



Sharing the dre

WHEN Paul Solomons took friend Sarah Griffith on a surprise trip to France she assumed it was to show her the house of his dreams, the rural retreat where he hoped to retire.

Little did she know that Chateau Charly, a run-down, 32-acre property in France's Loire Valley, was destined for so much more. Aid-worker Sarah, who founded Guernsey charities Bridge 2 Sri Lanka and Bridge 2 Haiti, had just got back from a traumatic trip to Haiti and was shell-shocked, but intrigued by the mystery tour. En route, Paul had arranged accommodation at two lovely chateaux. 'Make a note of everything you like in the rooms,' he told Sarah. That's when she knew he was up to something. The destination was 19th-century Chateau Charly – picture perfect from a distance, in a clear state of decline close-up.

Dazed and confused, Sarah followed her friend around the property and the pair left having agreed that although it would be a fantastic location for a bed and breakfast, the place needed too much work.

'That was in March last year. In July, Soli [Paul] phoned me and said, 'I'm buying it', she said. When the keys swapped hands in October, the enormity of the project dawned. But Paul had a plan for the chateau – and the penny still hadn't dropped for Sarah.

'He said, 'You've got to help me.' 'Soli, I'm going out to Sri Lanka, I've got fund-raising to do,' I said.' But fund-raising was exactly what the wealthy businessman had in mind. Paul planned to use his money – and Sarah's help – to transform Chateau Charly into a luxury B&B. But here's the thing. Instead of making it a business, they would make it a not-for-profit organisation, with 100% of the proceeds going directly to Sarah's two charities. Even more ingenious was that guests would be invited to decide the value of the stay themselves. 'We think it's a world first. We don't think anybody has ever opened a B&B, given all the proceeds to charity and allowed guests to choose how much they want to pay,' said Sarah, who was amazed and elated by Paul's idea.

Work on the property began in February and it was a mad dash to complete it before its opening, two days ago. The chateau starred in the Channel Five series Build a New Life in the Country when it was owned by the Park family, who had ambitions of starting a new life in the French countryside. They bit off more than they could chew, but Paul and Sarah were determined their attempt would not meet a similar fate. 'It's the most gorgeous place, out of this world, but I've seen it looking the pits, with dirty water springing out of the ground. A lot of the place



had to be stripped and cleaned, we had to paint most of it, we put wireless lighting in and we've taken a lot of effort to ensure it's as green as possible,' Sarah explained. The chateau is heated and air conditioned using the latest in green renewable technology – geothermal and aerothermal energy. A 10-metre outdoor swimming pool (pictured above), heated using the latter, has been installed near the coach house and has views of the orchards. A kitchen garden is also planned. The deal was that Paul would stay at the chateau during renovations to oversee the project. Sarah was tasked with furnishing the place. 'I asked him to give me a budget, but he wouldn't,

so if I found some photo,' she said. 'V She was like a kid antiques, hand-w India, Afghanistan sourcing furniture Guernsey. There's a Sri Lank with Buddha head made wooden bow 'I didn't want to g It's such a beautif speak for itself an very much our air 'But Guernsey had quite important to been so supportive Beaucette, Fernai we're getting in so Paul and Sarah ar villagers and plan to look around the They have also str boutique wine pro the nearby hilltop and promote his w private tours of hi a Chateau Charly charities. 'Because I've been with it but it's bee word,' Sarah said.

ABOUT CHATEAU CHARLY...

BUILT in 1839, it is near the city of Bourges in the Cher region of central France, a five-hour drive from St Malo. The chateau has five bedroom suites, available on a bed and breakfast basis. Set in 32 acres, it boasts an enormous walled garden, a heated outdoor swimming pool, orchards and woods. Although a rate of 140 euros per night is suggested, guests are invited to pay what they think their stay was worth, all of which will go directly to Bridge 2 Sri Lanka and Bridge 2 Haiti. Evening meals and luxury picnic hampers are available by arrangement and funds raised from these will go towards the chateau's upkeep.

For more information contact Sarah on 07781 133502, Chateau Charly direct on +33(0) 248741520 or visit www.chateau.com.



BIG ADVENTURE FOR ANNA



Sarah Griffith and Anna Wallace. Anna, right, will manage the chateau. (1167718)

ANNA WALLACE is Chateau Charly's only paid, full-time member of staff and left Guernsey to become the property's manager. It's an adventure the 35-year-old relishes. 'I just thought, 'Wow, can I start now?' she said ahead of her move to France. 'I'm so excited. I think people will be amazed by how beautiful it is and the whole concept.' Anna has years of hospitality and catering experience. She was the manager of Hojo for three years, has worked in England and Scotland and is

an accomplished cook. 'Dinner will be available on request and I'll be doing all the cooking. I'm really looking forward to it. I'm a bit of a pastry cook and can't wait to make my own jams and chutneys. There's a fantastic orchard.' Anna was in Nepal when Sarah contacted her about the project. The opportunity was too good to pass up, she said. 'Sarah has such an infectious personality, I can't say no. She had this idea and I said, 'I'm there'.



