

At home with the interior designer restyling French properties via Zoom

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Interior designer Benji Lewis works from bases in the UK and France

Interior designer Benji Lewis tells us how lockdown inspired his new online design service Zoom That Room and why he loves French properties – especially his own in Landes

Where did the idea for your virtual design service, Zoom That Room, come from?

I usually meet clients in person and have a site meeting to find out what they want and like but I've also worked remotely in the past. I did a job in Cornwall without being there in person and I realised I could work in the same way during lockdown. Lots of the projects I had been working on were put on hold and starting Zoom That Room brought in lots of new interest and meetings which resulted in new work. We've never needed to feel as good in our homes as we do now, and spending so much time in them made people see the things they wanted to change. I also realised that I could work from anywhere so it's also allowed me to spend time at my home in France, where I've now been for the past six weeks.

What are you particularly enjoying about your new way of working?

It's brilliant because it's so adaptable. Clients can take as much or as little advice as they want, and I think they enjoy being able to control the situation. It's face to face but it's very different to having someone in your house. They take me on a video tour and show me what they want to show me, and can engage with me as much or as little as they want to. I love my virtual meetings, they're so much fun. I really enjoy the interaction with people generally and am fascinated by the psychology of the choices people make in their homes.

Can you tell me about a French project you're working on as a result of Zoom That Room?

I'm about to start a job in **Paris** for an American couple, they're moving from Mayfair in London and want to make their Paris house a forever home. We've had three meetings on Zoom and they've sent me scale drawings of the interior space and lots of photos, and I've also had a video tour. I'm just waiting for the list of furniture that they own and want to keep. It's going to be interesting because they want to work with the possessions they already have and reuse them rather than buy everything brand new, so it's a question of how to incorporate them in context. It's an amazing single-storey house that was built in the 1970s and it's more of an upgrade than a renovation to bring it up to a higher standard.

And the French projects you've worked on in person?

Before the pandemic I was working with an Australian lady on the renovation of her château down towards the Pyrénées and that project is still ongoing. I've also worked on a property in Aveyron and on a lovely presbytery in Tarn. I'm happy to work on any type of property.

Benji has long had a connection with Landes in south-west France and owns a home there ©Dariya Korzhenko Getty Images

How did you come to take on interior design commissions for French homes?

I had a French partner a long time ago who was from Bordeaux so we spent a lot of time down here, between Bordeaux and Biarritz. My parents also bought a house in France and as I gradually spent more and more time here I took on interior design commissions on French properties. I speak fluent French so was employed by English owners. Houses in France are extraordinary – what luck the French have with their incredible architecture – and I am passionate about the health of a French home. Sadly, over time many of the old stone houses here have been renovated unsympathetically and I'm very mindful of sympathetic conservation and doing things properly.

Why did you choose to buy your own property in Landes?

I first came to **Landes** 21 years ago and it's very dear to me, I love it. I bought a home here 17 years ago, a charming little 1930s house that I owned for years with an utterly delightful French couple as neighbours. They were fantastic but when the husband died the wife moved away to be closer to her daughter and that changed things for me, so I made the decision to move too. I bought a house 10 minutes down the road and about 45 minutes inland from the coast, which brings a great energy to the area and is very well known for surfing. I've always been in Landes and probably always will be.

How have you changed the property since you bought it?

It's a beautiful house but had been clad in cement and work had been done in different stages at different times. I was told about a specialist conservation builder in the area, he was very in demand and busy but I played the waiting game and finally was able to engage him to do so work here. He's been fantastic and the quality of his work is exceptional, something I place great value on. I would always try and engage French labour and artisans that were right for the job. I'm passionate about the health of a home which means I'm not about saving everything and reusing every piece of timber. Just because something is old doesn't mean you have to save it.

How much time do you spend there?

I run my business in the UK and have a lot of work there so I can't split my time equally but I come to Landes often. I don't rent the property out when I'm not here because it's a real home. I'm very settled and have many dear friends here. I'm very lucky because I have a strong business in the UK and can spend lots of time in France but I also made my own luck. I made sure I could speak fluent French, which I think is vital for integrating and making friends. I think a lot of people move to France and aren't prepared for what it takes to really settle in.