

# Telegraph magazine

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## TAKING THE PLUNGE

A rundown estate in the Languedoc presented a London family with an ideal – if daunting – opportunity for a new, quieter life. By **Juliet Kinsman**. Photographs by **David Giles**



**I**n 2003 Becky Saillard was working as a management consultant while her husband, Philip, was entrenched in Japanese equities. They were living in Bayswater, London, but were starting to think about opportunities for a change of pace. At first they mooted a move to Dorset, but later that year, while visiting the Languedoc-Roussillon region in the south of France where Philip has family, they overheard some cafe gossip that would set in motion a far bigger life change than they had envisaged.

The story went that a French cultural attaché based in Lima and his wife were divorcing and their *maison de maître*, with its surrounding barns and stables, was going on the market. Intrigued, the Saillards went for a viewing. What they found was *Domaine de Sarraïl*, a 10-acre estate outside the medieval village of Montréal de l'Aude, near Carcassonne. Apart from being used as a weekend party house, it had hardly been occupied for decades. It was ramshackle and had no central

**Top** Philip and Becky Saillard with their daughters, Fleur and Thalia. **Right** when they found *Le Sarraïl* eight years ago it was badly neglected. **Left** is stable is now an open-fronted reception area







heating. But to the Saillards Le Sarraal represented an opportunity: there was more than enough space for a family home and, between the various outbuildings, plenty of scope to realise one of their longheld ambitions – to run a family-friendly holiday lets business.

The transformation was no small challenge for a pair lacking previous building or design experience. In the early days they lived on a building site with their newborn daughter Thalia (now seven) and two-year-old Fleur (now 10). 'We seem to have lived in dust for years,' Becky says. 'There were up to 10 men on site every day, jabbering away in a dialect that was tricky to learn.'

For their first few months, meals were prepared using a two-ring camping gas stove. 'We didn't even have a kitchen in the house,' Becky recalls. 'I remember salivating as the builders would set up little stoves to cook their steak lunches while we grabbed a ham sandwich and worked through.' One especially un-British site meeting is a fond reminder of the family's improved quality of life in their adopted home land: at 9am they were sharing their builder's homemade wild boar sausage and red wine. If spirits flagged, they would look out across the rolling farmland towards the Pyrenees. 'The sheer beauty kept us going,' Becky says. 'And the nature. I'll never forget seeing wild boars in the garden, or three stags wandering into the sunflower field, or the enormous hare sitting outside the kitchen window.'

Becky not only played architect and project manager for the family home and the four holiday houses, but she also sourced all the materials and furnishings. 'This is still a fairly undeveloped part of France and there were no designer interior shops,' she says. 'I really had to hunt for nice things.' Today, every corner of the main house expresses what she calls 'retro chic' – a fearless throwing-together of flea market finds and family heirlooms that tie in a mishmash of decades. Cesca chairs by Marcel Breuer were found at a local secondhand market for a pittance. Rugs come from Marrakesh and ostrich eggs from



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**Above right** the kitchen, with the dining-room beyond. Just seen is a unit that was handmade by local craftsmen to display vintage crockery.

**Right** stripping away the plasterwork, exposed stone walls in the sitting-room. The metal-and-glass 1960s coffee table, and the Robin Day sofas and armchair were secondhand market finds







South Africa – mementoes from far-flung forays.

The house has a tactile quality, with rag rugs and animal hides adding colour and texture to concrete floors. A cosy hand-built wooden kitchen is at its heart, with its huge Belfast sink and clutter of cute vintage crockery. Stripping away plasterwork exposed stone walls that give a sense of drama to the sitting-room.

The house's yard-thick walls were drilled through to make an opening that would connect the living-room to the dining-room. Original warped-glass windows and decades-old floor tiles make this light-filled, high-ceilinged room the couple's favourite space. Modern embellishments include a wall in striking monochrome 3D-effect wallpaper by Elitis and a unique oval painting above the Victorian fireplace, one of Becky's own

acrylic-on-leather creations. 'I love the fact that the canvas is organic and it was living at one time,' she says. 'It makes you want to touch it.' The fireplace's black-marble mantelpiece is peppered with strange green glass trinkets – once electricity cable housing, removed when they transferred the wires underground. A French grandfather clock, originally bought in London and handed down through Philip's French family on his mother's side, now inhabits the same space as a photograph by Jérôme Yager from his 1980s *Motorola Days* series. Mid-century salvage finds include the Breuer chairs, tucked under an antique oak table.

The holiday homes received the same treatment. Crumbling outbuildings – brick barns, haylofts and basic seasonal dwellings for fruit pickers – were transformed into high-spec accommodation

with plenty of polished concrete and vintage finds. There are wood-burning stoves inside, barbecues on the terraces and a swimming-pool to share. Earlier this year saw the final milestone in the completion of the retreat. The stables, remodelled as an elegant open-fronted reception area, hosted a party for friends and family.

As the Saillards sit out in the open-air living space off the summer kitchen, overlooking their own pool and the vineyards beyond, they say there is one last thing they would like to do before they can say they are finished. They want to tempt the previous owner over from Peru for drinks. 'He still has family nearby and apparently he's very keen to see what we've done,' Becky says.

*Le Sarrail can be booked through:*  
[www.lesarrail.com](http://www.lesarrail.com) or  
 0033 4 68 76 59 66

**'This is still a fairly undeveloped part of France and there were no designer interior shops. I really had to hunt for nice things'**

**Top left** 1960s Kengu chairs by Elsa & Nordal Soheim. **Above left** a section of 1950s public seating was found in a market. **Above right** the Elitis 3D-effect wallpaper adds to the sense of light in the dining-room. **Right** the bedroom lamp was picked up at Portobello. **Far right** vintage floor tiles in the hallway.

