How we moved our family to France

Jodie and Andy Broad swapped Hertfordshire for the French Alps with their two young daughters

Liz Bonthuys
Updated July 23 2022 - 10:00am GMT
Reporting: Emma Pinedo, Tom Harris, Ben Wright, Ashley Armstrong, Jack Leslie and Jim Pickford

Edit this article for free
Add as a preferred source

Jodie and her daughters Ella and Ellie-Mae in the Alps

Have you lived abroad as an expat? Whether you stayed or came back to the UK, we'd like to hear about your experience. Email money@telegraph.co.uk

The show of an entire life in the French Alps persuaded Jodie Broad and her husband Andy to move from Hertfordshire with their two daughters.

The town where Jodie and Andy worked in Chamonix for a year previously before having Bonnie, now 18, and Beatrice, 10 - but second time around chose the town of Saint-Gervais-les-Bains in the Haute-Savoie.

Jodie and her daughters Bonnie and Beatrice in front of Mount Blanc near Saint-Gervais

"We always wanted to return. I speak French and was confident the girls would learn quickly when thrown in at the deep end," says Jodie, 35.

"Saint-Gervais is in the heart of the mountains but only an hour from Geneva, it's an authentic, historic French town, with normal life going on all year round, rather than a ski resort."

The couple had established a business in Britain - Wine & Sky, which offers "aerial adventures" such as a 3100ft sheer-down Anfield stadium. However, they did not need to be in Britain full time to run it, and Andy, 32, could commute weekly.

Jodie and her daughters Bonnie and Beatrice in front of Mount Blanc near Saint-Gervais

When the family made the move in 2017, they did not need to get long-stay visas either.

With no tax war profiles tax incentives for new residents post-Brexit, the main appeal of France remains the quality of life it can offer, particularly for those who enjoy an outdoor lifestyle revolving around national parks or mountain villages.

The French education system ranks highly, but there are relatively few international schools compared to Spain - 5%, according to INC research with just over half in Paris.

Alongside navigating the school system, there is also France's infamous bureaucracy and the paperwork needed to relocate post-Brexit.

Here, we break down what lower and the tricky traps to avoid if making the move as a family.

Find the right school

The family moved to a ski resort in France, on Bonnilly and Beatrice (Year seven) to the local primary school, Ecole Marie Paradis.

There are Catholic and private schools to choose from, but for most families in rural France the local school is the go-to option.

The family did not consider international schools in nearby Geneva, says Jodie, and getting a place at the local school was an easy process.

If you are not thinking of an international school, the younger you move your children to surmount the language barrier, the better. Jodie reckons it usually takes about a year.

Bonnie and Beatrice Broad in front of Mount Blanc near Saint-Gervais

"Bea was seven when we moved and she didn't let an eyelid flutter. Bonnie was nine and spent the final year at primary school learning French. It was more difficult."

However, by the time the girls moved onto Saint Jean Baptiste Collège in Megève, their grasp of the language put them in a good position.

Bonnie and Beatrice Broad in front of Mount Blanc near Saint-Gervais

"The most challenging time to move is usually during the GCSE years (age 14 to 16), when both language demands and academic pressure increase significantly," advises Jane Fraser Bryan, an independent property consultant with agent Bonny Villages Immobilier in the Dordogne.

In France there are four school stages: nursery (age two to six), primary (six to 11), collège (11 to 15) and lycée (15 to 18). Nursery is optional but more academically focused than in Britain, with less emphasis on pastoral care. Discipline is stricter, and homework starts at a young age," she adds.

Bonnie and Beatrice Broad in front of Mount Blanc near Saint-Gervais

"The most challenging time to move is usually during the GCSE years (age 14 to 16), when both language demands and academic pressure increase significantly," advises Jane Fraser Bryan, an independent property consultant with agent Bonny Villages Immobilier in the Dordogne.

In France there are four school stages: nursery (age two to six), primary (six to 11), collège (11 to 15) and lycée (15 to 18). Nursery is optional but more academically focused than in Britain, with less emphasis on pastoral care. Discipline is stricter, and homework starts at a young age," she adds.

International schools can be good for older children who do not speak French but are only in France on a short-term basis - but be prepared for fees.

Annual tuition fees at Bonnie International School for a 10-year-old cost €10,000 (+vat) for day pupils (minus lunches), at popular Meaulne British International school on the French Riviera, a pupil of the same age pays €10,920, after a registration fee of €2,000.

"Another caveat: in some international schools, French integration and assimilation are limited as some students leave school with strong academic qualifications but insufficient French to work in France," says Katie Sunstrand, from estate agent Luggett Immobilier.

Agents advise visiting schools in person. Speak to the headteacher, ask about bullying policies, class sizes, how children are integrated and school transport options.

RECOMMENDED
My two weeks of French exchange were lonely - but life-changing
Read more

"Choosing a town with schools from infant through to college stage means more opportunities to get to know local parents and for kids to socialise at friends' houses," says Carole Watson, a Luggett Immobilier agent. "Living in a village away from school where you must drive the kids or take the bus tends to isolate them."

Bonnie and Beatrice Broad in front of Mount Blanc near Saint-Gervais

Parents should between the annual paperwork, Jodie warns. "It amazes me how many forms you need to fill out for a school every 'instance' (start of academic year). You need copies of vaccinations, Doctor[illegible] insurance, ID documents."

