

Navan woman's French connection a little venture with a big heart

Olive Towey left her corporate job in Ireland to set up home in the Bordeaux/Cognac region of France surrounded by vineyards and now curates bespoke well being experiences in the picturesque and unspoiled countryside

SALLY HARDING

A Navan woman who left her corporate job to escape to the French countryside says she could never have imagined how far her journey would take her.

Olive Towey had been working in a marketing role with the charity Concern when she decided to take a two year sabbatical and spend some time exploring France with her partner Charlie Ganly. What started out as a personal adventure resulted in the duo curating bespoke well being experiences in the picturesque and unspoiled Bordeaux/Cognac region of France.

Olive describes the retreats which have been named 'Ceangal' the Irish word for connect as a little venture with a very big heart!

"My partner's children had grown up and fled the nest and we had some flexibility and for different reasons we both really wanted to come to France," explains Olive.

"I had wanted to improve my language from since when I did French in school and Charlie's uncle had always been saying France would really suit you in terms of the weather so we found a house sitting website and we signed up to that," she added.

"It's a brilliant way of being able to travel the world looking after people's properties, their cats and dogs and their gardens. It's a way of travelling around on a budget and it's a great way of exploring.

"We did some house sitting in Provence and then we were invited to run a B&B here near Bordeaux and Cognac and we came and we found ourselves looking after this amazing huge manoir (manor house) in the middle of the vineyards."

Around this time, Olive's brother Martin, an author and mindfulness practitioner visited the property and encouraged his sister to use the



Olive Towey, Martin Towey and Charlie Ganly.

manoir to its full potential. The idea picked up momentum from this point on as Olive explains:

"When Martin saw this place he said this is perfect for mindfulness you should try and do something here. Then I have a cousin who lives in Dordogne who is a qualified chef so we put out an invitation to friends and family to come over and Martin did the teaching and my cousin did the cooking.

"We had a second one and that led onto a yoga retreat so it all happened very organically. We did about five retreats in the first year and it was ideal for us because the owner of the manoir had a very relatively small business so she was very interested in earning some additional income out of season in the Spring and Autumn and it kind of gave us the opportunity to experiment around this idea of creating a space for a light experience with lots of cultural aspects as well.

"We'd go to a distillery, do wine tasting, we went to some beautiful French villages with lots of space and time for people to just chill and relax and they just loved the

combination."

The manoir that inspired this concept for Olive and Charlie went on to be sold around a year later and the couple moved on to a property that was just as exciting, however as the pandemic took hold, an intended short stay turned into something quite different!

"We moved to another property called the Painted House and that was in a beautiful town house in Châteauneuf near where we live now," said the Navan native.

"There was an artist called Rousseau and he was quite well known and the town house was his studio so he painted each room a different style to show how competent he was as an artist," she added.

"You walk into the house and the hallway is Art Nouveau and you go into the dining room and it is Neoclassicism and then you walk into the kitchen and it's Art Deco, it's just beautiful.

"We weren't supposed to be there for very long and then Covid hit so the owners were stuck in the Isle of Man and we were stuck in this beautiful house with no visitors



Troglodyte (subterranean) church in Aubeterre-sur-Dronne.

allowed. When Covid came to an end we said to Victor and Frank the owners, what would you think if we hosted an art retreat here because it is a painted house and has all this artistic heritage so they thought it was a great idea.

"A friend of Charlie's is an artist and she brought out a group of 15 people and we hosted them for a week and our friend Maggie who is a qualified chef in Brittany came in and did the food and by the end of the week they said we are coming back but we are not coming back for

art we are coming back for cookery!

"So then we said ok let's do a cookery course so that is how the whole thing evolved, it was partly in virtue of where we were at the time, we started with mindfulness because Martin was able to offer it and we moved on to art because we were in the painted house and then we moved on to cookery because people came out and tasted Maggie's food and wanted to learn to cook like her."

Olive's ability to work remotely when she returned to work allowed



Les Halles market, Angoulême where Olive and Charlie source ingredients for their cookery retreats



The vineyards of Malaville.



Mindfulness weekend with “Mná Na hÉireann” a community of Irish women living in France



Charlie Ganly, Niamh McGovern, Margaret Ryan, Olivia Hayes, Maggy Paul-Martinet, Phil Rafferty, Mary Lavelle, Helen McGee, Olive Towey. groups of people visit the southwestern region of France to participate in curated retreats run by Olive and Charlie.



Olive Towey and Charlie Ganly left everything behind to start afresh in the Bordeaux/Cognac region of France



Olive and Charlie.

her to continue to work on her new venture as she explains:

"I was able to go back to work after my two year sabbatical and I was able to work remotely from France for two years which was like a blessing. We did a little bit of mindfulness online during Covid to stay connected to our community the people we had hosted and the people we had reached out to and that was really nice because I think people were in need of that because it was so stressful."

Describing the area where the

couple live Olive said:

"Where we are we are literally surrounded by rolling hills of vineyards and my perception before I came to France was that vineyards were very big and very grand with huge chateaus and owned by super wealthy people but actually it is very much small farmers, small vineyard owners and this is their livelihood it's not a luxury business."

"Most of them sell their grapes to the big Cognac houses so this region is best known for Cognac, it is not a region that is known for its wine

even though the wine is lovely. The best thing about the wine is that it is sulphate free so it doesn't give you a hangover!

"So most of the farmers would sell their grapes to the big Cognac houses like Hennessy and Remy Martin They might hold back 25 percent of their yield and make their own wines. There is a spirit here called Pineau and it is a derivative of Cognac and you can't get it anywhere outside of this region which is called the Charente. The Charente region in

southwestern France is where you get the opportunity to experience authentic culture and local villages that have been largely untouched by tourism according to the Ceangal founder who said:

"The weather isn't dissimilar to Ireland for a lot of the time but the summers are much warmer. We are close enough to the coast that the climate is quite temperate. There isn't so much tourism in this area which is why it is such a lovely place to bring Irish people because it has not been very over exposed."

"It is not like Provence or Loire Valley that are kind of set up for tourism, this region is very rural very authentic and there are some beautiful villages."

"There are also some villages that are very quiet because a lot of people have moved to the cities there is an issue with depopulation, they are not quite abandoned but you drive through them and the boulangerie is closed down and

the butcher is closed and there are others that are really quaint."

The couple who use four or five different venues to host their wellness experiences offer participants the chance to cook local dishes. "It is a big farming area so we show people how to use the local ingredients that are in season," said Olive.

"Here we have the market three days a week in Châteauneuf and everybody buys their fruit and veg in the market and I remember that first time I went and I asked them for tomatoes and they looked at me like I had three heads because it wasn't the time of year for tomatoes and I felt like such a fool!"

"It has been a whirlwind few years but it has been an amazing adventure that we want to take other people on to experience this stunning part of rural France."

More information on upcoming events visit www.ceangal.eu