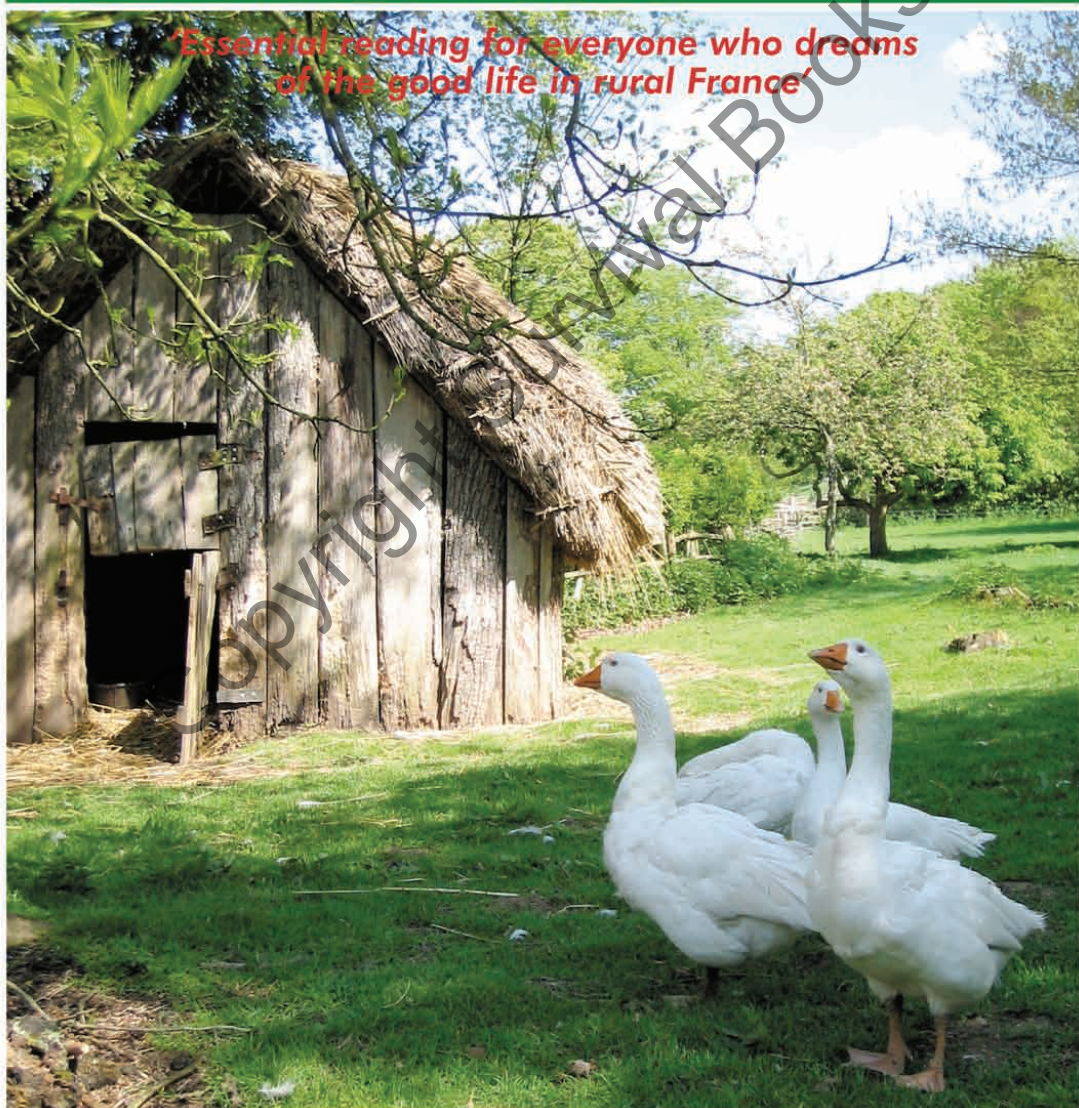


Rural Living in France

J.C. Jeremy Hobson

*Essential reading for everyone who dreams
of the good life in rural France*



Rural Living
in
France

A Survival Handbook

by

J.C. Jeremy Hobson



SURVIVAL BOOKS • LONDON • ENGLAND



First published in 2006

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or recorded by any means, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Copyright © Survival Books 2006
Cover photograph: © unknown (www.dreamstime.com)
Illustrations, cartoons and maps © Jim Watson

Survival Books Limited
Office 169, 3 Edgar Buildings, George St, Bath, BA1 2FJ, UK
+44 (0)1225-462135, info@survivalbooks.net
www.survivalbooks.net and www.londons-secrets.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library.
ISBN: 978-1-901130-99-1

