

Island in the sun

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Swept away by the enchanting Île de Ré, Karon Foxwell and husband Mark found themselves returning from their holiday having made an offer on a dilapidated period property there.

One of the beauties of holidaying in France is how easy it is to get carried away in the moment. Countless of us have done so and returned with an array of souvenirs to prove it; from the *boules* set gathering dust in the garage over the past decade, to the bottle of fragrance from the bespoke Parisian perfumery that cost 10 times what you'd normally pay.

As impulsive purchases go though, not so many of us arrive home having just made a serious offer on a French property - especially having set off on our travels without the remotest intention of buying a house in France.

Karon and Mark Foxwell, however, can place themselves squarely within this exclusive set, having returned from what can best be described as a remarkable holiday on France's west coast back in 2013.

"It was our first proper summer holiday without our daughters, taking our vintage Mercedes over on the ferry to Dieppe and touring down the north-west coast," recalls Karon, still quite dreamily. "The sun was shining, wind in our hair, staying in lovely châteaux. By the time we reached Île de Ré I think we were approaching a state of bliss."

HAPPY MEMORIES

Aside from this, Île de Ré, as many will attest, has the power to bewitch entirely by itself. Connected by a 3km bridge to La Rochelle in the mainland Charente-Maritime department, this beloved island, a slice of seaside heaven stretching 30km east to west and studded with languid pines, green-shuttered, whitewashed houses and endless miles of golden, sandy *plage*, is one of the jewels of the French coast.

"Mark is a keen sailor and used to come here when he was young," Karon explains, "so we had a fond history with Île de Ré - but this time we totally fell in love."

"We were staying in St-Martin-de-Ré, the island's gorgeous harbour capital and our hosts were a charming couple, both French and English, working in real estate, who we got on so well with they offered to show us some property in the town just for fun."

"It seemed like an amusing, unusual way to spend a few days away, indulging in the pipe dream of having a house here," she continues. "We even joked that we'd pretend to be potential cash buyers as we toured around!"

What Karon and Mark didn't know was that fate was playing its own game too.

"The first property we went to see was a historic house in the UNESCO World Heritage heart of St-Martin. It was a lovely building in a lovely part of the harbour, but in desperate need of renovation and modernisation, and when we left we casually mentioned how much we'd be prepared to pay for such a place after taking that into consideration," says Karon.

"We spent a few more blissful days on Île de Ré - and then on our return we got a call out of the blue, saying our offer on the property in St-Martin had, in principle, been accepted!"

"We were dumbfounded, obviously, to start with," Karon continues, "but it then slowly dawned that Mark was thinking seriously about this and we began to realise just what an impact the island and the house had had on both of us."

"Three and a half months later we found ourselves with a French mortgage, signing our contracts at the *notaire's* office."

"We'd spend the intervening time filling out endless forms, undergoing medical tests and financial investigation, and now we were about to embark on the full-scale renovation of a property in a different country." ▶

WHO:

Karon and Mark Foxwell

WHAT:

A luxury two-bedroom, 17th-century townhouse

WHY:

A harbourside holiday home

WHERE:

St-Martin-de-Ré





Owner Karon Foxwell



Karon and Mark's colourful furnishings stand out against the white walls of the *salon*



NEW LOOK

Not only was the property a good distance from their current home in West Sussex, it also needed rewiring, re-plumbing, a new kitchen, a new heating system, several replacement windows and, as they only discovered after completing the purchase, a new roof.

"With the clarity of hindsight, it seems like we went temporarily mad," Karon admits, "but on the positive side, what we'd have after our renovation work would be a stunning 17th-century house on the corner of one of the oldest streets in the UNESCO-protected historic heart of St-Martin, with a cool and airy central courtyard, a beautiful double-aspect *salon*, a new French-style fitted kitchen, two double bedrooms and an office space on the floor above them."

Prior to being purchased by the couple the house had been inhabited by an elderly French gentlemen and his carer. The property had been adjusted so that life could be lived entirely on the ground floor.

"Which meant the central courtyard area had been roofed over to provide extra downstairs living space," explains Karon. "It was nerve-racking finding workers and tradesmen locally then having to go back to the UK while they got on with it - I didn't realise until then how much of a control freak I can be!"

"Still, we received regular updates and the renovation began to progress, mainly because, to start with, it was more about ripping out the old than fitting the new."

Meanwhile Karon had also bought a good deal of glass, china and old furniture from the previous owner, a trove of *brocante* treasures

that she now began to imbue with a second life, employing sandpaper, wire wool, wax and much of the Annie Sloan paint range.

"From having our offer accepted up until this point it had always felt as if fate had been pushing us forward," reflects Karon.

"Whenever we hit a stumbling block some kind French facilitator had always arrived to solve our problems and keep us on track. But when we started updating and refitting the house, it quickly became clear our project manager was out of her depth and some of the workers on site didn't really know what they were doing.

"When this happens and you can't be there every day, things get stressful very quickly. Fortunately, Mark stepped in with pure resolve," she continues.

"He found the perfect new kitchen, actually in Shoreham-by-Sea, just down the road from our home in West Sussex. If I have any tips for refurbishing a French property, it would probably be use a UK kitchen company - you'll get twice the quality for half the price, along with competent professional fitters."

The couple also employed an English handyman, Darren, to complete the top-to-bottom redecoration, finish the last bits of essential DIY and help move in their belongings and furnishings.

