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DESIGN DUO

A move to France provided a lifestyle shift for one Canadian family who went on to set up their dream *chambres d'hôtes* business in Pays de la Loire, as Anna McKittrick discovers

It's hard to believe that Warren Coulson and Shari Swan have only called France home for little more than two years. In just a short space of time, the Canadian couple, who lived in Amsterdam for more than a decade, have transformed their property in Pays de la Loire's Vendée department into a family home and luxury *chambres d'hôtes*.

They opened to guests last year and are already receiving rave reviews for their B&B's laid-back ambiance, warm welcome and unique country-meets-contemporary design aesthetic.

Running a *chambres d'hôtes* has clearly come naturally to Warren and Shari, but initially they only planned

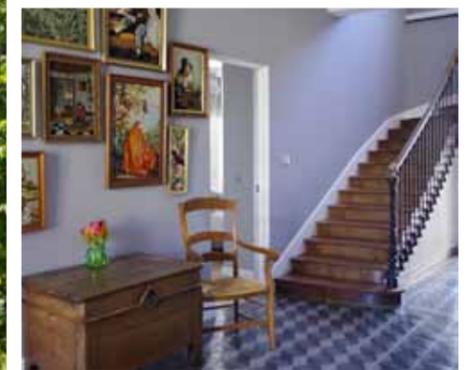
to purchase a holiday home in France. "Originally we wanted a smaller house to come to for summers and weekends. But the more properties we viewed, the more our plan changed as we realised the value of what our Canadian dollar could buy here," remembers Shari.

They then started thinking that a permanent move could be life-changing both for themselves, and for their two children, Jacobi and Sienna, now four and one-and-a-half-years-old respectively.

With the idea for the business came the need to find a space that would work to welcome guests, but would also be somewhere they would be happy to put down roots. When it came to the location, Warren says

they chose Vendée because the family knew the department and surrounding area well from holidays, and loved the feel of it, the people, its beaches and its ease of access. "It's just 40 minutes from both Nantes and La Rochelle airports, which made it convenient as we knew we'd have to travel to Amsterdam quite a bit, because my business is still based there. We're also 40 minutes from the ferries, 40 minutes to the beach, 40 minutes from the historical theme park Le Puy-du-Fou, so ideal for tourists. It turns out that 40 minutes is the magic number," laughs Shari.

The couple came on property-hunting trips, either flying or driving down from Amsterdam at weekends, and Shari says they viewed in excess



of 100 properties, from rural farmhouses to village houses, before settling on Manoir du Moulin. "This one stayed in our minds for a really long time. We first saw it in April, and I don't think we purchased it until October. It had gone down in price then as well, so that made it more attractive."

After weighing up their options, Warren and Shari decided on a village location; Manoir du Moulin is situated in Sainte-Hermine, a pretty village with plenty of amenities including a butcher, several *boulangeries*, a restaurant, a school and even a small cinema. Although it's near the centre of the village, the property, which is set in an acre of private gardens, still benefits from a

relaxing and tranquil feel as it's surrounded by a stone wall and backs onto parkland, making it a secluded oasis.

Shari says that as soon as they saw the property, which they bought

As soon as they saw the property, which they bought from a French couple looking to downsize, they realised its potential

from a French couple looking to downsize, they realised its potential. Although it wasn't run as a *chambres d'hôtes*, the existing layout of the house meant it could easily be adapted to become a business

Opening page: Moulin du Manoir; **Inset:** Warren and Shari at home **This page:** life at Manoir du Moulin takes place at a relaxed, easy pace

without involving too much structural work. "We didn't have to move too many walls or knock down and change things too much. In that regard it was fairly, I wouldn't say easy, but simple to plan it out," says Warren. With all of the five guest bedrooms already offering en suites, it made a huge difference to the project. In the end they did replace all the plumbing and electrics, but Shari says having the existing connections in place made the job much more straightforward.

During the 17-month project, the couple wanted to retain the history of the property while adding modern touches. The building, which dates back to 1650, was originally one level and has been adapted over the years to include a second storey, a conservatory and an additional wing. "We wanted to restore as much of the period features of the house as we could and enhance the stone walls," says Shari.

The couple kept as many original



doors, doorframes and cornice work in the ceilings as they could, and all the radiators and windows had to be stripped down as they were coated in lead paint. Knitting together old and new elements was a challenge that Shari relished.

“A lot of thought went into working out how to use what’s here and make it modern. We knew that the rooms needed to be *chambres d’hôtes* standard, but there wasn’t space for wardrobes, so we built in a lot of the features with plasterboard over the beds, and created places to hold clothes in order to maximise the storage available.”