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thing I liked, I'd send him a We very rarely disagree.' in sweetshop, picking out ven rugs and furniture from n and other countries as well as from France, the UK and

can and Haitian presence too, ls from the former and hand- ls.

o berserk and make it too fussy. ul house, you've got to let it d preserving its character was n,' Sarah said.

l to be represented. That was o me, because islanders have e. Four of the suites are named n, Bordeaux and Torteval and ome Guernsey teddy bears.' e keen to forge links with local to throw a party, inviting them e finished product.

uck up a partnership with ducer Philippe Raimbault, from town of Sancerre. They will sell vine at the chateau and arrange is vineyards and he will produce wine, with proceeds going to the

so busy, Soli's just had to get on en great, we've not had one cross

She and Paul first met in 2005. He was moving to Guernsey, had read about her aid work and told a mutual acquaintance that he needed to meet her.

'He'd been living in Malaysia, where he had set up his own fund-raiser which had raised £8,000. He's very charitably minded and we just became really good friends. His energy is exhausting, actually, but I love him. He's so quirky,' said Sarah.

'He calls me Maj. He says it stands for Queen of Guernsey, which is a bit embarrassing. But he's so thoughtful. I knew he wanted to retire to France, but I didn't register what he was planning. It's amazing and hopefully it can keep the charities ticking over.'

'To make the enterprise a success, Sarah said it was vital the project stays vibrant and keeps evolving. The plan is for the chateau to stay open 11 months of the year. It will be a winter wonderland at Christmas and it's hoped that it will also attract skiers, as there are slopes nearby. 'We'd love for a whole family to rent it out, or a group of friends, or have it used for corporate functions. We really hope we can encourage islanders to visit.'

Guests who want to see where their money goes can see the chateau's accounts online. 'A big part of Bridge 2 Sri Lanka and Bridge 2 Haiti is that people can see exactly where their money is going and it's going to be exactly the same for Chateau Charly. I want people to see how much their money helps.'

'I DEFY ANYONE NOT TO FALL IN LOVE WITH IT...'

'HAD a thought the other day, when I was cleaning one of the bathrooms – if you'd told me a year ago that I'd be a chambermaid in a French chateau, I'd have checked myself into an asylum,' said Paul Solomons, the man behind Chateau Charly.

'But I'm relishing every minute of it. The people here are very, very lovely. They've been fantastic to me and I'm very optimistic about the project... I don't think it's ever been done before.' Paul spent 35 years in luxury retailing and marketing in the UK before moving to Guernsey and he's channelling all his expertise into the venture. No matter what the project, he said, customer care is the priority.

'I'm really looking forward to having guests. It's going to be different. I've been here a little while on my own, trying to find people to do the work and negotiating things. It's going to be great to share it with people. The fun starts here. It's going to be hard work but we've done the worst bit.' Paul, who set up his own fund-raising project in the wake of the Asian tsunami, met Sarah in 2005 and has visited Sri Lanka four times with her and Haiti once. She's an inspiration, he said.

'I've seen how she spends money in the most appropriate way: there's absolutely nothing wasted. I've seen her deal with people who really worship her and I know that when anyone gives money to her, it

'The previous owner let us stay there for a night and I sat on the bed with my head in my hands, thinking, "If I owned this place tomorrow, where would I begin?"'

goes exactly where it needs to go,' he said. 'She's someone who gives 100% of themselves and when I came to Guernsey I really wanted to focus on helping people.'

Paul had been thinking of moving to France. The idea was to get an apartment – nothing on the scale of Chateau Charly, though he had previously entertained the idea of setting up a B&B in America. But when he saw the property online, it leapt off the screen. He wanted Sarah to see it with him and a plan for how he could use it to help began to germinate.

'The previous owner let us stay there for a night and I sat on the bed with my head in my hands, thinking, "If I owned this place tomorrow, where would I begin?"' said Paul, who had a real estate licence in Florida. 'It took six months of deliberation. I couldn't get the place out of my mind. The chateau is in the Berry region, so I call it my Halle Berry. The first time I saw her, I fell in love with her. It was the same thing with this building. I defy anyone not to fall in love with it.'

Working with Sarah has been fantastic, he said. There was never any doubt in his mind it would be otherwise.

'I would have never done this without knowing it could be used for a charity. Living in a chateau was not something I ever dreamt of, it's really not very me. But I'm on a mission.'



Paul Solomons – 'The fun starts here,' he said. (1170532)

WIN A FOUR-NIGHT STAY AT CHATEAU CHARLY

PAUL and Sarah are offering one lucky reader and a guest the chance to stay at Chateau Charly.

The winner will spend four nights in one of the chateau's beautiful suites on a bed and breakfast basis, with a luxury picnic hamper provided on two days.

The prize is valid for one year, so could easily be incorporated into a longer holiday, and people who need an overnight stay en route from St Malo can take advantage of specially negotiated rates at a convenient Best Western Hotel.

For your chance to win the four-night stay,

complete the coupon and send it to: Chateau Charly, Features department, Guernsey Press, PO Box 57, Braye Road, Vale GY1 3BW. Competition closes on Wednesday 24 August.

Name _____

Contact number _____

Email _____

Q: In which region of France can Chateau Charly be found?

Note: You can enter as many times as you like but only on original newspaper entry forms. No purchase necessary. No cash alternative. The winner will be chosen at random from the correct entries and no correspondence entered into. Subject to availability. Accommodation is in a double room. Travel or travel insurance are not included but are highly recommended.

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