



When plans change often works out for the better as Vanessa and Richard Rhoades-Brown discovered when they started their search for a French property. The couple had initially set their sights on a holiday home in Normandy but soon found that their limited budget didn't stretch very far and the only properties they could afford were run-down barns in need of total renovation. For Vanessa and Richard, who both had stressful jobs in the UK, the prospect of renovating a wreck was too much to contemplate. "They were all barns with no roofs on and we thought, 'This is ridiculous. How can we get over on a weekend and try and renovate this property and then go back on the Sunday ready for work on Monday morning?'" says Vanessa. The pair decided to reassess

Vanessa and Richard Rhoades-Brown didn't shy away from vibrant colour when they renovated their 18th-century property in the Seven Valleys

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their options. Their long-term plan was to move to France permanently, so on returning from Normandy they decided to sell one of their properties in London to enable them to finance buying a larger house in France where they could fulfil their

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Above: the Louis XVI bed takes pride of place in the flamingo room

dream of running a B&B. Vanessa and Richard then shifted their property search further north concentrating on the department of Pas-de-Calais so they could be close to the UK but also benefit from stopover travellers heading to the south of France and the rest of Europe. The Rhoades-Browns eventually settled on an 18th-century *maison de maître* in the Seven Valleys area, knowing instantly that it was the one. "It was the last house we saw in a week of viewings. As soon as we drove through the drive we knew it had real potential and could really work for us," says Vanessa. The interior didn't disappoint either and when they walked through the door Vanessa and Richard saw that it had real promise both as a business opportunity and as the rural home they so desired with their move to France. "We just



pas-de-calais renovation



needed a big lifestyle change and wanted to live in the countryside and start a new chapter," says Vanessa. The vast size of the property means that the couple are able to have their own space as well as accommodating guests which Vanessa says is vital when running a B&B as essentially you're inviting guests into your own home. Unlike the derelict properties in Normandy that needed extensive rebuilding, the house they bought in the Seven Valleys needed building work but on a much smaller and manageable scale. Vanessa and Richard were no strangers to renovation projects having done up and sold several properties in the UK, so they knew what converting the house in France would entail. The couple enlisted the help of Vanessa's father, a builder, who worked with a French plumber and electrician to transform the existing

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Clockwise from left: the vivid colours of the peacock room; the front of the house before the work; Vanessa studying the building plans; the glamorous art deco lounge



Right: Vanessa and Richard are pleased the bulk of the renovation work is done
eight bedrooms into four en suite guest rooms and update the dining room and lounge to give it an art deco feel. Creating the en suite bathrooms involved extensive plumbing work especially as the old pipes were all external and had to be buried. Vanessa says they found

the French artisans excellent to work with. "I have absolutely no complaints at all," she says. "In fact if anything our plumber has been more fantastic than we'd hoped. Once you get him here you can't get him to leave! He would stay till 8pm at night and we'd say to him, 'enough's enough now André you need to go home!'" One of the hardest aspects of the renovation process was the communication as initially Vanessa and Richard only spoke basic French but as they improved it got easier. The couple were lucky the property was structurally sound and that they only encountered a few glitches along the way, particularly as Vanessa says once you start to do renovation work and peel back the layers you can often find problems. An unexpected expense was having to fork out for a new sanitation system to replace the

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existing fosse and accommodate the six bathrooms the property now has. The *assainissement non collectif*, essentially a massive tank in the garden that drains all the dirty water away, set them back €12,000. Once the structural work was under way, the fun started for Vanessa who has a real passion for interior design. Back in the UK alongside her job as a nurse, she also worked as a fashion designer so the blank canvas of the B&B offered endless opportunities for her to indulge in her passion. "The interiors were a dream come true," she says. "Obviously when you live somewhere you're never as brave as you really want to be, especially if you're selling it on, but having it as a B&B I've been able to go to town." The couple had already decided to name the business *Maison de Plumes* (House of Feathers) prior to making the move as they wanted to theme the rooms around birds – not only because of the abundance living in the surrounding area but also because of Vanessa's love of the art deco period which features a lot of bird inspiration. The decor of each of the four bedrooms is themed around a different bird: the flamingo room features vibrant print wallpaper accented with hues of

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pink and stone and a dramatic Louis XVI-style bed; the parakeet room is decorated with ornate rococo furniture and a black and green colour scheme; chocolate brown and silver feature heavily in the ostrich room and vivid shades of turquoise, navy blue and greens creates an uplifting feel in the peacock room.

Vanessa spent hours scouring the internet and visiting antiques fairs searching for products to decorate the B&B and inject her personality into the property. "I went to hundreds of different antiques fairs, brocantes and the Braderie de Lille where we picked up lots of pieces," she says. "We also got original Art Deco items from eBay and even had some things, such as the chandelier in the



This page, clockwise from top: guests can enjoy a fresco dinner; the gold galleried hallway; the ostrich en suite bathroom; installing the new sanitation system



This page, clockwise from top right: the parakeet room; the dining table set for a winter supper by a roaring fire; knocking two rooms into one in to create the parakeet room



lounge, shipped over from America." The couple has also made a lot of things themselves including the dining table, cocktail bar and sink units. A fifth room is in the process of being renovated which has a swan theme, with Vanessa taking inspiration from the 1960s for the furniture and decorative touches. "The new room has been over a year in the making because we are making a lot of the furniture. If you went out and bought the kind of pieces that we have here it would cost you a fortune and unfortunately we don't have an endless pot of money. I painted the floor and it

took over a month," says Vanessa.

It took 14 months of hard graft before the business was ready to welcome guests in July 2008 and four years on the couple are pleased with the success of the business, even though they frequently put in 18-hour days. Ironically the couple had hoped to work fewer hours once they moved to France but running a B&B, especially when you offer *tables d'hôtes*, is tiring says Vanessa. "We didn't realise how much hard work it would be. I used to do 12-hour nursing shifts in London and that was difficult but what we do here doesn't even

compare. But then what we put in we get out. It certainly beats working for anybody else."

There's potential for further expansion of the property but the Rhoades-Browns want to keep the *chambres d'hôtes* on an intimate scale and continue to give the level of service they would expect themselves. "Every guest is welcomed with a drink and a chat. No guest is ever taken straight up to the room and asked what time they want breakfast in the morning. If anything the most valuable thing that we give the guests is our time." LP www.maisondeplumes.com