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Carcassonne - the world's most beautiful film set

Gallic glory through new eyes and a camcorder lens - on a film-making course where directors of all ages shine



Louise Roddon

I'M STANDING in a market square in southwest France and something unbelievable is happening. My son is staring with great interest at a stall full of vegetables. He is getting up close to mounds of carrots and ropes of garlic, then pulling away. Now he is examining the faces of shoppers and passers-by - then scanning the entire scene as if it really mattered to him. Like he really wants to engage with France, and everything French. Yet he is only 13 years old.

How is this happening? How are we breaking the barriers of non-interest that so often separate a child from a holiday experience?

Felix is making a film. In fact, here in this tiny town of Bram there are quite a few of us doing just that - capturing French life on a bright autumnal morning.

Over by the donkey sausages, a digital camcorder plugged to her eye, is thirtysomething Karen. She is zooming in on the miniature Eeyore that the butcher, in a moment of Gallic show-and-tell, has set astride his prize bangers. "Eugh," shudders Felix as he brushes past on his way to capture some croissants.

Sixteen-year-old Barney is focusing on that enduring symbol of France, a poodle in a waistcoat, while pyramids of tomatoes are the source of fascination for 12-year-old Ollie.

Bram may be tiny but it lacks for nothing. There is a supermarket and pharmacies, restaurants and a café, canoeing and tennis, and even a hospital. Plenty of interesting stuff to film, then, and the mayor would doubtlessly give you a kiss if you did but ask. Which I don't, because I, too, am capturing this raggedy-routed market, letting my lens linger on pans of steaming and fragrant paella, and awaiting my Scorsese moment.

So that's the line-up. The indifferent French shoppers, frou-frou dogs, shuffly old men and mouthy stall holders, all reverting to type, as if gathered from central casting. And then us in pursuit - a small team of British amateur cinéastes on day two of this half-term digital movie-making course.

We are looked after by Moira Martingale, the owner of our comfortable base a short drive away. She runs all-inclusive "French Houseparty" holidays from the Domaine St Raymond - anything from creative writing courses and stitching workshops to golf and gourmet breaks.

This mixed-age movie-making course is a first for the Domaine. Cue Peter Ralley, a former headmaster, former professional photographer, and all-round good bloke. I know he is a good sort, because we all eat together, and he has told us how his movie-making workshops have inspired underprivileged kids. But even so, fetching up at “class” on our first morning, I'm feeling pretty nervous. For starters, I stand in awe of my son's gadgets-and-gizmos brain wiring. Would I be the class dunce?

“Not a problem,” Ralley says. “Anyone can make a film. You don't need to be a technical wizard.”

Well, phew for that. And Ralley has brought all the gear we need - from camcorders to laptops for editing.

The boys immediately bag the more sophisticated tackle. But no matter. Our teacher has promised that we will return home with at least four of our own films.

Over the next few days our time is divided between filming and surprisingly easy editing sessions. We master how to cut and trim our film clips, how to add effects, and are given essential tips - such as avoiding queasy-inducing zoom overload.

In between, there are outings: a trip to the Airbus factory in Toulouse, where we feel simultaneously dwarfed and awed, while other afternoons usher in brisk walks to the Canal du Midi or journeys to bastide towns such as Mirepoix.

Did the mixing of ages work? Interestingly, yes. Something amazing happens when you give a teen a camcorder and a few basic instructions. The lads divided themselves into actors and directors on one occasion, and disappeared into their own drama among the ploughed fields. More amazingly, they all engaged with France in a way that normal sightseeing would probably not have induced.

If ever there were a city made for filming, then it would be Carcassonne, with its Camelot turrets and Robin Hood battlements. What did these boys shoot? French dogs in the rain. And biscuits. And dodderly old men.

Each evening, after a leisurely dinner cooked by Debbie, the chef, and her husband, Carl, our team would gather for “Show Time” - the viewing of all we had produced that day.

I would rather not dwell on my efforts, particularly the soppy two minutes' worth of light on leaves that I set to guitar music. Instead, let me move hastily to one of Felix's films - a slo-mo of Bram market, where bled colours vibrated in time to a hip-hop accompaniment.

Seeing France through the eyes of our companions was much more enthralling than exchanging verbal tourist tips. Obviously Ralley thought so, too, since he awarded everyone a shiny replica Oscar on our final night. Mind you, given one aspect of French life that we had all chosen to capture, a donkey sausage would have done just as well.

NEED TO KNOW

French House Party (01299 896819, www.frenchhouseparty.co.uk) offers movie-making courses at Domaine St Raymond from July 26-31 and October 25-30. The cost is £995 for adults and £895 for 12-18 year olds and includes tuition and full board.