



Sandy and Ross at home in Cantal

## Walkin' back to happiness

Popular with walkers, Cantal in the upper Lot Valley proved ideal for one expat couple's B&B, says **Deborah Curtis**

Twelve months ago, Sandy Greenwood and Ross Markwell were living in Brisbane. They had careers, a house, family, friends and three cats, but they have left all that behind them - apart from the cats - and now run a *chambres d'hôtes* with walking holidays in the stunning rural landscape of the Lot Valley.

This dramatic shift was precipitated by changes in Sandy's work as administration manager at a language school in Brisbane.

"It was time to move on and look for something else, but I didn't really want another office job," says Sandy. "We talked long and hard about things, and we decided to look for a B&B."

Sandy's dual nationality, thanks to her father being English, meant that the couple could cast their net as far afield as Europe.

"I started looking on the internet. The south of France was good weather-wise;

Brisbane is so hot in summer, and we wanted to go somewhere that wasn't quite as difficult in summer. I found this place on the internet and we fell in love with it."

The property that captured their hearts is Les Sources, a former hotel in the village of Saint-Jacques-des-Blats in Cantal.

"We were told it was built in 1850," says Ross, who previously worked as a chemist for a water and sanitation utility company in Brisbane. "However, we've seen photos with 1813 etched into the stonework so we're pretty sure it was built earlier. It used to be run as the hotel-restaurant for the train station, but that has now been closed for many years."

Originally known as the Hôtel de la Gare, with 14 guest bedrooms, the property has slowly evolved over time to become Hôtel Restaurant de la Gare, then Hôtel des Sources, before becoming Les Sources in 2006 when it was converted into a *chambres d'hôtes* with

five en-suite rooms.

"It is quite rustic in style but it has been updated over the years," says Sandy.

Ross came over to look at the property, which also includes a self-contained gîte, in July last year, and they decided to go for it.

"We loved the tranquillity of it all," says Sandy. "We've come from a busy city, and we wanted something that was quiet and relaxing. Mind you we've been very busy since we've been here!"

They sold up in Australia and took up residence in France in October 2013. Their three cats - Lavender, Lily and Oliver - took a week to make the journey from Brisbane with a pet transport company, but are now happily settled in their new home.

"The guests love Lily," says Sandy. "She lies in the lounge or at the entrance to the guest salon and the guests come up and pet her and stroke her, and she's so tolerant."

Taking over an established business



This page, left: striding out across the Massif Central



Lily relaxing on the sofa



Guests at Les Sources

enabled them to hit the ground running. There was no essential work to be done on the building, and with guests already booked when they moved in, they've been thrown in at the deep end, but they love it.

"We've got the best of both worlds," says Ross. "The summers are really pleasant but

that, and they've already welcomed visitors from the UK, Australia and South Africa.

"This is a bit of a hidden area to the English, and so far most of our visitors have been French," says Sandy. "The area is a hidden gem but it's a little more difficult to get to; a little more remote. It's beautiful. The

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not too hot, and then we have the really fabulous winters with the snow and skiing. That's perfect for our business, because we get walkers in summertime and skiers in winter. We have guests all year round."

So far, the majority of their guests have been French, which Ross and Sandy put down to the area being less well known to international tourists. They aim to change all

mountains are breathtaking. We're right in the middle of the Massif Central, and there's so much walking around here. It is lovely!"

The couple provide breakfast and a four-course evening meal, which they cook themselves using fresh local produce. They also provide hearty picnic lunches for walkers and skiers alike.

"We've always enjoyed our cooking at

home in Brisbane, and we both do things quite well, so together we do a pretty good job," says Sandy. "We overfeed everybody, of course. No one ever leaves our house hungry - that's an Australian trait!"

Many of the vegetables served to guests are grown in their productive vegetable patch, and they also have plans to get chickens, and to plant a selection of fruit trees hardy enough to withstand the testing winter.

"The potatoes we've grown are just fabulous. They are really lovely and they just don't get any fresher than when you go down to the backyard and pick them yourself. That's one of the nice things about living here: you can have such fresh produce. We also have fabulous cheeses and the wine's not bad either," says Sandy smiling.

With all this delicious food on offer, it's no wonder that many guests like to get out and work up an appetite with a walk in the surrounding countryside. 🐾





This page, left: a view down into the valley



Lavender surveys the scene



Tending the vegetable patch

“The walks have been developed over a decade or more by successive owners,” says Ross. “They give a good snapshot of the general area. All the walks come with a laminated sheet with a map and walking notes so you don’t need a guide.

“If you come here for a week, you can go off in lots of different directions from Saint-Jacques and there are some fairly challenging walks along two ridge lines if you want, as well as ones that don’t climb very much higher than where we are now.”

The paths are easy to follow and Cantal is such a sparsely populated department that walkers often feel as though they have the place to themselves. It is this tranquillity coupled with the unhurried pace of the French lifestyle that has worked its magic on former city-dwellers Sandy and Ross.

“It’s completely different here,” says Sandy. “I’d got a bit tired of it all. Brisbane isn’t the busiest city in the world but there are about two million people living there. It’s a big change to move to a village of 380 people.

“It’s really tranquil. The cows here all wear bells and so it’s like having these beautiful, subtle wind chimes around in the backyard because they’ve all got their bells on. There’s no hustle and bustle.”

They have been warmly welcomed by their French neighbours and being the only English-speakers in the village has meant that

Sandy has had to throw herself into learning French from scratch.

“Ross is the French-speaker,” she says. “He did a postdoc in Lausanne, in Switzerland, in the eighties, and he worked in Montreal for seven years, so his French is pretty good. I had no French when we came here and it’s still difficult.

“Nobody in the village speaks English but they are so patient. They really appreciate the fact that I am trying to speak French, which is good because then you get better all the time.

“Our neighbours have been just lovely. Everyone waves and we make a point of waving when they go past, and we go to the *boulangerie* everyday to get our croissants and baguettes. Everyone has been impeccably

*“The cows here all wear bells, and so it’s like having these beautiful, subtle wind chimes around”*

polite and very helpful.”

There have been some tough times along the way over the past nine months: the slow-moving behemoth of French bureaucracy almost saw Ross having to head back to Australia before his *carte de séjour* just came through in the nick of time; and cruel

exchange rate fluctuations between the euro and the Australian dollar ate a huge chunk of the capital and savings they’d spent many years accumulating.

However, despite these setbacks, they are

excited and optimistic about their new lives.

“It’s a wonderful adventure,” says Sandy. “Thank goodness we have Skype because I miss my family terribly, but it’s been a wonderful experience so far and we’ve got many years ahead of us.” **LF**

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