

# Let's learn French together!

Dominique Mavrakis explains how she ended up teaching French to Brits in France

I was born in Dijon, the country of mustard and kir. My husband, a video artist and ethnologist, is from Cambridge. We met in Paris when I was teaching French at the Sorbonne. After teaching French in French schools for more than 30 years, and long stays in Tibet for my husband's work, it was time to go back to the Pyrénées where we had always wanted to retire.

'Le Presbytère' had been waiting for us. It was a massive building made of two houses where the priest and a community of nuns used to live. It had a big hall, a chapel – perfect for my husband's video studio – and a long enclosed garden.

We had to get it for our new project – we wanted to create a beautiful *maison d'hôtes* with a difference, where people would share our love for art, creativity, French and nature. *Le Presbytère* was perfect. Its price was not, but I have always trusted providence and here it came in the shape of Barbara, followed by a whole stream of Brits.

I bumped into Barbara at the repair shop in Mirepoix, our beautiful medieval town. No, her bread machine could not be fixed – 'Elle est foutue' – but Barbara could not understand the thick southern accent. 'Are you English?' I asked. 'No, Welsh!' she replied proudly.

Barbara, although retired long ago, lived high up a vertiginous path in a remote hamlet surrounded by three dogs, four cats and 12 chickens. She would often drive down to the *bricolage* store in her Gallic car. She asked me to help her with her French, followed by a friend and another. 'Le bouche à oreille' spread like wild fire. Soon many others came to the classes, to the surprise and joy of the villagers.

We can always recognise British people on market day at Mirepoix. Not only because you read your *Sunday Times* at the *terrasse*, but also because you all order *un grand café au lait* instead of a *crème!*

For the national *Journée du Goût* we organised a competition in Puivert. We had a huge English breakfast for the whole village with real English sausages (please don't ask me how we get them!) followed by Australian style chicken, Irish stew, English/Indian curry,

Japanese sushi (beautiful works of art made by my Japanese student Junko), roasted wild boar, Catalan snails, chocolate cake and English trifle! Not to mention seven kinds of Muscat aperitif and 'vin nouveau' that helped with the songs in French and English afterwards!

My students now range from six to 82 years old. Cameron (6) and his brother Jack (8) moved to our village with their family in September for 'La rentrée'. Like all the other children they arrived with their new satchels and stationary, but they couldn't speak or understand French. Jack later announced triumphantly to me, "you know what Dominique, we had a three-course meal at the canteen, we had bread with tomato and egg salad, bread with steak and potatoes and a third course of peaches and it's going to be like that everyday!" Now Cameron and Jack speak French with the local accent!

Through the courses, I meet lots of differ-

know the word 'le derrière', apparently because of an advert for a French car on British TV!

Local families love to receive guests for the intensive course I run. They proudly show them around and introduce them to our way of life.

My students start taking me seriously now when I produce our moon calendar, which predicts the weather. Last year, it announced that it would rain on August 15th and against all odds it did (fortunately for me!)

*Le Presbytère* is now on its way and guess what? The locals, now need to speak English so my students are taking turns teaching them – let's learn English together. Next life, I'll teach Tibetan!

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'Le Presbytère'

ent people I would never have known otherwise. We have a great time together as my students try to make sense of our totally illogical use of masculine and feminine tenses, attempting to pronounce 'portefeuille' and 'imperméable' and trying to get the difference between 'un slip' and 'une culotte'. They all

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