Printed and bound in Italy by Legoprint spa

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people to thank for their help in compiling *Rural Living in France*: in particular the many readers of my 'Rural Riddles' column in *French Property News*, whose questions and comments have, whether they realise it or not, contributed greatly to my decisions as to what information is most likely to be of assistance to those planning to live in rural France. Very special thanks must go to Phil Rant – both he and I know why! Others to whom I am sincerely indebted include Melinda Hobson for her computer expertise, Roger Morris for research on my behalf, Phil Pembroke for help with the fishing section and permission to use some of his previously published work, Laurence Huber of the European Mediation Centre, Karen Tait (Editor of *French Property News*) and Liz Wright (Editor of *Smallholding*).

I would also like to thank Sue Coleman and Phil Stevens for their invaluable help and willingness to share their knowledge of rural living in France and their permission to use emails and website information, which I found invaluable in the writing of **Chapter 8**, 'Other Livestock'. Thanks also to Bob Batty, David Bland, Steven and Lynn Cluer, Sandy and Eric Compton, Bob Dalton, Carole Deedman, John Maslin and Steve Midgley. My thanks are also due to Joe Laredo for editing the text, Alex Browning and David Hampshire for proofreading, Kerry Laredo for the layout and Jim Watson for the amusing cartoons, cover and colour pages. Finally, I must thank Joe Laredo and Peter Read for suggesting that I write this book in the first place.



WHAT READERS & REVIEWERS

When you buy a model plane for your child, a video recorder, or some new computer gizmo, you get with it a leaflet or booklet pleading 'Read Me First', or bearing large friendly letters or bold type saying 'IMPORTANT – follow the instructions carefully'. This book should be similarly supplied to all those entering France with anything more durable than a 5-day return ticket. It is worth reading even if you are just visiting briefly, or if you have lived here for years and feel totally knowledgeable and secure. But if you need to find out how France works then it is indispensable. Native French people probably have a less thorough understanding of how their country functions. – Where it is most essential, the book is most up to the minute.

LIVING FRANCE

Rarely has a 'survival guide' contained such useful advice. This book dispels doubts for first-time travellers, yet is also useful for seasoned globetrotters – In a word, if you're planning to move to the USA or go there for a long-term stay, then buy this book both for general reading and as a ready-reference.

AMERICAN CITIZENS ABROAD

It is everything you always wanted to ask but didn't for fear of the contemptuous put down – The best English-language guide – Its pages are stuffed with practical information on everyday subjects and are designed to complement the traditional guidebook.

SWISS NEWS

A complete revelation to me – I found it both enlightening and interesting, not to mention amusing.

CAROLE CLARK

Let's say it at once. David Hampshire's *Living and Working in France* is the best handbook ever produced for visitors and foreign residents in this country; indeed, my discussion with locals showed that it has much to teach even those born and bred in l'Hexagone. – It is Hampshire's meticulous detail which lifts his work way beyond the range of other books with similar titles. Often you think of a supplementary question and search for the answer in vain. With Hampshire this is rarely the case. – He writes with great clarity (and gives French equivalents of all key terms), a touch of humour and a ready eye for the odd (and often illuminating) fact. – This book is absolutely indispensable.

THE RIVIERA REPORTER

A mine of information – I may have avoided some embarrassments and frights if I had read it prior to my first Swiss encounters – Deserves an honoured place on any newcomer's bookshelf.

ENGLISH TEACHERS ASSOCIATION, SWITZERLAND

HAVE SAID ABOUT SURVIVAL BOOKS

What a great work, wealth of useful information, well-balanced wording and accuracy in details. My compliments!

THOMAS MÜLLER

This handbook has all the practical information one needs to set up home in the UK – The sheer volume of information is almost daunting – Highly recommended for anyone moving to the UK.

AMERICAN CITIZENS ABROAD

A very good book which has answered so many questions and even some I hadn't thought of – I would certainly recommend it.

BRIAN FAIRMAN

We would like to congratulate you on this work: it is really super! We hand it out to our expatriates and they read it with great interest and pleasure.

ICI (SWITZERLAND) AG

Covers just about all the things you want to know on the subject – In answer to the desert island question about the one how-to book on France, this book would be it – Almost 500 pages of solid accurate reading – This book is about enjoyment as much as survival.

THE RECORDER

It's so funny – I love it and definitely need a copy of my own – Thanks very much for having written such a humorous and helpful book.

HEIDI GUILIANI

A must for all foreigners coming to Switzerland.

ANTOINETTE O'DONOGHUE

A comprehensive guide to all things French, written in a highly readable and amusing style, for anyone planning to live, work or retire in France.

