



Romancing the stone

Ben Palfreyman learns about a Gascon gem that first cast its spell over its owner a quarter of a century ago, and has been transformed into a stunning home

In the land of wild mushrooms, foie gras and armagnac brandy, the Gascon department of Gers is as stunning as they come. Fields of sunflowers frame ancient *bastide* villages in the summer until the weather turns and the distant Pyrenean mountains get their first sprinkling of snow.

Set within this charming landscape is Château d'Arlens, a beautiful 19th-century pile that sits atop a promontory amid the undulating hills. Approaching the house along the 600m-long private drive, visitors get a taste of the substantial grounds that come with it, the majority of which is laid to pasture.

Once you arrive at the house, the views open up and you can gaze over the gentle hills of Gers – 63 hectares of which belong to the house, including nine hectares of woodland, two natural springs, rose gardens, flower borders and lawns. The Midour stream borders the chateau's land way down to the south, while closer to home, the east terrace is perfect for relaxing and al-fresco dining under the pergola covered in vines and passion flowers.

A breath of fresh air

A love of the outdoors was one of the main reasons why current

owner Sally Mayo fell for the charms of this chateau. "Initially, we were attracted to the area due to the quality of life it offered," says Sally, who moved here with her late husband Terence, the Earl of Mayo, and her two-year-old son in 1989. "We did an amazing amount of research while still in the UK and decided we wanted to be within driving distance of the ski slopes in the Pyrénées and the Atlantic. I love the mountains as I used to be a ski instructor but I don't want to live in them – and I love the sea but don't want to live on the coastline with all the day-trippers.

"Gers is quietly beautiful – so therapeutic that it gets into your soul – and Château d'Arlens was the only property we found that sat on its own, surrounded by its own land, looking south to the snow-capped Pyrénées."

It was the 29th property the family looked at, partly because they wanted something that was both a real home and could pay its way. They opened the house up as a *chambres d'hôtes* and used the land to run a red deer farm. "I ran the farm for 18 years and loved it," says Sally. "It only just washed its face but it did give me a lot of notoriety among the locals. I was also involved in the property

business and more or less could knock on any door around here and they knew who I was."

The Earl and Countess have created a wonderful chateau home that enjoys an air of non-fussy elegance and have been very popular as holidays hosts. Their son Jem went straight into a local school. "We knew he had become bilingual," Sally remembers, "when he said '*mais non, maman*' after a couple of weeks. Raising my child here has been a real highlight for me, and watching him enjoy nature and the hospitality of the local families has been great. He is now working in the States – which is one reason why I am selling, as you need more than a few days to pop across the pond – but of course he vows that one day he will buy the chateau back!"

Labour of love

Besides looking after the business and family, Sally also found time to renovate the house and gardens. When the couple first moved in, they completely redecorated the property and over the years have maintained it well with new roofs on the tower, new wiring and the renovation of an outbuilding into a party barn. They have also installed a pool –

surrounded by lawns and trees – and built an artificial-grass tennis court with summer house.

The chateau itself has been tastefully decorated: stone fireplaces, wrought-iron railings and original oak floors and doors create a natural yet luxurious feel, while the huge proportions of the rooms and hallways give a sense of light and space. Perhaps one of the most unusual features is the wonderful mural on the staircase walls and ceiling, depicting the red deer and birds of prey that you might find in the hills of Gers.

Now on the market for €1,750,000, the house boasts nine bedrooms – many of which are en suite – as well as a one-bedroom apartment in one of the barns and a two-bedroom apartment in the main house. Reception rooms include a large drawing room with parquet floor, a spacious dining room and a library – as well as a sunny kitchen with butler's pantry and back kitchen.

But when in Gers, why dine inside when you can breakfast on the kitchen terrace or laze about in the pool under a full moon with a glass of wine? ■

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Tel: 020 7384 1200
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