

When Olive met Charlie

Charlie Ganly and Olive Towey met speed dating and since then their lives have been full of adventures. The latest is a retreat business, with an Irish name, set in one of the loveliest areas of France

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In France, on official documents, I would be called Charlie's concubine and he would be my concubin.

I was renewing my driving licence and I realised that," Olive Towey laughs, as she explains some of the cultural differences she and her partner Charlie Ganly have faced since deciding out of the blue to go and live in France six years ago.

However, it's an adventure which the couple are thrilled they've embarked on, one which is evolving all the time. They went with no fixed plans, yet soon found themselves starting a business – Ceangal – which is largely based there.

Ceangal is the Irish word for connect, and it's a good word for their business concept given that the pair organise retreats and breaks away for people to disconnect from the hustle and bustle of daily life and connect with themselves through nature, food, mindfulness, art, yoga and other pleasurable activities in beautiful surroundings.

"Both of us have been there,



stress heads with all the commuting we did," says Olive. "I was commuting up and down from Navan, Charlie was commuting up and down from Naas, getting up at six, on the road for three hours per day, it wrecks you." The name Ceangal is extra appropriate given that Olive and Charlie themselves connected at first in an unusual way – speed

dating. It's unlikely they would have met otherwise, given their disparate backgrounds. Though both are chatty and warm, they are opposite in most other ways.

Charlie is from the Dublin suburb of Rathfarnham while Olive is from a farm in Navan, Co Meath. The eldest of three, Olive has the more academic background. She got her primary



Ceangal entrepreneurs Charlie Ganly and Olive Towey bask in the sunshine outside the home they've created for themselves in the Charente area of France. The house, which is surrounded by vineyards, dates from the early 1900s and is typical of houses of that period in that area – big windows, high ceilings and spacious rooms. From their base here, they have their pick of beautiful houses for yoga/painting/wine/food retreats for groups of up to 12



We had two men for starters and two for the main course. I decided Charlie was the most normal of them

degree in European business studies in Coleraine, then worked in banking in London for 10 years. After that she made a huge career change.

"I was interested in human rights and I wanted to take some time out, so I did a master's in peace studies in Trinity. Through that I got to know Concern and began to work with them in policy and

advocacy, lobbying the EU around investment, where the money should be invested to tackle hunger," she notes, adding that she was with Concern for 18 years.

Charlie is one of two sons of the well-known auctioneer Bobby Ganly, but he avoided auctioneering: "My dad tried to get me into it but I had no interest. Instead, through my friend

Stephen, I became a sales rep for industrial paint equipment for 20 years."

Charlie got married and he and his wife had two children, both now grown up. They separated and Charlie also changed jobs.

"At 47, I got bored and did a degree in London – a plumbing degree. That morphed into property maintenance »

My favourite room

» – fixing everything in the house – windows, doors, locks, drains. I worked with the same clients all the time, I still do that,” he says. “I love fixing things – anything, engines, motorbikes. I have a tractor in France dating from 1958 that I’m working on.”

They met 12 years ago through a predecessor of online dating, a dinner dating organisation. “I went with a friend of mine and Charlie went by himself. It was in a restaurant in the Italian Quarter – one with little booths. Myself and my friend sat at one of the booths and we had two men for starters and then two men for the main course, and by the end of it, I decided Charlie was the most normal of them, which was not saying a lot – there were some strange people.”

Charlie begs to differ: “She fell head over heels and wouldn’t let me go,” he says.

Neither is interested in marriage – “been there, done that,” says Charlie, while Olive, though she’s never been married, is happy without the piece of paper. “We had a commitment ceremony with 40 friends in my dad’s back garden in 2015. We’re not sentimental, it was great fun,” she says.

In 2019, they decided to move to France. “We came at France from different angles,” says Olive. “A relation had recommended it to Charlie as he suffers a bit from arthritis, and the weather there would improve it. As for me, I had done French and German at school, but concentrated on German in college, and I had always wanted to go back to the French. We were both kind of free and so I asked for a sabbatical from my job in Concern.”

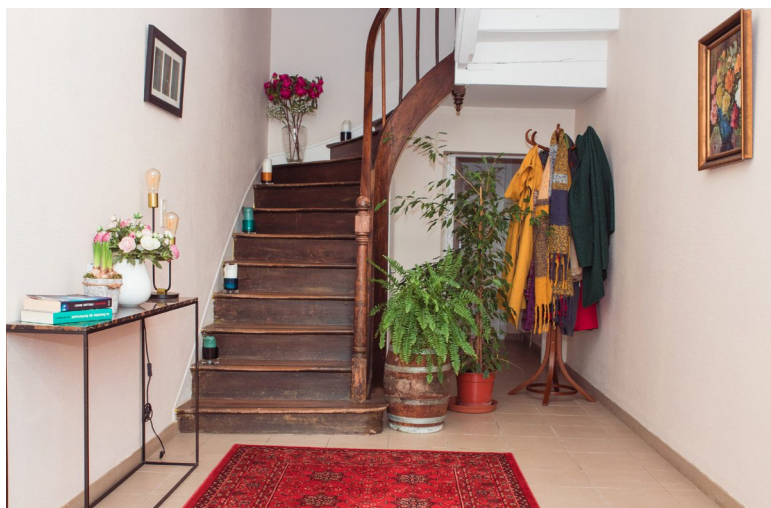
Olive had heard about a website called *mindmyhouse.com* and they signed up to that. But before they had decided to take on the minding of a house, one fell into their laps. “I have a friend who lived in Singapore and in December 2019, as I sat down to write her a Christmas card to tell her our plan, an email popped into my inbox to tell me she had bought a house in



