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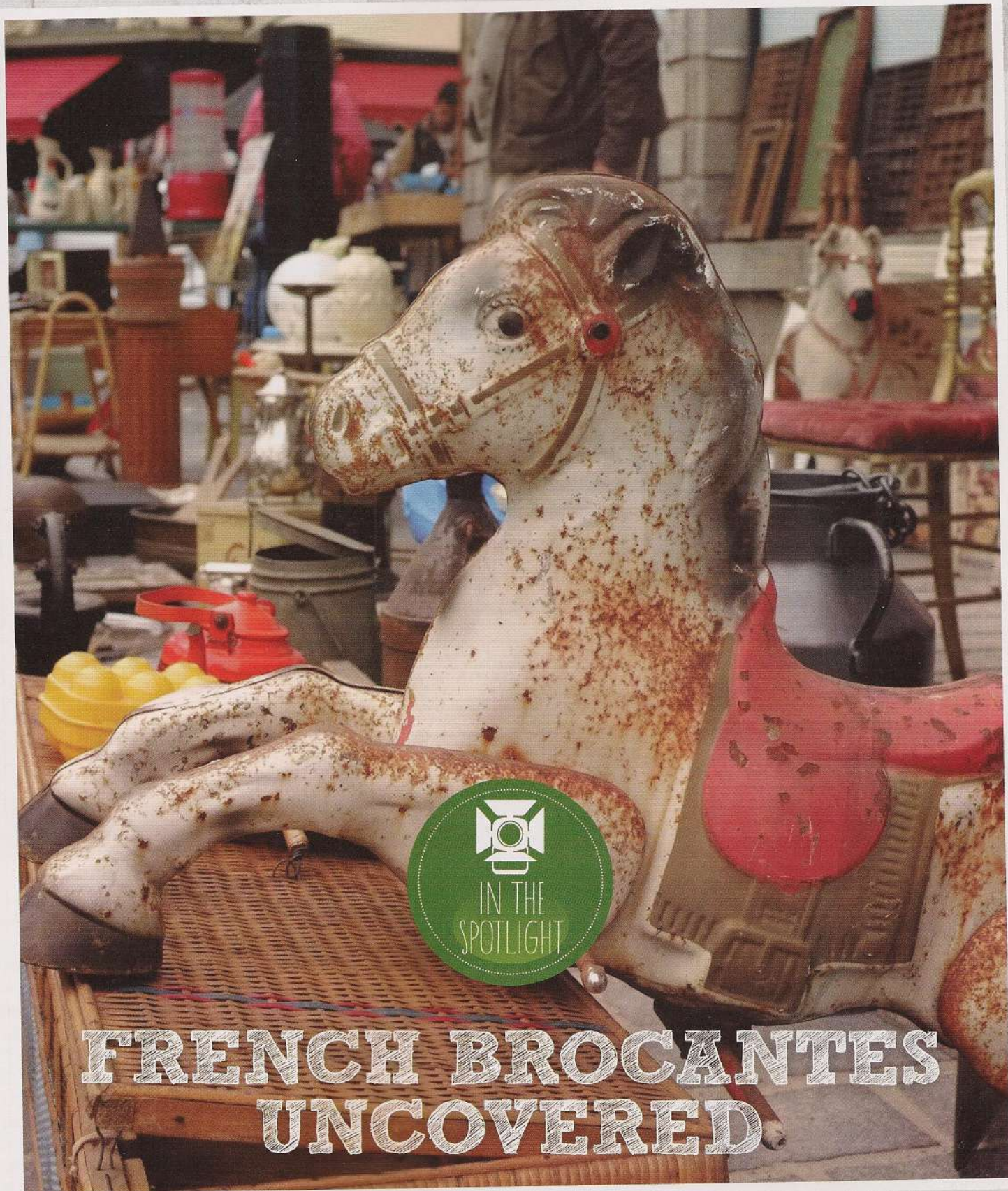


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FRENCH BROCANTE UNCOVERED

If you fancy a weekend jaunt across the Channel, why not pack light and take in one of France's many second-hand markets, known as brocantes. We find out where to go, what to buy and how to bag a bargain.

Words by Lou Butt, photography by Flea Market Insiders



Quirky finds at the Grande Braderie de Lille.



Brocantes expert Nicolas Martin from Flea Market Insiders.

While there are bargains to be found at local car-boot sales and British flea markets, if you're looking for something a little different to refresh or upcycle, consider heading to France and visiting some of the 15,000 *brocantes* that regularly fill the streets of towns and cities each year.

