

To the manor born

Avid horticulturalists Penny and Peter Dinwiddie have transformed an overgrown plot of land and derelict manor house in Brittany into a charming *chambres d'hôtes*

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With its immaculate landscaped gardens and stunning interiors it's hard to imagine that Manoir de Kerlédan was ever in need of some tender loving care. But it's taken the hard work and dedication of British owners Penny and Peter Dinwiddie to bring this Breton manor back to life.

Penny and Peter have always loved France and spent many happy holidays there, so when they sold their thatched country cottage near Marlborough and couldn't decide where to put down roots in the UK, they cast their net further afield, to France.

"My husband was in the military and we'd lived in Germany and Australia so we were used to moving around a lot and we adore France," says Penny. "We love the French ideal which you rarely see on holiday, so we thought why not go and have a look at properties?"

The couple concentrated their search in Brittany as they wanted to be within easy reach of the ferries to get back to the UK where their children Joe and Hannah (now 24 and 22) were at boarding school. The climate was also a pull for Penny and Peter when choosing the location of their French home:

"We were thinking of going down further south but we're both keen gardeners and the weather in Brittany is similar to Cornwall. You have what is called a soft air, a bit like Ireland, so it's quite moist. The summers are early and we have lovely weather in May, June and early July. August isn't wonderful but September is normally glorious," says Penny.

When they came across Manoir de Kerlédan, a rundown manor house on the outskirts of Carhaix in Finistère, they knew it was the one.

"It was a *coup de coeur*. We hadn't really worked out what we were going to do once we moved, we were terribly green, but we just fell in love with a ruin and an overgrown plot of land," says Penny.

The couple bought the 16th-



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century manor house and moved out to Brittany in September 2002 to begin work on the property which was in need of an extensive amount of renovation. It was part of an estate owned by a member of the Breton aristocracy and after she died in the 1960s, the property fell into disrepair until a Parisian couple bought it in the mid-1990s to do up as a holiday home.

"They put on a new roof and made it sound as far as windows and doors were concerned, but there were no floors, no electrics and no plumbing when we took it on," says Penny.

The couple camped in the property while they worked on the house. They did most of the work themselves, with the occasional help from artisans to assist with the more technical aspects such as the wiring. During the restoration process Penny and Peter retained period features such as the vast granite fireplaces to keep the spirit of the original property.

The green-fingered couple's original plan was to set up a *pépinière* (a garden nursery) at the property but the land was so overgrown that they soon realised it would be difficult to earn money in the short term, so they decided to set up a *chambres d'hôtes* instead. The first room was ready to welcome guests in 2004, but Penny

says it wasn't until 2009 that it was fully finished – although she jokes that it's an ongoing process. They now have four en-suite guest bedrooms.

"We created an atmosphere in which guests come to stay as guests of the house. The ambiance is that of a relaxed country house where friends of friends of friends might come to stay," enthuses Penny.

"Our kitchen opens out onto the *salon* and it's very open plan downstairs. I do a lot of catering as we offer evening meals three in four nights throughout the season so I'm often cooking and guests will wander into the kitchen and ask if there is something they can help me with. We grow all our own vegetables and fruit so they often go out and get herbs from the *potager*," adds Penny.

She says that as an army wife she was expected to do a lot of cooking and entertaining, so she has become accustomed to catering for large groups, a skill which has proved invaluable since setting up the business. And Penny loves creating the different menus for guests based on the seasonal produce they grow in their flourishing kitchen garden.

"We're passionate about producing our own fresh organic foods and we source just about everything else locally, either through the market or the producers. Because I love cooking, offering evening meals has become our niche market as it's something that not many B&Bs do because it is a lot of hard work," says Penny.

The organic vegetable garden was planted and grown from scratch by the couple, along with the rest of the gardens that make up the vast grounds encompassing seven acres. It took Penny and Peter two years to clear the land with the help of a local farmer and they then divided the garden into smaller plots, each with their own theme.

"We have flower beds in the front and rear courtyards where tables are set up in the summer. We have an orchard where we grow medlars, quinces and varieties of plums, pears and apples. Then there's the lush garden with big leafed plants with a lot of colour



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which leads to the topiary garden which is my husband's hobby," enthuses Penny.