Above: Olive and Charlie in the kitchen/living area of the house. They say they had great fun furnishing with the aid of new French friends who help Charlie with his French – they brought them to local markets and brocantes to find pieces like the Grecian bust

Right top: Their cat Pussy relaxes in the living area. The Roche Bobois sofa is one of two bought for €100 on the Leboncoin website. The table and chairs came from an old schoolhouse

Right: The house has some lovely period details, including this curved oak staircase. The framed photograph on the wall is by Irish artist Suella Holland, while the painting of flowers is from a brocante



Aix-en-Provence.” As it happened, the house needed work done to it – and Olive and Charlie were the perfect people for the job.

When that was finished, they took on their first house sit, in Carcassonne, and after that they got another interesting project – this time, a manoir in Charente complete with restored distillery and pigsty. They were offered the opportunity to run it as a guesthouse. “I’ll never forget our first guests, we were up to our eyes making everything perfect. At three o’clock a big car drew up, and a group got out. We gave them an Irish fáilte and big hugs, we thought we’d make a good first impression. They looked at us strangely. We then saw they were carrying books. Weren’t they Jehovah’s Witnesses, they weren’t coming to stay at all! Then we had a lot of trouble getting rid of them, we had given them such a welcome,” recalls Olive.

In the main, it was a quiet business and it gave the couple a chance to get used to operating in France. On trips home, they showed photos to friends and family, including Olive’s brother Martin, a physiotherapist and mindfulness therapist who thought the property would be perfect for mindfulness courses.

So with Martin on board, they suggested to the owner that they do some courses in the off seasons, using the property as a base. She agreed. Olive conveniently has a cousin – a chef in the Dordogne – and he did the food. “That first year was very much experimenting. The owner was giving us the space to try this out and we were giving her revenue that she wouldn’t have got out of season,” says Charlie. “We designed a weekend of mindfulness, with wine tasting and excellent food, and we brought the guests on cultural outings. The surroundings were beautiful and they loved it. Once they got on a plane, they didn’t have to do a thing. We took care of everything.”

Two of the people on an early weekend were yoga teachers and they suggested that Olive and Charlie do a yoga weekend for

their clients and the themes soon widened further to include art, wine and food.

That property was sold, but they found another equally picturesque one, and though Covid-19 put a slight stop to their gallop, there were positives. They made lots of good friends in the village, and Charlie’s French improved: “I can make myself understood, I can make people laugh. You can make life easy or you can make life hard.”

During 2022, Olive’s sabbatical with Concern ended. She worked remotely for a while, but then opted to give it up and give all her energy to Ceangal: “I did a six-month course in creativity, innovation and leadership in UCD. One of the fundamental things we talked about on the course was core values. And our core values are authenticity, connection and inclusiveness. We’re not interested in luxury tourism. We want to welcome people who really need to disconnect. We’re very fortunate – we live in a part of France that is only an hour from Bordeaux, and is very authentic, very beautiful, very reasonable, very down-to-earth.”

They resumed organising the retreats and now have about five different properties in their area, which they can rent to welcome groups of up to 12. Food has become a big part of their offering. “A local chef, Maggy Paul-Martinet, does the cooking. She’s great on wine too. One painting group told us, ‘We’re coming back, not for the art, though it was great, but for Maggy’s cooking’,” Olive says.

“It might be wine tasting or yoga or a book club or a murder mystery weekend, it doesn’t matter what the theme is, it’s about creating that space where people are looked after. Depending on the theme, we can source a venue. Also, Ceangal can move. At the moment it’s in France, but it could be in Ireland.”

They have lots of different ideas for developing the business – looking at partnerships with yoga teachers, working with corporates to incentivise their staff, or even bringing Ceangal on the move. “Things happen in strange ways. If



This area is the couple’s ‘wellbeing corner’ for their own yoga and mindfulness practice. The mantelpiece is original to the house and the throws are from Ireland



We’re not interested in luxury tourism. This is not high end, we want to welcome people who really need to disconnect

you’re flexible and open-minded, things will happen.”

One of the couple’s mantras is “creating space where things can happen”. After five years in France, they’ve lived in lots of different places, but they’ve only recently managed to create their own little space, their own home.

The house is in the Charente countryside, 10 minutes from Châteauneuf-sur-Charente and 20 minutes from Cognac. Surrounded by vineyards, it dates from the early 1900s and is typical of a rural dwelling with large windows and high ceilings and spacious rooms.

They’ve furnished it simply, but with loads of colour. “We got a lot of the furnishings from local brocantes and markets. Leboncoin website was great too. We actually got two Roche Bobois sofas for €100. Furnishing the house was a great adventure,” says Olive.

Moving country, changing jobs and finding a home, Olive and Charlie have the right idea – make everything an adventure. ●

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