week: Arno the 'Action Man', who runs a gîte and chambres d'hôte with his wife in the Puy de Dôme; Virginie, the puppeteer, who is moving from Toulouse to the Cherbourg peninsular; Christine and Esther from the Ardeche, who are hoping to renovate a barn and build a straw bale house in the Lot; and me.

The verdict was uniformly positive. André's generosity with his knowledge, experience and resources, Coralie's cooking, baby Antonin's ingratiating smiles, the Wednesday afternoon question session and the *bonheur* of coming together to share such a unique opportunity to learn were all thoroughly appreciated.

Arno would have liked more meat, Esther more structure, and Christine wasn't comfortable with André's experiment to work in Zen-like silence as we plastered the straw one afternoon. But there were no 'worst moments'. So let me fill that particular vacuum. It was a toss-up between stubbing my toe in the middle of each night on the bonsai walnut tree just outside the loo and the realisation on the first day that a man who hopes to build his own house can't put his tent up unaided.

Find out more

Due to excessive demand, the de Bouters have decided to replace the *chantier école* this year with their full Straw Bale workshop. The cost of 350 euros* includes tuition, meals and on-site camping. Participants need motivation, a good command of French, work clothes, a tent, an alarm clock and realistic expectations of comfort levels.

The programme for 2004 will be decided and published next January.

More information is available on the de Bouters' excellent and comprehensive website: www.la-maison-en-paille.com To register your interest, you should send an e-mail (in French) to m.ep@laposte.net or a stamped addressed envelope to: La Maison en Paille, Coralie & André De Bouter, 16290 Champmillon, France. Before inscription, you will be asked to outline your reasons for wanting to attend.

* Price valid for 2003.