'*Brocante* is basically the French word for "flea market",' explains Nicolas Martin of Flea Market Insiders, an online global guide to second-hand markets. 'It's a place dedicated to the sale of second-hand items of furniture or antiques. A visit to a *brocante* can be the highlight of a trip to France: a chance to immerse oneself in everyday French culture, an exciting way to spend a few laid-back hours, and an opportunity to grab a bargain or pick up a prized souvenir to add to a collection.'

However, there are different types of second-hand sale events, as Nicolas explains. 'The equivalent of the UK car-boot sale will be called a *vide-grenier*

(literally meaning 'attic clearance'); a *bric-a-brac* is a venue dedicated to selling knick-knacks which aren't worth very much; and a *braderie* will be more like a giant swap-meet. However, the differences between *brocantes*, *vide-greniers*, *bric-a-bracs* and *braderies* have become more blurred, so whichever one you visit, you'll find everything from furniture to china, coins, stamps, farming tools, as well as the usual array of crockery, glassware and second-hand clothes.'

OFF TO MARKET

As the majority of *brocante* stalls are set up outside and open to the elements, they are mainly held during the warmer months of the year. They start popping up mid-spring right through to the end of August. Some of the biggest events in the calendar are Grande Braderie de Lille, Grande Foire à Tout des Andelys (Normandy), Farfouille de Leyment (Ain), Braderie du Canal Saint-Martin (Brittany), Grande Réderie d'Amiens, and Braderie de Houilles (Yvelines). These



events gather between 1,000 and 3,000 stallholders, once or twice a year only.

While you will find many *brocantes* held on a weekly, monthly or quarterly basis in many of the tourist areas of the big cities, the merchandise on offer will often be priced at a premium. Nicolas has visited many *brocantes*, and has singled out Vanves as a favourite. 'Tucked in a quiet corner of Paris, Vanves hosts around 350 vendors, who sell quality goods for very fair prices. Usually tourists visiting Paris head straight to the Puces de St-Ouen. While this market is certainly incredible, it can be a little overwhelming for some shoppers – its 2,500 stalls form a vast maze within 17 kilometres of winding alleyways,' he says. 'A region I particularly like for antique shopping is Provence, specifically around Avignon. This area regroups three of the most interesting antique fairs in the southern part of the country: the Déballages Marchand d'Avignon, the Foire de L'Isle sur la Sorgue, and the Brocante de Villeneuve-lès-Avignon.' 📍

© Deb Hunt



Deb's eclectic mix of purchases from her latest trip.

© Deb Hunt



SHOPPING FOR BUSINESS

♥ Keen to restock her shop with unique pieces, Deb Hunt of Doodledash Interiors in Oxfordshire often makes the 600-mile round trip across the Channel to visit *brocantes*.

'I love going for the experience of the whole event but mainly to find stock that you don't see at home,' Deb enthuses. 'I like to provide my customers with one-off items when I can.' Deb's first taste of a French market was via an organised coach trip by Brocante Travel (see page 31), and while the experience was lots of fun, you are restricted to what you can fit on the coach. 'That's why I now go in my own Doodle Van!' says Deb.

Deb loves the diversity of what you can discover on the streets of France. 'You never know what you're going to find, that's the beauty of *brocantes*. Recently I brought back some marble-topped pot cupboards and little side tables, and I also picked up quite a few reasonably priced decorative coat racks on a trip to Grande Réderie in Amiens, north of Paris. My best purchase was an old copper telephone with a Bakelite receiver and a proper dial. It had long since stopped working, but I found someone who recommissions old phones. I love hearing it ring!'

In order to get a good price, Deb recommends trying a little French. 'It's important to at least have a go. It seems appreciated, even if it's not understood! Stallholders are not offended if you ask for a lower price, but will certainly say no if they have a firm price on an item.'

● Find out more about Deb's *brocante* trips via Facebook at doodledashinteriors and Instagram at doodledashlove.

© Deb Hunt



before

© Deb Hunt



A cupboard relined in her workshop with French paint.

after

'ON MARKET DAY IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE ON SITE AT LEAST TWO HOURS BEFORE THE OPENING. THE VENDORS ARE STILL UNPACKING AND THIS WILL INCREASE THE PROBABILITY OF MAKING INTERESTING PURCHASES'

LEARN THE LINGO

Nicolas suggests that having a go at speaking the local language can help you secure a good deal. 'French people are very mindful of manners. Learn these five words (and how to pronounce them) before you travel: *bonjour* (hello), *au revoir* (goodbye), *merci* (thank you), *s'il vous plaît* (please) and *désolé* (sorry/excuse me).'