THE TIMES

A concise, thorough account of the DOs and DON'Ts for a foreigner in Switzerland – Crammed with useful information and lightened with humorous quips which make the facts more readable.

AMERICAN CITIZENS ABROAD

Covers every conceivable question that may be asked concerning everyday life – I know of no other book that could take the place of this one.

FRANCE IN PRINT

Hats off to *Living and Working in Switzerland!*

RONNIE ALMEIDA

THE AUTHOR

Jeremy Hobson is a freelance writer living in France and a member of the Association of Freelance Journalists. In 1974, he gained a Distinction in Game & Estate Management and was employed in shooting management for over 30 years. Since 1983, he has written regularly for all of the UK's country-orientated magazines and has had numerous books published. In addition, Jeremy has been involved with script writing for BBC2 television and BBC Radio 4. Unsurprisingly, his interests include all country sports, farming, gardening and poultry. He has exhibited bantams at some of the UK's most prestigious poultry shows and has judged beagles at hound shows.

TITLES BY SURVIVAL BOOKS

The Best Places To Buy A Home
France; Spain

Buying a Home
Australia & New Zealand; Bulgaria,
Cyprus; France; Greece; Italy;
Portugal; South Africa; Spain;
Buying, Selling & Letting Property (UK)

Buying and Renting a Home
London; New York

Culture Wise
Australia; Canada; England; France;
New Zealand; Spain

**Foreigners Abroad: Triumphs
& Disasters**
France; Spain

Living and Working
America; Australia; Britain
Canada; France; Germany

The Gulf States & Saudi Arabia;
Ireland; Italy;
London; New Zealand;
Spain; Switzerland

Earning Money from Your Home
France; Spain

Making a Living
France; Spain

Retiring Abroad
France; Spain

Other Titles
Investing in Property Abroad;
Renovating & Maintaining
Your French Home;
Running Gites and B&Bs in France;
Rural Living in France;
Shooting Caterpillars in Spain;
Wild Thyme in Ibiza

CONTENTS

1. THE REALITIES OF RURAL LIFE... 17

General Considerations...	19
Climate...	21
Financial Considerations...	21
Accessibility...	22
Plants & Animals...	23
Integration...	23
The System...	24

2. BUYING RURAL PROPERTY... 29

Choosing an Area...	30
Choosing a Property...	31
Checks...	33
Making the Purchase...	38

3. MOVING IN... 41

Removals...	42
Animals...	43
Health Insurance...	46
Fencing...	47
Services...	47
Registration...	51
Insurance...	53
Meeting the Neighbours...	54
Improvements...	55

4. LAND & ITS USES... 61

Vineyards...	62
Woodland...	63
Hedges...	66
Cutting...	67

Meadows...	70
Ponds...	70
Management & Maintenance...	71

5. FLOWERS & FRUITS... 79

Planning...	80
Preparation...	83
Propagation...	85
Plants & Fruit Trees...	85
Pruning...	88
Fruit Pests...	89

6. VEGETABLE GARDEN... 93

Neighbours & Advice...	94
Creating a Plot...	95
Potagers...	98
Herbs...	98
Staking...	100
Planting by the Moon...	101
Compost...	102
Watering...	103
Cloches & Poly-tunnels...	105
Crop Rotation...	105
Controlling Pests & Diseases...	106
Storage...	112

7. POULTRY... 115

Free-range or Panned?...	116
Housing...	118
Choosing Stock...	121
Food & Drink...	123
Eggs...	127
Breeding...	127
Moulting...	132

Diseases & Parasites...	133
Poultry Clubs & Exhibitions...	137
Longevity...	138

8. OTHER LIVESTOCK... 141

Buying Livestock...	143
Cows...	143
Goats...	144
Sheep...	151
Pigs...	155
Horses, Ponies & Donkeys...	158
Bees...	159
Transport...	165
Death & Disposal...	165

9. MACHINERY & TOOLS... 169

Generators...	170
Rotary Tillers...	171
Tractors & Trailers...	171
Plant Hire...	174
Buying Tools...	177
Maintenance...	180
Using a Chainsaw...	182

10. MAKING MONEY... 185

Registration...	186
Bed & Breakfast & Gites...	187
Camping & Caravan Sites...	189
Kennels & Catteries...	189
Pet-sitting...	190
Dog Breeding...	191
Livery Stables...	191
Selling Products & Produce...	192
Wood Turning...	196

Wine Selling...	197
Writing & Photography...	198

11. RURAL PURSUITS... 201

Hunting, Shooting & Fishing...	202
Rambling & Hiking...	211
Canoeing & Kayaking...	213
Cycling...	214
Horse Riding...	214
Boules & Other Games...	215
Clothing & Equipment...	216