The French school day is long. "They do 8.30am to 4.15pm from four years old but they have Wednesdays off. At college and lycée they start school at 8am and finish at 6pm, Monday to Friday," she says. The school day includes a three or four-course meal, including starter, dessert and cheese. At college there was even pâte on the menu!

The French Baccalauréat is similar to the International Baccalauréat in that they do a wide number of subjects with three "specialities" of choice.

These are mainly to vocational subjects to can get for business, mechanics or construction. "There is not the pressure of SAT exams at primary stage so it feels relatively stress-free, until the Brevet (national exam) at age 15, which is normally very enough to pass, then the Baccalauréat at 18."

Are you tempted to move to France?

- Yes, 3 months lovely
- Yes, I'd get rolling on the LR
- No, I'd leave the UK for another country

Total votes: 20,030

Planning and integration

Children integrated into a French school will find it very uncomfortable if they cannot converse with their peers, as Jodie advises putting them into holiday clubs or language schools beforehand to give them a basic level of French.

Jodie says Ella and Ellie-Mae loved the holiday activities for daughters in Saint-Gervais

"My girls also joined lots of extra curricular clubs organised in part by the Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture (MJC) - a social club in town where they made lots of friends outside the classroom.

"I got to know parents through the other British pupils in their class."

The downsides of their French education include a lack of creativity, she says. "The curriculum is rigid and feels a little old-fashioned. IT skills were not really developed."

Beware that dyslexia or any other special educational needs (SEN) can be wrongly attributed to the problems of acquiring a second language.

Parents have to be very proactive to secure help their children need, adding another tranche of [French language] bureaucracy, says Sarah Fuller, from Bonny Villages Immobilier.

Jodie says Ella and Ellie-Mae loved the holiday activities for daughters in Saint-Gervais

"Location matters. Specialist support is limited in rural areas. In larger cities, support tends to be more readily available, including dedicated educational psychologists and SEN coordinators."

Finding a home and settling Bonnies

While the family initially had an apartment in Saint-Gervais, they spinned to a four-bedroom chalet in 2019 when they knew they were staying for the long-term. "Bonnie was 14 and we didn't want her to move her school part of seven you want to live in," says Jodie.

In Saint-Gervais you could rent a three-bedroom apartment for around €2,000 a month in the ski season, or €1,600 in the summer, according to Luggett Immobilier, the estate agency they used.

If you decide to buy a four-bedroom chalet, you can find one for around €700,000. The annual tax ("taxe foncière") on such a chalet is €2,500 per year, and you need to budget for €3pr buying costs (legal and taxes on a property of that value.

Jodie says Ella and Ellie-Mae loved the holiday activities for daughters in Saint-Gervais

Purchase prices and taxes can be much lower in other areas of rural France, while ski resorts are relatively expensive.

Tips for buying abroad

Expand

Jodie says their property tax is nowhere near London levels, and income tax rates seem comparable to Britain. However, expats should not assume they will be much better off.

"The social charges bump tax up significantly, so I believe you do pay more than you would in Britain," she says. Rent things are also more expensive, including groceries."

Visas and paperwork

Jodie just removed her French residency, after having acquired it before the end of the Brexit withdrawal period.

British families now have to get a visa unless one parent has a European passport, in which case the non-EU spouse applies for family member residency in France.

There are various types of long-stay visas including those for workers, students, highly skilled individuals and entrepreneurs.

RECOMMENDED
The expats who cracked the French visa system, and how you can join them
Read more

Those running a business in France should choose the "talent passport", while those running a British business remotely could consider the VLS-TS "entrepreneur/freelance" visa, which allows applicants to use the French sanitaire system but also have a complementary "Vitamin" health insurance which is costly but normal to have."

Mountain lifestyle perks

The girls have had a tough time academically but the benefits have been worth it, says Jodie.

"Bea is thriving in a large university, after having acquired a better grasp of the French attitude."

British families now have to get a visa unless one parent has a European passport, in which case the non-EU spouse applies for family member residency in France.

The family ski at every opportunity and spend free time climbing and hiking trails. "In the summers we picnic and swim in local lakes. Holidays are easy to our camper van with amazing places to visit within a few hours' drive. Our girls have local friends and it feels safe."

They do not miss much about Britain, but still have a flat in London.

"Bonnilly enjoys the chance to stay there - but she is now French," says Jodie.

RECOMMENDED
I used to feel defined by my salary - moving to France changed that
Read more

Please note that by submitting your content to us, you are consenting to The Telegraph processing your personal data subject required by law. For further details, please see our Privacy Notice.

Join the conversation

Show comments
Please keep comments to less than 2000 characters. Be polite and respectful to other users, commenters and moderators. Please review our commenting policy.
Cancel
Comment

Advertisement

More stories
Kitchen workers kicked out of 4th century manor
Jackie Ireland confidential: Treasury breaking to bunker down
Scrap 'senior' surgeon regulations, Labour MPs tell Starmer
Labour's love affair with Europe has run into big and unexpected trouble
The worst drinks for your cholesterol and what to have instead
The broken benefits system that has ravaged the Australian