



Ian Morris surveying a house in France from the roof down

To survey or not to survey

Ian Morris explains that it is both possible and feasible to get pre-purchase (structural) surveys undertaken in France

When you meet someone for the first time you form a 'first impression'. And within perhaps an hour or so you learn a little more about them. But it takes a lot longer to get to know them properly, including their faults. So it is with buildings.

Many potential buyers spend a week or two property hunting in France, sometimes over quite a wide area. During this period they look at maybe a dozen or more properties, make a shortlist and, hopefully, take another look at the one or two in which they are seriously interested. Invariably it is now time to return to the UK so they make their offer, have it accepted, and are persuaded to sign a *compromis de vente* just before they depart. Sounds familiar?

They may have spent a total of only half an hour, or an hour at the most, in what they hope will become the home of their dreams. Yet I never cease to be amazed that, at this stage, many purchasers are not even sure of the full extent of the accommodation to which they have committed themselves. It could only happen in France!

Back home, reality sets in and their thoughts turn to whether it would be wise to get a professional opinion on the condition of what they are buying. If the property is cheap, or is patently a wreck, some people adopt the attitude that it's simply

not worth paying for a survey. Otherwise it is invariably a question of where to find someone who can undertake the task. And if the *compromis* has already been signed unconditionally, there is also an element of panic.

Some of these problems can

Advertisements in this magazine give the names of surveyors who undertake surveys in France and who produce reports in English. You should be looking for a surveyor who is bilingual, understands French building practices, and (if appropriate)

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be avoided by contacting a surveyor in advance, and putting them on 'standby' – ready to undertake a survey when needed.

It is a fact that hardly any of the French themselves commission a pre-purchase survey. However, this is due not only to their wonderful *laissez-faire* attitude to life but also because there are very few French professionals geared up to undertake pre-purchase surveys as we know them in the UK.

Many French architects offer to do an *expertise* (valuation), but their inspections are usually brief, their reports normally verbal, and invariably in French. As in other walks of life there seems to be a strange reluctance on the part of French professionals to put anything in writing! By way of contrast I might mention that I usually spend between four and eight hours on a survey, and my reports sometimes run to 20 pages or more.

has experience of old buildings. It normally costs nothing to get a fee quotation, but make sure you find out whether the figure quoted is inclusive of travelling and other expenses, and whether VAT is additional.

Don't expect to find a qualified surveyor who is able to undertake your survey immediately. I for one never eat in restaurants where there are no other customers and I would worry about the competence of

any professional who doesn't seem to have any other work to do. But if time is a problem, investigate the feasibility of getting a survey done with a verbal report the same day – and with a written report to follow.

If you decide in advance that you are definitely going to require a survey you should bear in mind that it is possible to have conditions (including a 'subject to survey' condition) incorporated in a *compromis*. Such *clauses suspensives* are not popular with *immobiliers*, of course, because they introduce an element of risk to the sale being concluded (and the sales commission being paid).

But you should not feel embarrassed about this; after all, it is no different to what you would reasonably expect to do when buying in the UK. A *compromis* can be drawn up only by a registered agent, *avocat* or *notaire*, and it is at this point that you would need to have the appropriate clause inserted.

Unless the property is extremely cheap, or is a ruin, a proper pre-purchase survey invariably represents good value for money. Or to put it another way, it will save you money in the long run. It will alert you to things that might have escaped your notice, or even the *immobilier's* notice, and will give you a clear idea of what repairs need to be allowed for in the future – and over what time scale. If you are working to a tight budget, or are relying on the fact that the property you are buying in France will not need any major repairs, a pre-purchase survey is essential.

In the second part of this article next month I will give you examples of what some of my surveys have revealed.

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