ISLAND LIFE

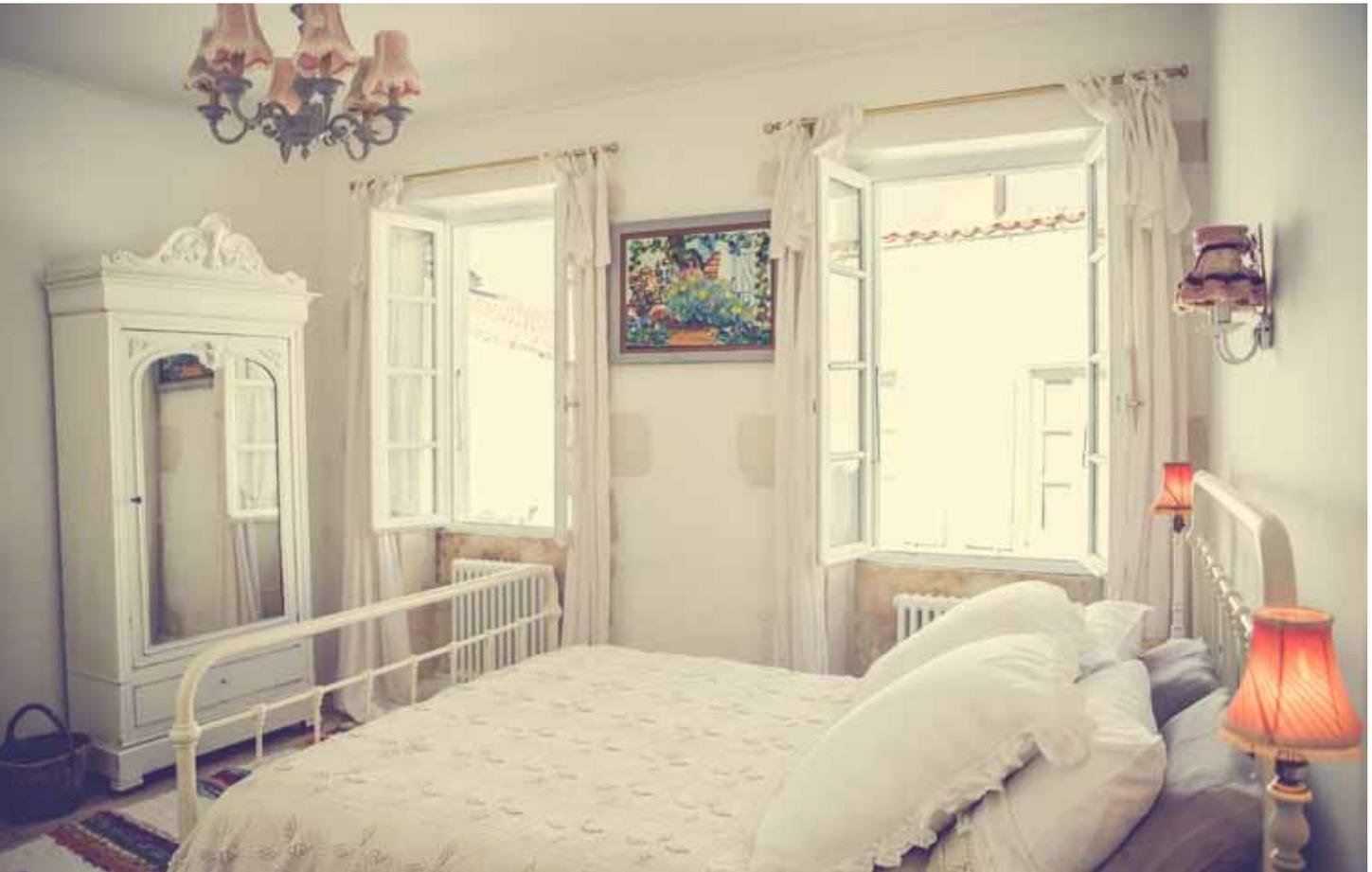
Despite the hiccups, by the end of spring 2014, only six months after work had begun, Karon and Mark found themselves the proud owners of a gorgeous, newly refurbished period home ▶



Left: A new, fitted kitchen has been installed in the house; St-Martin-de-Ré's attractive streets

Top right: Relax on a day bed in the garden room

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“It seemed like an amusing, unusual way to spend a few days away, indulging in the pipe dream of having a house here”

situated in the very heart of life on the island they’d fallen so hopelessly in love with.

“It’s been a whirlwind, but also truly serendipitous,” reflects Karon. “We’ve made so many wonderful friends along the way, our neighbours are a mixture of French and English, and all lovely, and I feel we’ve been thoroughly welcomed here. This is a uniquely special place, where the super rich from Paris rub shoulders with local fishermen who’ve lived here for generations, and everyone simply accepts each other at face value.

“I’ve been able to quickly become fluent in French just by shopping here and conversing with everyone at our local bar on the harbourside. Could there be a better way to learn a new language?”

For the times of the year they don’t plan to spend here, Karon’s cosy island haven is now being offered to guests, who since last year have

been seizing the unique opportunity to come and stay in such a stunning period home set in a fairytale French location.

They have also launched Galathée Retreats, a series of courses now running in September which will allow guests to enjoy a range of pursuits perfectly suited to the tempo and charms of Île de Ré. The courses cover everything from yoga and flower arranging using blooms grown on the island, to cycling tours and landscape painting classes, not to mention the chance to enjoy meals created with some of the finest local produce.

They say ‘the world is your oyster - but it’s up to you to find the pearls’, and on this enchanting island, where some of the world’s finest oysters are harvested, it would appear that Karon and Mark are doing exactly that. **LF**

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Clockwise from top: One of the spacious double bedrooms; the bright hallway; a quirky light fitting in the kitchen