

Coast to coast

From a life among the stars in the south of France to finding inspiration for a novel in Brittany, **Jane Jesmond's** 31 years in France have been full of adventure

As 1990 drew to an end and French and British workers constructing the Channel Tunnel met 40m under the sea, my husband Alex and I headed off to the south of France to start working for an event production company in Monaco.

It felt like a bit of an adventure, a change from London and the chance to spend a couple of years living abroad. It was only ever meant to be a temporary move but 31 years later we're still here in France and not quite sure how it happened.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

The early years were bumpy to say the least. This was before automatic freedom of movement within the EU and we had to grapple with residence permits and work permits, as well as a health system that was completely alien to people brought up within the totally free NHS.

Everything was a challenge because it was so different: buying and registering a car, exchanging driving licences, opening a bank account and then understanding the statements. Alex had a blistering exchange with the accounts department of the company we were working for, accusing them of taking large sums of money from our account as payment into a retirement fund, before they gently pointed out that the French word for 'retirement' and for 'cash withdrawal' were the same (*retraite*).

We lived in Monaco for the first few months in a company flat but eventually the endless noise of mopeds and the sense of being in a city got too much and we looked for something a bit more rural. A flat in a small

perched village in the hills behind Nice came up for rent and we went for a viewing. The only access to the village turned out to be via a small road with a sheer drop on one side and 16 hairpin bends. We drove up laughing at the idea that we could ever live at the top of such a road, only continuing out of politeness to the agent who was waiting for us at the top.

The flat was nothing special and rather small to boot, but outside a massive balcony ran its length. It was covered with an ancient vine in summer and it had a spectacular view. To the north were the beginnings of the Alps, snow-covered in winter, while straight ahead the hills rolled down to Nice. We signed for it on the spot.

DIY MISHAPS

It was the perfect place to start life in France, especially when some friends came out to live in the flat above. Together we experienced all the essential *fêtes* and *soirées* that punctuate the French year, including Papa Noël coming down the mountain in his horse-drawn sled. The people in the village were lovely, helping and advising us, although they were often as confused by our English ways (such as our requirement for fresh milk, our quest for pork with crackling and our habit of putting dollops of cream on pudding) as we were by their French ones.

But nothing horrified them more than the autumn we picked the grapes from our

vine, trod them in one of the children's paddling pools and tried to make wine with them. When we couldn't find winemaking equipment the shops, we realised homemade wine was not something the French undertook. Undaunted, we cobbled together our own equipment, only to be woken a few weeks later by explosions. The homemade vents for the glass jars that contained the fermenting grape juice had failed.

The main thing marring our first couple of years was the continual problem with our residence permit applications. We always suspected it was down to the two police officers at the station where our initial requests had been filed. Slightly the worse for wear after a long lunch, they'd been more interested in demonstrating their singing double-act to Alex in the hope he might book them than dealing with our paperwork. When I was threatened with deportation in 1992, while eight months pregnant, we gave in and employed a professional, but mostly we dealt with everything thrown at us, laughed a lot and learned a lot.

Our French improved to the point that talking to plumbers and electricians held no fear and we quietly became assimilated. So much so that when the effects of the first Gulf War finished off the company we worked for, we decided to stay in France and start our own business. Cue another very steep learning curve.



