

Fast-track to fluency



Is there an easy way to learn French? **Elizabeth Thorold** took a 4-day intensive language course in France to find out

An understanding of French – spoken, written and aural – is key to getting more out of France. Whether the idea is to live there permanently or simply to visit frequently, being able to get by in French will have a huge impact on your cross-Channel experience. But just how much French can one person learn in 4 days? Common sense would dictate not a great deal but if truth be known, I was hoping for a small miracle when I checked into my residential course at Le Poiron Bonjour in Vendée.

I wasn't starting from scratch as I studied French at university – but time passes and along with it, *le temps passé* as well as many other verb conjugations, vocabulary and grammatical sticking points seemed to have taken temporary leave. Even with more than 10 years of study under my belt, holding a conversation in French with a native speaker in France was starting to seem like a daunting affair and I was keen to kick-start my language with an intensive course.

There are a lot of things one can do from the comfort of the UK such as watching French films, arranging conversation classes with French people, tuning into a French radio station or watching French television online but I wasn't feeling motivated enough for that; I wanted an injection of



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pure French to reignite my enthusiasm and make me fall in love with the language all over again.

A residential language course was the obvious option: I wanted to speak French dawn till dusk, be surrounded by French people and have structured lessons that I could then put into practice – but it is imperative to pick the right course.

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Total immersion is effective at any level; however, for complete beginners, it is important to have some down time. It's mentally exhausting and demands a lot of effort, patience (with yourself and others) and resilience to keep plugging away. One of the most important things when choosing a course is to make sure that you find yourself with people



of a similar level.

A conversation around the luggage carousel at La Rochelle airport introduced me by chance to one of my two fellow students and, in what turned out to be a seminal moment, Romilly had the foresight to suggest that we only converse in French from that point on.

Anyone who has ever had a go at learning French will know just how painful a prospect that is: to converse in a foreign language with someone who shares your mother tongue. There's the fact that you're going to make mistakes, the fact that you sound like a completely different person in a foreign language – one who affects different mannerisms to boot – and most of all, the fact that the flippant off-the-cuff comment that you would come out with in English, the one that would break the ice and give an immediate insight into your character, is not at your disposal in French... The French-only rule verges on the boot camp but it is much easier to implement between complete strangers and it turns out that this very grown-up decision was the making of our stay.

Vast estate

The Château du Poiron is nestled in a green landscape of fields and forest, peace and tranquillity in the department of Vendée and is owned by Françoise who grew up in neighbouring Niort and her British-born husband Mark. It's a vast sprawling estate of a place with outbuildings and land enough to make them quite the lord and lady of the manor and they are quick to remark on how different life is from High Wycombe.

Mark has expertly converted much of the main residence himself as well as the two *chambres d'hôtes*, the studio and the *grand gîte* that sleeps up to 29, and their business interests now lie in Françoise running language courses and the bookings and Mark helping out where necessary while still taking on building jobs in the local area and further afield.

We were there for the language though so over a relaxing evening meal, we set about getting to know each other – in French, *bien sûr* – in preparation for a hard day's work the next day. It was quick to see that we were all of a similar level: Romilly taught French to adults in the UK and Pat was deputy head at a primary school and would be dusting off her degree-level French to teach her young pupils starting in September. What was interesting as well was that we all had our own strengths and weaknesses and so were able to learn from each other as much as from the teaching itself.

By enforcing our French-only rule, even dinner became a learning curve. We forced ourselves to have conversations that although somewhat stilted and involved a slight satellite delay, were nevertheless stimulating and interesting and not dissimilar from those we would have had in English.



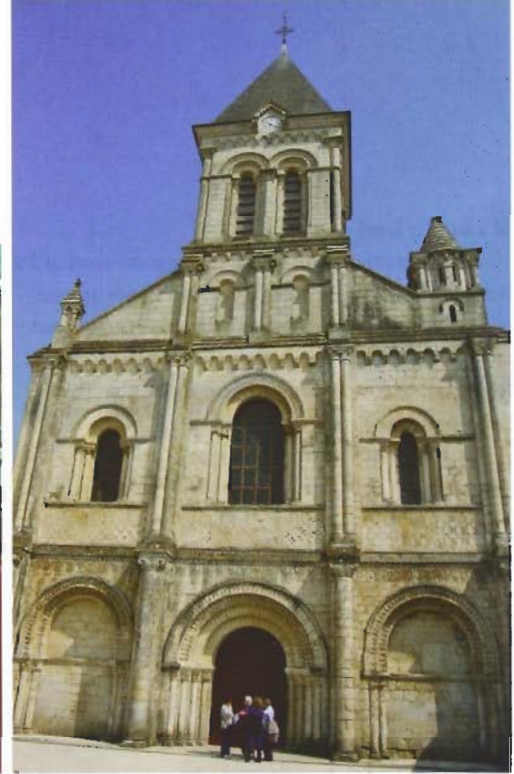
Opposite page, from top: Françoise in the château's designated classroom; fellow students Pat Lund, left, and Romilly Lancaster, right, hard at work **This page, from top:** Nearby Nieul-sur-l'Autise makes for an interesting day out; the château is set in the verdant Vendéen countryside

Top tips

- Do not underestimate mealtimes. This is your opportunity to put your newly learnt French into practice; your host should be encouraging you to talk and give you all equal air time
- Ensure groups are small; you are only cheating yourself out of learning if you hide behind others in a big group
- Speak French between yourselves outside of lessons – if you can't manage a whole day then set aside an allotted time slot instead
- If you want to buy a property in France, look for a course that contains property-specific content



The course structure at Le Poiron Bonjour remains the same whatever the level of French and Françoise mixes classroom-based sessions with 'field work' and alternates taking the class herself with handing over to guest speakers. The result is a varied mix that would see us writing a resumé of a news report in the morning and cooking local food with neighbour Marie-Paule in the afternoon; we would



be at Niort market with a shopping list the next morning and putting the pluperfect tense into practice back in the classroom by the afternoon.