12. WILDLIFE... 219

Insects...	220
Moths & Butterflies...	223
Mammals...	225
Reptiles & Amphibians...	228
Birds...	232
Wild Flowers & Fungi...	234

13. RURAL LIFE... 237

Agricultural Shows...	238
Beliefs & Superstitions...	239
Bonfires & Noise...	240
Christmas Tips...	240
Crime...	241
Fêtes & Saints' Days...	242
Markets...	243
Newspapers & Home Deliveries...	244
Postal Services...	245
Recycling...	246
Sapeurs-pompiers...	247

APPENDICES... 249

Appendix A: Useful Addresses... 250
Appendix B: Further Reading... 253
Appendix C: Useful Websites... 260
Appendix D: Weights & Measures... 264
Appendix E: Map... 268
Appendix F: Glossary... 270

INDEX... 275

SURVIVAL BOOKS... 284

Copyright Survival Books



IMPORTANT NOTE

France is a large country with myriad faces and many ethnic groups, religions and customs. Although ostensibly the same throughout the country, rules and regulations tend to be open to local interpretation and are sometimes even formulated on the spot. **I cannot recommend too strongly that you check with an official and reliable source (not always the same) before making major decisions or undertaking an irreversible course of action. Don't believe everything you're told or read – even, dare I say it, herein!**

To help you obtain further information and verify data with official sources, useful addresses, references and websites have been included in most chapters and in **Appendices A, B and C**. Important points have been emphasised throughout the book **in bold print**, some of which it would be expensive or even dangerous to disregard. **Ignore them at your cost or peril.**

Unless specifically stated, the reference to any company, organisation, product or publication in this book doesn't constitute an endorsement or recommendation.



AUTHOR'S NOTES

- Where it may be useful, flora and fauna mentioned are identified by their Latin *genus* (the name for a group of closely-related organisms) and *species* (a unique name for each type of organism), in accordance with the Linnaeus System of nomenclature devised by Carl von Linné (*Linnaeus Carolus*, 1707-78), the Swedish-born founder of taxonomic botany. Also, when helpful, common French botanical names have been included. When attempting to find the French name of a plant or animal, check the Latin equivalent of the name you know and then compare it by looking up the French. For example, the bird known in English as the hooded crow = *Corvus cornix* = *la corneille mantelée*.
- Times are shown using the 24-hour clock, which is the usual way of expressing the time in France.
- Prices quoted should be taken only as estimates, although they were correct when going to print and usually don't change greatly overnight. Prices are quoted inclusive of tax (which is the method generally used in France) unless otherwise stated.
- His/he/him/man/men (etc.) also mean her/she/her/woman/ women. This is done simply to make life easier for the reader and, in particular, the author, and isn't intended to be sexist.
- British English is used throughout. French equivalents are given (usually in the singular) where appropriate. A glossary of useful terms can be found in **Appendix F**.
- Warnings and important points are shown in **bold** type.
- The following symbols are used in this book: ☎ (telephone), ☎ (fax), ☎ (internet) and ✉ (email).
- For those who are unfamiliar with metric weights and measures, conversion tables are included in **Appendix D**.
- A map showing the regions and *départements* of France can be found in **Appendix E**.

INTRODUCTION

Many people dream of moving to rural France – somewhere warm and sunny where days can be spent *al fresco* basking in the shade of a tree. In their mind's eye they see themselves relaxing over a leisurely lunch of newly-baked *baguettes* from the village *boulangerie*, fresh produce from the garden, mouth-watering cheeses and *charcuterie* from the local market, and a few bottles of chilled wine from a local vineyard. In the background, chickens wander from barn to garden scratching in the earth, geese graze happily in the orchard and the family pets gambol in the sun. In the winter, a plentiful supply of logs is stacked in the outhouse, while indoors a blazing fire reflects patterns on the tiled floors and the dreamers sip their *apéritifs* and bask in their good fortune . . .

It's good to dream, but what is the reality of life in rural France? ***Rural Living in France*** has been written in answer to this question. Unfortunately, the weather can be cold and wet, even on the Côte d'Azur, market produce can be expensive, livestock can contract diseases, and winters can be long and lonely – and you cannot live on panoramic views alone.

Loneliness, isolation and boredom are common experiences in rural France and have been cited by many expatriates as the reasons they returned home, especially those with little or no understanding of the language. Rural living is very different from town dwelling – no matter what country you come from. Villages can be insular and the neighbours daunting. Most rural properties require much more improvement than is realised, and, if you aren't prepared to carry out such work, you might be better off considering a more urban and modern home elsewhere. It may not be possible to find a job if money runs low as, understandably, the French look after their own before worrying about the needs of foreigners. Employment in the countryside is spasmodic, seasonal and likely to be of a casual nature.