Here are 10 phrases to help with a successful deal:

C'est combien?
How much is that?

Quel est votre meilleur prix?
What's your best price?

Désolé, c'est trop cher pour moi.
Sorry, it's too expensive.

Pouvez-vous baisser encore le prix?
Can you go a little lower?

Vous me faites un prix si j'en prends plusieurs/si je prends tout?
Is there a discount if I buy more than one/all of them?

Coupons la poire en deux.
Let's meet each other in the middle/strike a bargain.

Je n'ai que 20 euros. Est-ce que ça va?
I only have 20 euros.
Is that enough?

Je peux payer en liquide?
May I pay in cash?

Je le prends.
I'll take it.

Marché conclu!
Deal!



Brocantes are held outdoors, with plenty of room to browse.

The stock you'll find on *brocante* stalls can vary depending on the area you visit in France. While furniture, glassware and garden pieces can be found nationwide, Nicolas notes there are regional differences. 'Flea markets in Brittany are filled with antiques originating from the sailing world, whereas those in Normandy or the Beauce region are more about old farming items. In Burgundy, you'll most likely find old winemaking tools, and the flea markets of Provence overflow with anything connected to cooking, such as glassware, crockery, cutlery, silverware, vintage tablecloths, enamelled jugs, cake moulds and rustic furniture.'

Do be prepared for some interesting discoveries though. 'I've seen a lot of strange things at flea markets: 20th-century human skulls, an Adolf Hitler action figure, "Frankensteined" furniture (made from different pieces from various eras), shrunken heads and even anatomical collections of preserved organs!' reveals Nicolas.

If you're keen to get the pick of the crop, you need to get to the markets early. 'On market day it's important to be on site at least two hours before the official opening,' Nicolas suggests. 'The vendors are still unpacking and this will increase the probability of making interesting purchases. The really good stuff goes fast.' Although, if you're just a casual shopper, you can still find interesting bargains and unique pieces later on in the day. Waiting until the market is nearing a close is another ideal time to secure a good deal. 'Merchants are eager to pack up and ready to cut down prices. You can expect up to a 30 per cent discount, particularly on bulky items.'

BARTERING FOR A BARGAIN

When you want to purchase something, don't take the first price as the only price. 'I always haggle when I'm shopping at a flea market, even if the price of an item is obscenely low,' says Nicolas. 'First, because the vendor is expecting me to do so: it is one of the



Everything from antiques to cheap bric-a-brac can be found.

unwavering rules of the flea market world. Most of the time, if a vendor prices something higher than it's worth, it's not because they are trying to rip you off, but because they're expecting you to haggle. Paying the exact price kills the fun of doing business for both you and them. Secondly, some items are outrageously priced for no particular reason. Even if you don't manage to win the negotiation, haggling at the flea market is a great opportunity to sharpen your skills.

'Last but not least, keep in mind that one thing shoppers should never do when bartering at a flea

market is to walk away from the negotiation when the vendor has agreed to sell you the item at the price you called. If you're going to engage the seller in bargaining, they probably think you are going to eventually buy the item. Don't start haggling if you aren't serious about making a purchase.'

Whether you're shopping for pleasure, to furnish a holiday home or to bring one-off pieces back home to relive and sell on, you can be guaranteed of finding something interesting or unusual in one of France's *brocantes*, and at a pretty attractive price too. ♥

DISCOVER MORE

Whether you're planning a visit, or interested to see if there's a *brocante* near your holiday destination, these websites will help guide you in the right direction.

www.fleamarketinsiders.com

Visit Nicolas Martin's website for everything you need to know about flea markets around the world. Packed with tips, articles and how to get the best out of your *brocante* experience.

www.vide-greniers.org

A French site which lists over 1,000 second-hand markets according to region and then departments. It's possible to navigate with limited language skills.

www.fleamarket.com

A great site giving a good overview of 250 major flea markets worldwide. However, to find dates and times you will need to pay a subscription fee.

www.info-brocantes.com

Another French-language site, where you can search by region and department. *Brocantes* are then listed by date and location.

www.brocantesfrance.com

An English-language site that has teamed up with the leading French websites to help you find the best markets near to your location.

www.brocant-travel.com

Organised coach trips to French and Belgian *brocantes*, accompanied by experienced guides offering a wealth of advice and information.

