

IN AN IDEAL WORLD

Having dreamed of owning a hotel one day, Arjan and Marije Capelle tell **Alice Broeksma** how a Dutch couple ended up in a French town built by the English



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Arjan and Marije catch up in the hotel bar



Some 11 years ago, Arjan Capelle and his wife Marije settled in the Dordogne town of Monpazier, a *bastide* built by the English in the 13th century. They fell in love with a pretty little château with towers and opened a bijou hotel, now frequented by visitors from all over the world.

“We had a plan, and it worked,” Arjan says, and they ended up with a fabulous result: a bijou hotel with a gourmet restaurant, a bistro in the same village, a home with acres of land, horses, a chocolate Labrador named Sybil, and three children, in a traditional French setting.

This small part of France has a very European feel: as young as they are, the children are trilingual, having been educated at the local French primary school; their Anglophile parents employ an English nanny in the summer season; they used an English architect to tackle French bureaucracy for the expansion; and have French builders and staff in their hotel/eateries.

In the summer, they have a staff of 14 plus themselves. “We are always on call; our success is not a coincidence,” says Arjan. “It’s the result of a lot of hard work by all concerned. For us, it’s our passion.”

Both Arjan and Marije studied at a renowned hotel school in The Hague, and later worked in Rotterdam at the headquarters of Center Parcs, an organisation with 20 holiday villages in the UK, Holland,

Facing page clockwise from top left: Marije is ready to welcome guests who come from all over the world; the hotel’s rather grand entrance; the finished result after the extensive refurbishment project, which was overseen by ‘FPN’ columnist Neil Vesma

This page top to bottom: Small towers add character to the building; guests can enjoy sitting on the terrace in the sunshine, before heading inside for a drink in the hotel’s comfortable bar area

Belgium, Germany and France. Earlier, Arjan had been deputy manager with the hotel group of Disneyland Paris.

The couple started to think about their own business, which would be their own project with a better quality of life, but they were not in a hurry to find exactly what they had in mind.

“We had a plan, and selected a few regions,” Arjan says. “We searched between the Loire and the Toulouse area and saw 22 properties. In one year we drove to France 16 times, convinced it was better to see the houses ourselves rather than on the internet.”

During each journey, they tried to add useful French connections to their new network, and then, on honeymoon in the south of France, they decided to take a detour via Dordogne.

“Suddenly, we found ourselves standing in front of this little château and knew this was it. We could have gone for a beach club on the Côte d’Azur, but that really wasn’t us. This landscape, with its English connections, ▶

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Clockwise from top left: The Capelle children, who are all trilingual, choose their favourite pastries; Marije takes a break from work at the hotel to enjoy a stroll in the sunshine; the 'bastide' town of Monpazier in the popular Dordogne department was built by the English and dates back to the 13th century

suits us, as well as the type of holidaymakers we wanted to attract."

Recently, Marije found her old notebook with their ideas jotted down during their car journeys. "It's interesting to see how everything worked out that way," she says. "Which one of us would do what in the business, and other things we wanted. Even the dog was planned, but not the three kids. Luckily, we adapt easily."

They had not predicted the growth of their business either. In the middle of the recession, they expanded from 12 to 17 rooms, and this led to considering options in the building next door, which now houses the new rooms and also the restaurant and a terrace for outdoor dining.

For the expansion into the old storage space next door, the couple hired Neil Vesma, of *An Architect's diary* fame, who dealt with the local regulations and saw them through the renovations.

"Once again we asked ourselves: where and how shall we continue? Do we even want to stay in France? The children were still young

enough to be able to move, but we decided to stay in Monpazier and now, as a family, we have taken root.

"The children are at school here, although I can't claim that we are entirely 'French'," Marije continues. "That's not an automatic thing; for a start, the kids are blond! And there are cultural differences we have learned to embrace too. At school, for instance, things can be quite different."

Arjan is a governor at the school as well as a member of the supervisory board of a regional French bank, and he volunteers as a business 'angel' to assist new talent in developing entrepreneurial skills.

On New Year's Eve the couple entertain the village with a short burst of Dutch fireworks, as is the tradition in their native Holland.

Marije, herself a chef, invites local French children into the kitchen for the odd cookery lesson. "Our lives are now interwoven with France. Thanks to our employees we have many possibilities to learn about France, including the slang and, unexpectedly,

complicated French medical terms. We had an English apprentice here once who needed a translator during a visit to the doctor. In the surgery, Arjan was sitting on one side of a curtain while the doctor and the patient were on the other. Not exactly the sort of vocabulary that you would come across in your average office environment!"

Guests come from all over the world to the hotel, including Japanese, Australians, Mexicans, Russians, Americans, English and, of course, the French. "We are fascinated by the diversity," says Marije. "It's great to interact with all those nationalities and sometimes we surprise guests with our own habits. Being Dutch, we believe in equality, whereas the French can be very hierarchical. One French guest was baffled when I, the owner of the hotel, carried her cases up to her room myself, but as I always say, we all do the dishes here.

"It's hard work and in the busy season we are always on call, but we live right next door and we can still be there to pick the kids up from school. You don't have to worry about their security; the whole village knows your children and they are very safe here. It really is a good life." ■

*Hotel Edward 1er is on Rue St-Pierre in Monpazier
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