The attractions of moving to rural France are well-documented: in the UK and elsewhere the high-income, high-outgoings treadmill of life can be stressful. French properties are still cheap by many countries' standards, although prices have been steadily rising due in no small part to the influence of TV 'lifestyle' programmes. Nevertheless, in many areas it's still possible to buy an adequate smallholding (*fermette*) for the price of a one-bedroom flat or cottage in the UK and some other countries. Mortgages, loans and other expenses can become a thing of the past by retiring early or downsizing to rural France – provided children are of an age when they can readily adapt to the language and village school life. Selling a property in a country where prices are high and ditching the mortgage while releasing

enough equity to buy a house outright in France is a tempting proposition, as are growing your own vegetables, raising your own livestock and reducing your outgoings by adopting a more frugal (and satisfying) lifestyle.

In order to ensure that you're looking objectively at life in rural France, however, it's as well to face up to the realities before making any irrevocable decisions. (If you've never lived in the country, it's prudent to rent a property in rural France before burning your bridges.) ***Rural Living in France*** points out the pitfalls as well as the pleasures to those considering a lifestyle change and provides in-depth practical advice to those who've already taken the plunge. Within these pages, guidance is given on a wide range of topics as well as a wealth of references to further sources of information.

We trust this book will help you overcome or alleviate the potential problems of rural living in France and smooth your way to a happy and rewarding future in your new home.

Bon courage!

**J.C. Jeremy Hobson
April 2006**



1.

THE REALITIES OF
RURAL LIFE

Copyright Survival Books

The attractions of life in rural France are plentiful and the majority of expatriate residents cite similar reasons for moving to rural France. Generally, the climate is better than in the UK, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands (where the majority of expatriate residents come from); the cost of living is lower; people are more willing to pass the time of day and to include you in their lives, especially if they see that you're making an effort with the language and participating in local activities. The countryside is outstanding, hugely varied and often unique – and access is easy as French landowners and farmers are generally unconcerned about visitors straying from public rights of way (see **Rambling & Hiking** on page 211).

There's peace and tranquillity in most rural regions and at night it's possible to see the constellations clearly. The huge skies make certain areas popular with painters and the clean fresh air is much appreciated – many newcomers are initially surprised at how healthily-tired they feel after a day spent in the countryside. Many expatriates insist, not in a negative way, that moving to rural France is like going back 50 years, to a time when there was less haste and aggression, and more peace and personal satisfaction. They love the courtesy of the French and their sense of family values. Young families have the opportunity of good schooling for their children, who often attain a higher academic level than they might in some other countries.

Nevertheless, the dangers of looking at life in rural France through rose-tinted spectacles are obvious and it's just as easy to have a holiday romance with an area, place or architecture as it is with a person – often with similar long-term consequences! You're likely to visit France in summer, when everywhere is active, but winters can be very quiet. The rural French make their own amusement. Cinemas and theatres, for example, may be a long way away and you obviously need to be fairly fluent in French to understand films and plays, although some cinemas in larger towns occasionally show films in their original language (*version originale* or VO). Bars are small, brightly lit, and sometimes uncomfortable and smoky, often closing as soon as the attached restaurants begin serving food. There are few 'take-aways' in rural areas, although mobile pizza vans visit some villages one evening a week.

Small villages and their inhabitants can be insular and you may be the source of gossip, which isn't always friendly. Without knowing it, you can find yourself alienated by choosing the wrong locals to be friendly with. There are plenty of petty rivalries, jealousies and even feuds amongst local families and if you offer a drink to the first person who tries to strike up a conversation with you in the local *bar/tabac*, you could be ignored by your more immediate neighbours or people you would rather mix with (see also **Meeting the Neighbours** on page 54).

Families arriving in France with children of school age can experience other problems. Generally, youngsters of primary school age fit easily into the local school, but teenagers will probably resent leaving their friends in their home country and may well experience considerable difficulty integrating into the French school system, which is pitched at a higher curriculum level than the British system, for example (it can be as much as two years ahead of what is being taught in UK schools at the same age). Teenagers used to walking down the street or catching a bus to meet their friends will – when they make new friends in France – find a huge difference, as in rural areas it can be difficult to get anywhere out of school hours. A regular bus service is unlikely and parents usually end up running a taxi service until children can drive – or accept the risk of their riding a moped. And the French language as it's taught in British schools won't help them much when all their school friends are conversing in slang or the local patois.

