



Alex and Greg with their two Labradors

**NAMES:** Alex Charles and Greg Taylor

**AGE:** 36 and 40

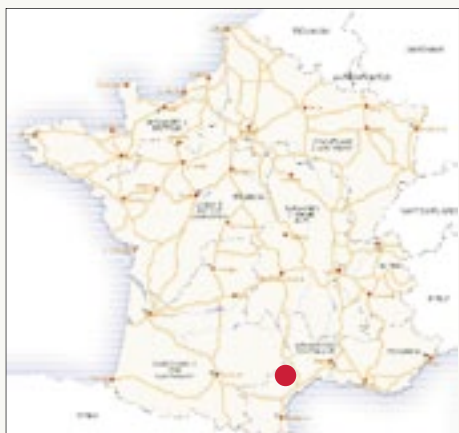
**JOB:** Set up a website design consultancy, MyWebSpinners, and a Languedoc property, travel and tourism site [www.creme-de-languedoc.com](http://www.creme-de-languedoc.com)

**WHERE:** Moved from a smart flat in a busy part of London to an old, stone-built terraced house in need of renovation in a village called Cessenon-sur-Orb, in department 34 of the Languedoc.

**CONTACT:**

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**Website:** [www.creme-de-languedoc.com](http://www.creme-de-languedoc.com)



## WHY BUY THERE: LANGUEDOC

■ Languedoc offers sustained, long-term capital appreciation combined with 300-plus days of rays per annum, making for a sunny outlook, whether you're buying a holiday home, a house for retirement, a permanent pad or a pure investment product. Prices are considerably lower than in neighbouring Provence.

■ The region boasts four airports (Montpellier, Nîmes, Perpignan and Carcassonne) offering quick, low-cost, regular flights to the UK. The quality of the French rail and motorway systems is very good too, making travelling a joy.

■ Languedoc wines are gaining a reputation for excellence, and family-friendly restaurants offer good food at value-for-money prices.

## GOT A REAL LIFE STORY?

### LET US TELL IT! CONTACT US:

Email [edit@frenchmagazine.co.uk](mailto:edit@frenchmagazine.co.uk) or write to French Magazine, Units 3 & 4, Riverside Court, Lower Bristol Road, Bath, BA2 3DZ

# Living the GOOD LIFE

Four years ago, Alex and Greg left London to start a new life in the Languedoc. The move meant time to enjoy their environment and no more commute – the couple run their property website, [www.creme-de-languedoc.com](http://www.creme-de-languedoc.com), from home. **Rebecca Chappell** talks to Alex to find out more

**I**n 2003, 30-something couple Alex Charles and Greg Taylor took the plunge and walked away from their comfortable London life to make a fresh start in the south of France. Their original plan was to move to Aix-en-Provence and start a business with friends there, but when they visited Alex's parents in the Languedoc, they found the region had everything they wanted, at a fraction of Provence prices. A chance meeting with a friendly local led them to consider renovating a run-down property, and the opportunity seemed obvious: there was certainly no shortage of old village homes in desperate need of tender loving care. Within three months, Alex and Greg found themselves the slightly nervous owners of not one but three ruins. Four years later, Greg and Alex have successfully renovated and sold two of their three French properties, and have made the third their permanent home.

### **French Magazine: What preparations did you make before you moved?**

**Alex Charles:** To be honest not as much as we should have! We chatted at length with the friends that we were going to go into business with in Aix and did a bit of reading – you know, the usual 'Move to France' books and had a look on the internet at property prices in the region we were moving to – but that was about it.

### **What do you do?**

We run a website ([www.creme-de-languedoc.com](http://www.creme-de-languedoc.com)) that provides property sales, rentals, travel and tourism information for Languedoc visitors and residents.

### **Could you speak French beforehand?**

#### **Have your language skills improved?**

I gave up French pre 'O' level and Greg had a basic knowledge of the language – so it was a bit of an up-hill struggle. It is not true that you can pick up the language just by living here! It takes hard work, practice and some formal teaching to get the grammar understood and French is not an easy language to learn. We enrolled in an excellent course, half day lessons twice a week but this proved to take up too much of our day as we were also trying to set up a business and renovate the house – so progress has been slow but we can get by.

### **Where do you live?**

In a lively, attractive village with good amenities, surrounded by vineyards, with swimming and fishing available in the nearby river Orb.

### **How have you benefited from your move?**

We live to work, instead of working to live! Thanks to the availability of what the French

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Alex and Greg enjoy the freedom of working from home; Taking the dogs for a long walk is now a part of their daily routine (right)



call ADSL, namely high-speed internet access, in our village, we can work from home, which has totally transformed our lives.

