

Property matters

Look before you leap, says surveyor **Ian Morris**



Is it true that buyers don't have surveys in France?

No, it's not true at all. I frequently hear this remark, yet I have been kept busy carrying out pre-purchase surveys in France for over 20 years. The French themselves rarely commission a survey because it's not part of their culture; many live in the same house as their parents and grandparents did, so the question doesn't arise. And unlike in other countries, the surveying profession has never really grown in France - even though the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has an office in Paris.

A key reason prospective purchasers don't have a survey is because often they can't find a qualified surveyor to do it. Should you be in this position yourself, you could visit the RICS website (ricsfirms.com), enter 'France' and you will see a list of over 400 firms.

Would you have a survey if buying a house in the UK, particularly an older house? Maybe, probably, yes? Why should it be any different in France?

Many people think that the diagnostic reports, which French vendors are obliged to provide, cover the whole property. Well, they don't. They cover a limited range of items and no part of the 'structure' (roof, walls, floors etc). The diagnostic report on termites, for example, does not cover 'woodworm' as such (bear in mind termites are white ants, not woodworm). The diagnostic report on the electrical installation covers specific issues and won't tell you, for example, that there is only one single socket outlet in the living room. The diagnostic

reports are no substitute for a thorough pre-purchase survey.

What can a surveyor see that I can't see for myself?

A properly qualified surveyor is rather like a detective, and in relying on years of experience, will have developed a knack for homing in on potential problems when 'looking' at a property. They will recognise, for example, whether maintenance and alterations have been carried out properly, and with the right materials, and will tell you if they might conceal a problem that could arise in the future. They will tell you whether or not the cracks you might have noticed in some of the walls are serious, what might have caused them and what might best be done about them. Your surveyor might spot cracks you haven't noticed yourself but which could indicate something quite sinister.



They will use an electric moisture meter to identify any damp problems and their likely cause. They might even use a drone to check roof coverings and chimneys that you can't see at close hand yourself.

There is an old saying 'a stitch in time saves nine'; it's better to be forewarned about a problem that needs to be rectified quickly and which, if discovered later, might prove much more expensive to fix.

Are surveys expensive, and are they worth it?

There are no set fees. Like most surveyors, I quote a fixed fee in advance, based principally on the total area of property that I need to cover, and to some extent on the distance I have to travel (which in France can be fairly substantial); nothing to do with the purchase price. I know roughly how many square metres I can get round in a day so it's a simple calculation.

Many surveyors will undertake a survey with only a verbal report afterwards, which is less expensive than if a written report is required.

For even the smallest of properties, a survey could take four to five hours - for making a detailed inspection, taking notes and photos. Larger properties can take much longer; a recent survey I carried

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out on an extensive property took three and a half days. In most cases, the dictation and production of a printed report takes almost as long the survey itself. The cost of a UK-type pre-purchase survey with a written report could be anywhere between £500 and £5,000, depending on these factors.

Most buyers who seek a survey do so because they want to avoid buying a money pit. But the real value of a survey is probably peace of mind; going ahead with your eyes wide open, knowing what, if anything, might need to be dealt with in the future and, if so, how soon. ■

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