Jane and her baby son, Oliver, on the terrace of their house in Nice

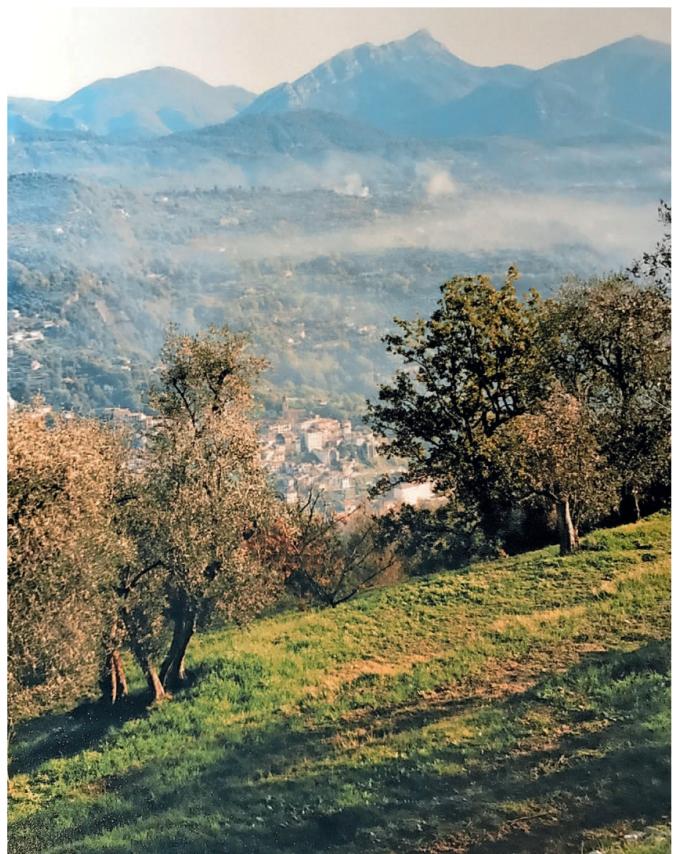


Island of St-Honorat just off Cannes

"The people in the village were lovely, although often confused by our English ways"



Jane and Alex have ended up in beautiful Finistère in Brittany



View from the flat in Nice which was up 16 hairpin bends



The original Brittany holiday home



The house in Fayence in the south of France



Jane's son Oliver in front of snowy hills in Nice



St-Mathieu church in Brittany



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Le Conquet harbour in Finistère

EMBRACING BRITTANY

We outgrew our hilltop flat, said a sad goodbye to the view and a not-so-sad one to the 16 hairpin bends. We moved to a charming but higgledy-piggledy house in the hill village of Fayence which at one point had been used to grow silk worms – hence the huge mulberry trees outside.

We enjoyed life and our little company did well working on events such as the launch of the new *Star Wars* films in Monaco and the latest McLaren F1 car in Valencia. However, time passed, children grew up and left home, a bout of ill health meant Alex had to slow down a little and I started to long for something different. I just wasn't sure what it was.

We'd always loved Brittany, often spending our holidays there to escape the long and overly hot summers in the south that were fast becoming the bane of my life. We'd had a ramshackle holiday home near the lovely town of Josselin before we'd moved to France but had been forced to sell it to afford a house in the south.

On one holiday at the extreme edge of Brittany – in Finistère, the 'end of the earth' – we found ourselves surrounded by the beautiful but wild coast and loving the long coastal walks. Taking in the big skies and expanses of beach, the feel of the sea impregnating the granite-built towns and villages, and above



Jane with her novel
and the lighthouse
that inspired it



Jane and Alex's current house
in Brittany has a view of the sea

all the sense of emptiness and space, we suddenly knew this was the place for us.

It was a massive wrench to leave the south but we love it here in Brittany. Our house has a view over the sea and islands of Ouessant (Ushant) and Molène. Cross the little road we live on and walk down over the dunes and you come to a magnificent sandy beach.

INSPIRATION STRIKES

With the move came the realisation that I wanted to do something different. It was time to see if I had it in me to achieve a long-held dream. I wanted to write.

My novel *On The Edge* came into being one stormy night when I was driving home past the magnificent lighthouse at the Pointe St-Mathieu. The coast where we live is very dangerous,

full of difficult currents and rocks and, consequently, a huge number of lighthouses, but St-Mathieu is exceptional. It stands like a sentinel guarding the inlet into Brest harbour. That night I was seized by a sudden urge to watch its beam light up the sea and see the answering gleams and flashes of the other lighthouses and buoys out at sea. They did their magic for me and the opening scene of *On The Edge* – a storm, a lighthouse and an unconscious and dreaming woman hanging from its top, lashed by the wind and the rain – sprang to life in my head. My daredevil, risk-taking protagonist Jen Shaw arrived shortly afterwards.

I spent the next few months dashing out a first draft – writing furiously while the story of Jen's search to find out how she had ended up hanging

from the lighthouse was fresh in my mind. Although the initial inspiration for the story came from the lighthouse in Brittany, the novel is actually set in Cornwall. To set it in France would have added a layer of unnecessary complication. However, France may play its part in the second book of the Jen Shaw series. Whenever I drive past the lighthouse at Pointe St-Mathieu, there's always a little smile on my face as I remember where it all started! ■



On The Edge
was released
in October
2021 and was
Sunday Times
crime novel of
the month