Although there are plenty of local workmen and *artisans*, they won't be much use to you if you cannot communicate with them in order to make them understand what you want them to do – always assuming that you can get them to come to see you in the first place. The pace of life is very slow and, although you may get a plumber to commit himself to coming on Tuesday, it's a very different matter pinning him down to a particular Tuesday! And when he does come, it's a pretty safe bet that he will arrive late, take himself off for a two-hour lunch break and depart early, often leaving a job half finished.

Rural communities are more likely to experience power cuts due to trees falling on overhead cables (see **Electricity** on page 47) and, like broadband, underground cables may be of low priority when there are more densely populated urban areas to be connected.

Like it or not, shooting and hunting (*la chasse*) are an integral part of French rural life and you may find your peaceful Sunday mornings disturbed by members of the local *commune* firing shotguns in the proximity of your boundary, and their dogs rushing through your open kitchen door and polishing off the food you'd left out for the cats (see **Hunting, Shooting & Fishing** on page 202).

Treat every small success as a triumph and be ready and waiting for the first hurdle – it's bound to arrive within days – but never give up; otherwise you might as well stay ensconced in your old life.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

If you dream of peace and tranquillity, an abundance of flora and fauna, contact with neighbours and village life, the idea of living in rural France must

appeal. Before proceeding further, however, it's important to draw up a list of 'fors' and 'againsts', as well as asking yourself some soul-searching questions, including the following:

- Why exactly do you want to live in France? Is it because you want to live a less stressful life in a sunny location – or is it because you know France well, can speak the language and all the sums add up?
- In what part of the country do you want to live? Are you open-minded, provided it's somewhere picturesque and the village is a pretty place to show off to visitors – or are you set on a particular region or department in an area close to an airport, port or shopping centre?
- Have you worked out where the money to live on is going to come from? Are you full of vague ideas and think you can easily convert part of your rural property into B&B or *gîte* accommodation and turn it into a money-making success once you're established or have you carefully researched the local economy and likely sources of income? If you're retired, have you calculated that your pension, less tax, will cover all your expenses? If you need to work, have you established contacts with employment agencies and found out what qualifications you might require?
- How 'rural' is rural in your eyes? Is it kilometres away from your nearest neighbour because you love the idea of sitting in your own woodland drinking a glass of locally-produced wine and admiring the river that runs through your property – or is it on the outskirts of a village so as to be close to shops and a primary school?
- If you have children, are you assuming they will adapt to a change of language, culture and school system – or have you investigated the schooling options available, the likely problems they will encounter and possible solutions?
- Have you experienced isolation and hard work before, in both winter and summer, when logs need chopping and fetching or animals/gardens need watering – or will a few months of cold, dark nights be a small price to pay for an idyllic summer lifestyle (and you never venture out much at night anyway)?
- What do you plan to do about medical cover? Are you going to worry about that when you get there and rely on your European health insurance card until you need to make other arrangements – or have you

investigated making social security contributions in France and how much this will cost?

- Having decided to move to rural France, are you crossing your fingers and hoping it will all turn out as you've imagined – or have you read all you can on the subject (you can do no better than read Survival Books' other books on France – see page 287) and opened a bank account in order to transfer money for the purchase of a property?

If you can identify with the first part of the above questions more than the second part, there's a good chance that you aren't yet facing up to realities of French rural living and need to clarify your objectives and narrow your options before taking the plunge. The following points may help you clarify your thoughts.

CLIMATE

The opportunity to get away from cold and wet weather is often one of the major attractions of moving to *la France profonde*, but it's necessary to research all the areas you think might be suitable. If you're looking primarily for a change in climate, you will probably eliminate the northern parts of the country and begin your search somewhere south of the Loire. But what about the extremes of temperature and excessive wind, rain, frost and snow that some regions experience? France is such a huge country that many areas are excessively hot in summer and below freezing in winter. If you're a keen gardener or want to become self-sufficient, you need to know which areas of France are likely to produce the best results for the plants you want to grow and the animals you want to keep.

It might seem a little thing, but can you cope with mud? The sun doesn't shine every day, even in the south of France, and there's a good chance that whilst maintaining your land or renovating your property in the winter months, you won't be able to avoid bringing mud into the house. Therefore you will have to decide early on whether to spend your life cleaning it up or simply learn to live with it.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Just because the cost of living in France is lower than in your home country, you shouldn't be tempted into thinking that you can live on virtually nothing. Even if you've disposed of a mortgage and have a few thousand euros in the

bank, French rural properties are notorious for their ability to eat away at your savings, especially if there's major renovation work to be done. Do you have enough money to convert not only the house, but also any outbuildings – or at least make them safe? For example, will the house need re-wiring, necessitating the hire of a generator whilst the work is being carried out? What about the cost of installing a new septic tank, bearing in mind the demands of the new legislation (see **Sewerage** on page 36)? A new one can easily cost around €5,000. It's common for people to underestimate the cost of renovation and restoration by at least 50 per cent.

