Brexit dashed our plans to spend more time at second home – now there's hope

Recent developments in French politics have sparked some hope for Britons affected by post-Brexit visa rules



Sarah and Martyn Ford would like to spend more time at their second home in France, but post-Brexit travel rules are preventing it (Photo: Supplied)

By Katy Dartford

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France has long been a magnet for British second-home buyers, but since Brexit, many have been left grappling with the challenges of a strict travel rule.

The regulation – which limits stays in France to 90 days out of every 180 for non-EU citizens without a visa – is now under review, with recent developments sparking hope for Britons affected.

The French senate has voted through an amendment to the immigration bill that, if accepted by the National Assembly, would grant British second homeowners an automatic right to a long-stay visa, allowing them to come and go as they please, although it would not grant the right to work.

The amendment was tabled by Martine Berthet, who represents the Savoie area in the French Alps, where there is a significant community of British second homeowners.



Carol Dean, pictured, owns a second home in the Haute Savoie region of the French Alps with her husband Mark, but Brexit travel rules have dashed their plans to spend more time there (Photo: Supplied)

Mark Dean, a British second homeowner in Les Gets in the Haute Savoie, said that he and his wife had planned to invest in a larger property, spend more time in France and travel around Europe as he reduced his work commitments.

However, Brexit dashed those plans, as they couldn't justify a larger property if their time there was limited to 90 days.

The family of enthusiastic skiers were also no longer able to spend an entire ski season in France due to the rule's constraints, and Mr Dean said it made it harder to keep up with international friends.

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“After 40 years of spending lots of time in France and the rest of Europe, we have many European friends and it is very difficult not being able to see them when you want to and relying on having ‘spare’ days to attend weddings, funerals etc,” he said.

The proposed amendment could reduce the administrative burden and uncertainty associated with the current rules for people such as Mr Dean.

“We may even reinstate plans to get somewhere bigger,” he said. “180 days per year would be fine as, like many people, we still need to maintain our primary residence in the UK and remain within the UK tax and health system.”

One of Ms Berthet’s arguments in favour of extended stays for British second homeowners was their potential contribution to the local economy.

Mr Dean concurs, emphasising that it’s not only about giving back to the community by staying longer but also about incentivising further property investments in France. He describes the online visa application system as a bit of a “scrum” and says a simplified process would be welcome.

Sarah Ford, a British second homeowner in Saint Gervais Les Bains, decided to buy property in the region in 2020 despite the uncertainties surrounding Brexit and the Covid pandemic.

The appeal of the spa town located in the shadow of Mont Blanc lies in its "local" feel, allowing her family to become part of the community when they are there.

"Being keen trail runners, hikers, and cyclists, we could see how the Haute Savoie area could provide us with a year-round home-from-home," she said.

Despite being able to work flexibly and remotely, the 90-day visa rule has affected their longer-term plans to spend more time in their French home and their teenage sons' prospects for travel and work in France.

Ms Ford views the proposed amendment as a progressive step that would benefit second homeowners who feel a strong connection to the towns where they have residences.

She remains committed to her French home and hopes for an improved relationship between the UK and France in the wake of recent events, including the royal visit and discussions about second homeownership.

One British man who preferred not to be named spoke to i about the profound effect of the 90-day visa rule on his life.

He said that the "Covid/Brexit hybrid" made him "re-evaluate" his life, and pushed him to retire early and move to his holiday home. "As a result of that – my marriage collapsed," he said.

"After a gruelling year of paperwork and French processes, we both obtained our *carte sejour*, which gave us French residency.

"But it took a toll on our marriage – compelled by lockdowns and all the other things that we did not know."

He said that if the 90-day rule had not been in place, he might not have made "the full leap to France".

After the marriage failed, he had to come out of retirement and had to work again in France.

The fate of the amendment, put forward by Emmanuel Macron's government, remains uncertain as it heads back to the lower house in December. Some Britons will be eagerly awaiting its outcome.