A delicate rose garden filled with 25 different varieties adds a delightful scent and a splash of colour to the outside space. It is used, along with the numerous containers of tulips, as a cutting garden so that Penny has a constant supply of fresh flowers to add a special touch to the guest rooms.

It's not just the exterior of the property that has benefitted from

Clockwise from top left: the topiary garden is Peter's favourite place; a guest bedroom at the manor house in Brittany; *tarte Tatin* is a favourite with visitors; the seven acres of grounds are spectacular; Penny and Peter love their new life in France; family pets enjoy a snooze



Penny and Peter's talent – the interior of the manor exudes rustic charm. While creating the interior design has been largely Penny's domain she says it's very much a partnership with her husband who she credits with making the massive three-metre mirrors that grace the walls in the salon and dining room.

Penny, who has always been interested in interiors, says the overall look took shape pretty organically: "We've gone for very simple interiors and nothing too smart, as the house is old but it's not an 18th-century elegantly refined property so we've kept the look rustic. Anything too smart makes the house look ghastly whereas shabby chic, which I can find easily, works really well. It's



more of a European look than an English look, although the French always say it's an English interior and the English say that it's French in style."

The couple brought over pieces from their English home but Penny says they just didn't suit the house – apart from her collection of blue and white Delftware pottery. Penny enjoys going to the local *brocantes* to source pieces for their home and has collected an eclectic mix of items. As a keen seamstress and upholsterer, Penny is in the process of relining the red striped silk curtains in the Françoise du Mur bedroom with red and white toile.

With the vast garden and *chambres d'hôtes* to maintain I asked Penny if it's difficult to juggle ▶

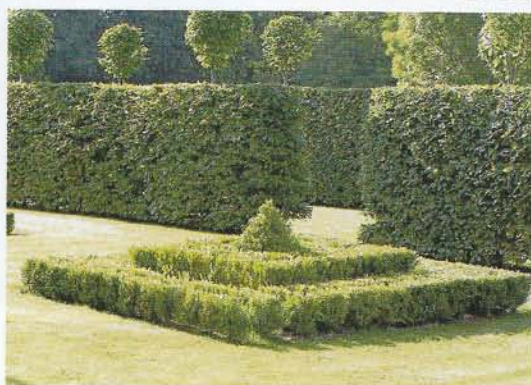


both of them. "It's full time. When we start the season, which runs from March to November, it's a seven-day week and we probably work far too hard just the two of us. But we love it and it's the only way you can be to do this business."

Their interest in gardening has proved to be a wonderful way for them to get to know their neighbours. "It's been fantastic for us because being passionate about horticulture you start visiting local gardens so we've made French friends through the garden links," says Penny.

The location of the property couldn't have proved better and although the couple hadn't spent much time in Brittany prior to moving there, they are delighted with their chosen location.

The Dinwiddies enjoy the Breton culture and in particular the diverse selection of music on offer in the region. Peter, who's Scottish, adores the Celtic links in Brittany and has even invested in some Breton bagpipes which has no doubt gone down well within the local community. They are ideally



placed to attend *Les Vieilles Charrues*, France's largest music festival, which takes place in Carhaix.

The whole town gets involved with the event which is charity run and the couple do their part by offering the organisers subsidised accommodation at Manoir de Kerlédan. The family attend the festival every year and Penny says helping out with the event has forged relationships within the local community and they now feel very much part of the proceedings.

It's not just Penny and Peter who are involved in *Les Vieilles Charrues* as their daughter



Clockwise from top: the manor house has been completely restored; French chic inside the house; in the grounds

Hannah, who is now bilingual, worked at the festival in 2009 when Bruce Springsteen headlined.

For the Dinwiddies their move to France signified a new chapter, and a decade into their French life they are happier than ever, ensconced in their little corner of Brittany. Looking towards the future Penny says they want to add garden tours to their repertoire – and with such enthusiasm for their hobby and an eagerness to share their knowledge of gardens in Brittany, there's no doubt they're on to a winner. LF
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