If you plan to start a smallholding there's likely to be the expense of purchasing wire netting and fence posts. If you've never owned property with a large amount of land before coming to France, it's unlikely that you will possess the tools and specialised equipment necessary for its management (see **Chapter 9**) and their purchase will obviously add to your costs. If you want to exploit your land (see **Chapter 4**), you will have to pay out money long before you have any hope of seeing a return, if indeed you're ever in that fortunate position. Being self-sufficient is possible, but there's the initial expense of buying livestock, seedlings and plants, and even if you eventually succeed you must face the fact that you're never going to sell enough surplus produce to pay for things such as petrol, fuel and property tax. **One of the reasons people fail to realise their dream of a rural lifestyle is that they under-estimate the amount of money they can live on.** A good rule of thumb is to reckon on needing at least a third of your previous income, even if you have no mortgage to repay.

Even searching for your ideal home can cost much more than you think. You will be lucky if you find it on your first trip and, even if you do, there are the costs of returning to sign various forms, when you may need overnight accommodation. Ferry crossings and flights (which may be at peak times) soon add up, as do petrol bills and hire cars.

If you're considering obtaining a French mortgage, it's important to remember that if your income is from a non-euro country such as the UK, an adverse change in the exchange rate could leave you struggling. For more details of the financial implications of purchasing property in France, read *Buying a Home in France* (Survival Books – see page 287).

ACCESSIBILITY

Rural doesn't necessarily mean remote. You can be in or on the outskirts of a village of 1,000 or 2,000 inhabitants and enjoy a rural existence while benefiting from easy access to shops, schools and other essential services.

In remote districts, on the other hand, you will have to use transport (invariably a car, as public transport will be severely limited or non-existent) every time you want a loaf of bread, and the nearest 'nightlife' may be at least a half hour's drive away – and probably no more than the local *bar/tabac*. If you have a strong interest in a particular sport or hobby, the distance you have to travel to engage in it may be prohibitive.

If you have friends and family members in another country, you will probably want to see them periodically and, with your idyllic rural property and the opportunity of cheap holidays, they will definitely want to come and see you! Bearing this in mind, how far from the nearest ferry port or airport do you want to be? Do the cheap airlines fly to your nearest airport or is it serviced by only the more expensive ones?

PLANTS & ANIMALS

If you have dreams of self-sufficiency, the weather is obviously important, but of more concern is how much land is attached to the property you eventually buy or rent. You obviously need to have some idea as to your intentions so that you don't commit yourself to too much or too little land: a huge vegetable plot to sustain you and your family may seem desirable, but can you manage it on your own? If, on your *fermette*, you intend to keep animals, are the soil conditions suitable to allow a small flock of sheep to over-winter without turning the fields into a quagmire? When you want to return 'home' for family occasions, will there be anyone to look after the livestock? Any animal, even the family pet, is a daily commitment, and it may not be easy to make alternative arrangements in a foreign country where the nearest neighbours live a kilometre or more away.

INTEGRATION

You must choose where you want to live very carefully, not only in terms of business opportunities, but also with regard to your social life – in particular whether you wish to be in an area where there are lots of your fellow countrymen or in one where there are only French people. In either case, be prepared to immerse yourself in French life as a means of being accepted and don't cling onto expatriate neighbours just because they speak your language; ask yourself whether you'd have chosen them as friends at home. No matter how poor your French, always try to use it when talking to neighbours, shop assistants and officials, and never be arrogant enough to presume that they should understand English. The reality is that if you speak

little or no French when you arrive, you might struggle for years to enjoy a proper friendship with your French neighbours and will be at a huge disadvantage at any social gathering, being able to understand only half (or less) of what is said, let alone managing adequately to express your thoughts and feelings. The French might appear arrogant, but that's how they've managed to preserve their culture and lifestyle, which presumably you're moving to France to enjoy – and anyway, they're the natives and you're the foreigner!

With very few exceptions, French rural dwellers are welcoming and polite. Things might be different in Paris and other large cities, but in sequestered villages you're invariably greeted with a handshake and a comment as to the weather or your health. Much of the charm of living in France lies in observing local customs as you go about your daily business. In few other countries can you sit in a bar and be acknowledged by every person who enters. Quite often each new customer will go around the tables shaking hands before settling down for a drink. Where else can you sit in a restaurant and be wished “*Bon appétit*” as fellow diners take their seats around you? Not only are you wished it, but it always sounds sincere. Even youngsters aren't exempt from the conventions and greet each other and their elders without embarrassment. For the rural French, the weekly market (see **Markets** on page 243) is an opportunity to meet friends and acquaintances and catch up with local gossip; if you're noticed there by a neighbour, you will be introduced and included in the conversation – leaving you with a strange sense of pride at being accepted.