Varied content

A varied programme is another factor of huge importance when choosing a course. The novelty of being back in the classroom soon wears off and a week spent in a room with the same people would quickly become uninspiring, no matter how much fun your classmates are. Also, it doesn't take long for frustration to creep in as adult learners have much higher demands on themselves and their progress; small doses of classroom-based teaching interspersed with putting what you've learnt to the test in the real world is Françoise's tried and tested method and it proved to be a good model.

There is a lot to see and do in this green and peaceful corner of France. The Château du Poiron lies on the Vendée/Deux-Sèvres borders and so enjoys influences from Pays-de-la-Loire as well as from Poitou-Charentes. The Forêt du Mervent lies on the doorstep of the domain with inviting dappled trails to follow, and from the pool you can watch horses frolicking in the surrounding pasture. It is an idyllic spot that is perfect for quietly phrasing sentences in your head.

One of our trips took in the Abbaye St-Vincent at Nieul-sur-l'Autise and its neighbouring Maison

d'Aliénor museum, dedicated to Aliénor d'Aquitaine who was born in the small *commune*. The abbey is a beautifully preserved example of religious architecture and the museum is remarkably modern and forward-thinking. Fascinating interactive applications engage all ages and bring the abbey to life as well as those personages who played an important role in its heritage, including of course Aliénor d'Aquitaine. The historical detail is quite a test for your French but the advanced visuals fill in most of the gaps for those whose French isn't quite as advanced.

We had to find four items of varying obscurity, from one of only two Vendéen cheeses to a slice of a local terrine, asking its ingredients

Similarly, the Thursday-morning market in Niort is a quintessentially French affair with all sorts of local seasonal produce on offer from meats, bread and cheeses to plants and patisserie. We were tasked with purchasing four items of varying obscurity, from hunting down one of only two Vendéen





cheeses to getting a slice of a local terrine and asking its ingredients. Stallholders, keen to showcase their produce, were the ideal, if unwitting, partners in our real-life French lesson.

Going native

Even though 4 days is not very long, we adopted a routine that very quickly became the norm and seemed to suspend time as we knew it. We were tasked each morning with watching the 8am news bulletin in our rooms before going down for breakfast; this would then provide the topic for discussion over our croissants. Anxiously scribbling down any word or phrase that could be picked out from the torrent of news that first morning (even though I knew that my notes would mean nothing to me when I re-read them in 10 minutes' time) miraculously transformed into relaxed note-taking by the last morning. Similarly, French became the natural language choice from day one and, as the 4 days progressed, any occasional English that was spoken jarred increasingly with our French-attuned ears.

There is an element of risk in signing up to such an intimate and intensive language course; it pays to

make sure you respond to your teacher's chosen teaching methods and to ensure that the course content is what you're expecting. It is important to ask as many questions as possible and to get a detailed breakdown of what is to be covered in the syllabus to ensure that you will get the maximum possible out of a short space of time. You cannot guarantee the personalities of your fellow students but as you are all there for the same reason, it is likely you will make some chums along the way; such a course engenders a certain camaraderie and if you leave your pride at the airport you can learn a lot from everyone in the classroom, not just the teacher.

So how much French did I learn in 4 days? A surprising amount is the answer. But, critically, it is not handed to you on a plate and it was the decision to speak French outside of teaching hours that consolidated our learning. Which just about sums it up: someone can teach you all they know but a huge individual effort must be made to then put it into practice. Given that there is no quick fix, it pays to enjoy the process of learning and where better to enjoy it than deep in the French countryside?

Opposite page, clockwise

from top left: Niort market was ideal territory for testing our French; the abbey at Nieul-sur-l'Autise has interesting leaning pillars inside; horses frolic in the neighbouring fields; the trip to the market was a great opportunity to buy lunch while we were there **This page, from left:** A small group is essential for maximising your time; trips outside of the classroom kept us fresh for learning

How to keep it up when you get home

TV5 Monde www.tv5.org

TV5 is available as a television channel (through 799 on Sky or 825 on Virgin) but there is a wealth of language learning resources available online too. Choose from worksheets on news bulletins (www.tv5monde.com/7jours) to learning new vocab or trying a quiz, all of which are available for all levels.

Films

Watching a French film doesn't even feel like homework. Pick one that appeals to you and if you can't face it without the subtitles, why not try watching with the subtitles in French?

BBC Online www.bbc.co.uk/languages/french

There are also free language learning resources available on the BBC website. These follow a more textbook style and are great for engaging content for all ages.

Music

French song is great for learning vocabulary and a more current vocabulary at that. Carla Bruni's second album *Quelqu'un m'a dit* is particularly good for language learning as her acoustic sound allows you to hear the words. Alternatively, you could try some French classics such as Gainsbourg or Trenet.

Fact file

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