For Shari, who owns a design and innovation agency in Amsterdam called Streative Branding, coming up with the concept and interiors for Manoir du Moulin was a really exciting project. “For me, although I’d done it with Streative, it was my chance to do it for us and build a brand and a company,” enthuses Shari, who describes the decor as modern, clean and functional but with an element of storytelling.

“There are a lot of vignettes around the house with different pieces, be it a wall or an area where you sit that has a second layer,” says Shari, who sourced many of the pieces from local *brocantes*, *vide-greniers* and antique shops. “Our house in Amsterdam was 160m² and we didn’t really have any furniture, so pretty much everything that’s been put in this house has been

“We bought a lot of stuff from vide-greniers... we really tried to use the local feel to create a look that mixes design and history”

bought since we moved or has been donated to us. We bought a lot of stuff from *vide-greniers* and the previous owners gave us quite a lot of furniture. It’s not to say that we don’t have any designer pieces, but we really tried to use the local feel whenever we could to create a look that mixes design and history.”

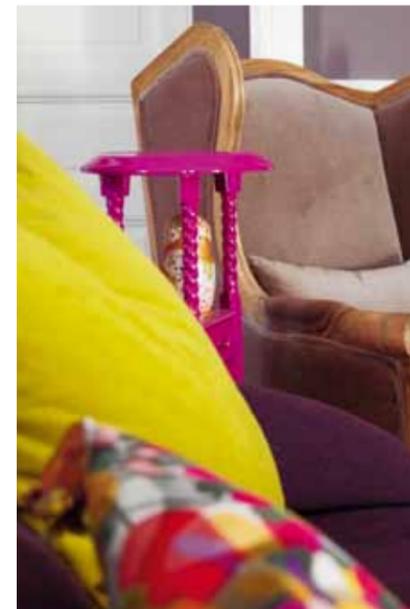
The biggest challenge the couple

This page: stylish design touches showcase the property’s history
Opposite page: key elements of Warren and Shari’s *chambres d’hôtes*

faced was converting the *grenier* (attic) into living space, as it needed a complete overhaul, having only ever been used for storage. Aside from insulating, plastering, painting and adding new floors, they built two bedrooms, a bathroom, a laundry room and a walk-in closet. The family live in the *grenier* space as well as the half of the house that isn’t let out to guests.

It was important for Warren and Shari to have space to live as a family, which is separate from the B&B, and likewise for guests to have their own areas in which to relax. In addition to the five bedrooms, guests also have access to a study room and a beautiful light-filled conservatory where breakfast is served. In the summer, visitors can enjoy dining outside in the pretty gardens or use the kitchen in the separate gîte where they can cook produce from the local food markets.

While Warren and Shari don’t tend to cook evening meals unless requested, although this might change in the future, they do run ▶





chef experiences at Manoir du Moulin, offering either cooking lessons with local chef Lionel Guilbaud or the chance to sample some of his regional dishes.

The couple recently hosted their first yoga retreat which, alongside yoga classes, wellness sessions and workshops, featured two chef-led cooking sessions. Shari was keen for the women, who attended the long weekend, to be able to discover the gastronomy of Vendée.

It's also something she's been keen to get to know herself since moving. "It's interesting how you change how you eat and how you cook when you move to a new country. You adopt the local traditions and local ingredients and here everyone eats what's fresh and in season," says Shari, who has noticed a shift in her shopping habits in rural France compared to city living, where you can buy anything year-round.

"We grow our own produce, we make our own jam, and we do all of our own canning. These are things that we dreamt about doing in the

city, but would never have had the opportunity to do had we not come here," she adds.

Although the couple are used to living away from their home country of Canada, moving from a big city like Amsterdam has been a welcome change, and the family has settled into the gentle rhythm of life in Sainte-Hermine.

"When you live in a city, you tend to know your neighbours, but here people really look out for you"

"There's no comparison between city living and village living" Shari says. "The people here are just a different breed, and have been super welcoming. It's really changed our lives. When you live in a city, you tend to know your neighbours or you have friends across town, but here people really look out for you."

Warren and Shari have made a huge effort to become part of the community, joining in with school

functions and local activities, and have learnt the language, which Shari says is vital if you want to integrate into a small close-knit village. Jacobi attends the local school and has already picked up French while Sienna's nanny, who looks after her a few days a week, only speaks to her in French. Having the opportunity for both children to be bilingual was a huge incentive for moving, especially with the links to French culture back in Canada.

While it's been hard work to set up the business, it's paid off and the couple are looking forward to the future at Moulin du Manoir. Shari says: "The last year and a half has been crazy for us stress-wise, but it's levelling out now and the rewards for that change are indescribable." LF www.manoirdumoulin.com

Above: one of the guest bedrooms; Inset: Shari with the couple's two children Jacobi and Sienna