**What is your property like?**

It's a traditional stone-built village house with a great location in the middle of a village. It cost us just €26,000 in 2003, but it came with some serious drawbacks (like the absence of a bathroom, a rat-infested barn, an ancient, smelly toilet, soil floors, rotten window frames, water-damaged beams, a dodgy roof, dangerous wiring, prehistoric plumbing, sticky lino, some nasty 1970s wallpaper... and an attic full of pigeon droppings). We worked long and hard to restore it to its former glory, spending about €100,000 in the process. It came with two barns and an old wine vat which we converted, so we've now got 135 square metres of living space over three floors. By adding a sun-trap courtyard we transformed the house into a very comfortable, year-round living space, and its size means that we can work from home.

**Do you regularly go back to the UK?**

We pop back to catch up with friends and for work-related projects. In January every year we

go to London to visit Vive La France, the French travel and tourism show. With the high-speed TGV rail service only 20 minutes away and two airports within an hour's drive, access to the UK is no problem!

**What is the difference to living in the UK?**

Life is slower, and it's much less stressful compared to our London lifestyle, where we both had high-pressured jobs in advertising. There are still challenges to be met here, but when the going gets tough, we can go for a dip in the river or walk our Labradors through the vines and look at the beautiful scenery to remind ourselves we really have done the right thing. But don't be fooled into thinking making a living in France is easy.

**What is your favourite time of year in France?**

Spring in the Languedoc is wonderful. The days are getting warmer and the winter retreating. It is a burst of colour, scent and activity. We love the fact that the region is still tourist free but the weather lovely. It is like the whole countryside is waking up again and everywhere you look there is blossom and flowers. The

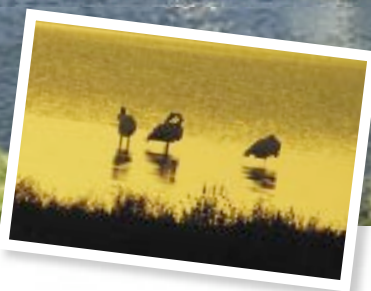
added bonus of the asparagus season followed by the amazing local cherries is also a bonus!

**Can you describe a typical day?**

Wake and go on a one-hour walk with the two dogs and chat about our plans for the day. Breakfast on the terrace in the sun, then the long commute to the office – all of a flight of stairs. The morning is spent working at home or in client meetings. We then break for a typical French lunch break and might grab a *formule* at our local café washed down with a *pichet* of *rouge*. Then back to the office for the afternoon stint which is punctuated with another walk with the dogs where we might all go for a swim in the local river – bliss! Finish off in the office and then we might meet friends for drinks and supper or just crash in the garden with a Pastis and a game of backgammon.

**In hindsight, is there anything you would have done differently?**

We are often frustrated by our language abilities – so I would certainly recommend that you start early and get the basics learnt. Also, I would suggest that you rent in the region you are interested in first – and really spend some »



time to get to know the area and the villages. It still amazes me how different the regions can be in terms of climate, type of housing, landscape and the impact these can have on you.

**Have you found it easy to integrate?**

On the whole, yes – although we are not French and will never be. We run our French registered business and have lots of great local friends – but we are British and there is no shame in still enjoying the company of your fellow countrymen or indeed of other expats. France has so much to offer but you do need to make the effort and go out of your way to meet people and make friends.

**Do you have any anecdotes?**

Our renovation project was going well until we removed the roofs of our two old barns, followed by the internal

wall that separated them, to create a large, open space that was to be the courtyard. Mortar and small stones started to fall out of the walls of our next door neighbour's house, and large cracks began to appear. We had an irate Frenchman knocking on our door and an emergency plan had to be quickly hatched: we built a new wall to provide support, and after several nail-biting days, disaster had been averted and all parties were back on speaking terms, thank goodness! We incurred considerable costs, but we learned a valuable lesson: always seek professional advice for particularly tricky tasks.

**Do your friends visit?**

Yes! And we love it when they do, but one word of warning: Always get them to hire a car and if you work from home you have to be strict about shutting the

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door and getting on with it! Difficult when you are surrounded by folks relaxing in the sun on holiday.

**Do you plan to stay in France permanently?**

We did not leave the UK under a cloud, but just wanted to take control of our lives and regain the life-work balance. We love to visit London and UK friends – but as a visitor. We could never go back. As far as living in France forever... we have no plans to leave – we love it! **fm**

Main picture: The Languedoc offers all kinds of outdoor pursuits; Inset: Wine, shopping and wildlife were three things to persuade Alex and Greg to choose the Languedoc region