THE SYSTEM

It's essential that you realise the importance of belonging to the French 'system' – you will endear yourself to no one if you take from it and give nothing back. The French population might have made a national pastime of 'playing the system', but you as an outsider shouldn't even contemplate it. A *carte de séjour* is no longer essential, but is available if you ask and will show that you respect the formalities of becoming a resident. You should register at your local *mairie*, even if only as a matter of courtesy, and if you're planning to live in the country full-time you will need to apply for a *carte vitale* and consider taking out complementary medical insurance (see **Health Insurance** on page 46).

Your local tax office (*hôtel des impôts*) will be keen to get its hands on your money via the annual *taxes d'habitation* and *foncière*, and various organisations with mysterious acronyms will demand hefty *contributions*

sociales. Therefore you should apply for the various forms and get yourself into the system as soon as possible after arrival – the *administration* will catch up with you sooner or later if you don't. As with all aspects of French bureaucracy, there's a lot of form filling to be done when you arrive, but generally each step will be explained as you go along. It's worthwhile taking as many documents as possible with you when visiting any official office, as you're sure to be asked for some form of identification and proof of address. Passport, birth certificate, papers confirming your marital status, a copy of your house purchase contract, utility bills (electricity, water, etc.) and your French bank account details will all prove to be essential requirements when you begin playing the snakes and ladders game of 'living in rural France'.

The Maire & Notaire

It's important that you get on well with the local *maire* and the *notaire* handling your home purchase. The latter you will meet when signing the agreements relating to the purchase and again whenever you need a document witnessed or when you want to prepare a French will. The *notaire* definitely makes a better friend than an enemy and a good one is to be looked after at all costs – a bottle of quality (single-malt, not blended) whisky offered at Christmas can result in minor fees being waived for the rest of the year!

A similar gift left with the *maire* (the *maire* is the person, the *mairie* his office) is also a wise investment and, if your *mairie* is a small one, a pot plant, bunch of flowers or bottle of good wine given to the *réceptionniste* will ensure that any future requests for an appointment or simply for general information are promptly granted. If you're having a party at which guests are expected to wander and mingle rather than a more intimate sit-down affair, extend an invitation to the *maire* and his partner; nine times out of ten they will be delighted to come and it might be the ideal opportunity to outline any plans you have for the property whilst they're on site and in a receptive mood!

Neighbours

Most inhabitants of rural France care for their family, friends and neighbours. An offer to help is often made without any ulterior motive or expectation of reciprocation or reward. National politeness ensures that you're never left standing on the doorstep when you have cause to visit a neighbour, but it's still an honour to be invited into someone's home for dinner or *l'apéritif*, even if such an invitation arouses as much anxiety as pleasure (see **Meeting the**

Neighbours on page 54). In most countries, a bottle of wine or a bunch of flowers is the usual gift to take for the host and hostess, but you can easily insult French neighbours by offering them a mediocre bottle (especially if they're wine-makers themselves!).

A stunning display of chrysanthemums, which would be greeted with delight in the UK, is bad luck in France, where they're only ever placed on the graves of dead relatives on 1st November, All Saints' Day (see **Beliefs & Superstitions** on page 239). A box of eggs from your own chickens is a better bet, although in a farming community this may be the equivalent of 'coals to Newcastle'. Play safe and take something home-made or a product only available in your home country. A *faux pas* will never be pointed out to you, however; whatever the present, it will be received with gratitude and is almost certain to be repaid by perhaps a box of vegetables left on your doorstep a few days later.

As with any country or group of people, there are exceptions to every rule and it's possible to encounter unhelpful and surly neighbours in France just as it is anywhere else. In some areas, they may resent newcomers, either because they're unused to them or, as in the highly publicised cases in Brittany in 2005, because they object to expatriates 'colonising' their villages (see **Choosing a Property** on page 31). Occasionally, for no apparent reason at all, they're downright hostile to foreigners and in many cases, irritatingly ignorant and condescending. Don't always take this hostility at face value, however, as once you've persevered with building up a relationship you often find that the individuals concerned appreciate your efforts and become good friends. Also, an attitude that might originally be seen as patronising may in fact be an example of the French sense of humour, which can at first be difficult to grasp and a little daunting.

Good neighbours can help in the most unexpected ways, but there's no limit to the trouble you can encounter from bad ones (see **Bonfires & Noise** on page 240).