

## Book Reviews

### **Brady, Michael, *France: A handbook for new residents***

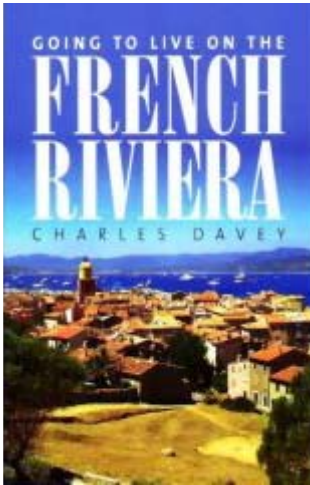
(2007) How To Books, Oxford, [www.howtobooks.co.uk](http://www.howtobooks.co.uk)

Paperback: 569 pages. ISBN-10: 1845281322, ISBN-13: 978-1845281328

### **Davey, Charles, *Going to Live on the French Riviera***

(2006) How To Books, Oxford, [www.howtobooks.co.uk](http://www.howtobooks.co.uk)

Paperback: 206 pages. ISBN-10: 1845281187, ISBN-13: 978-1845281182



As one who spends much time in France, with a *pied-à-terre* on the Côte d'Azur, there was not a lot of essential new information for me in reading *Going to Live on the French Riviera*—but it had taken me nine years to learn it—and now it lies between my hands and in much more crisp detail that my memory can easily hold and recall, still useful for one who has already settled in.

Brady's *France*, on the other hand has a much larger scope. It is absolutely encyclopedic. It is rare that two such different books are at once factual and readable. Both authors, and perhaps much credit is due to the editors at How To Books, have provided excellent, appealing, and often fascinating guides to France as a expatriate destination. Substance well presented without dilution.

Davey's book on the Riviera is a hands-on, no nonsense guide to settling in on the south coast of France. It is a book that one should have when deciding to come here or not as a resident, whether temporarily or permanently, whether as a homeowner or renter, whether coming for work or coming to retire. Despite the alluring set of full page color photos in the center of the book, the book is not a promotional piece, but a fully informative collection of what one needs to know to move here and manage the dangers and pitfalls of another life style and immersing oneself in a different socio-cultural system with its unfamiliar laws, policies, institutions and procedures.

The data found in *Going to Live on the French Riviera* is up to the minute—a challenge for books of this sort, which age all too quickly. Indeed one has the sense that it should be a website rather than a book, but a book it is and a user friendly one at that. UK expats are the primary target audience, and so the author's focus is often to make clear to British readers the essential differences they will find in the course of moving here, finding housing, work, schooling and services and what is needed to know just to “settle in.” The emphasis is on assistance and services for English speakers and the comparisons made are of the British vs. French variety. This does not mean that speakers of English other than Brits cannot benefit from the information in Davey's book, but those coming from the Isles will find it fine tuned for them.

Brady's *France: A handbook for new residents* contains no less practical information and advice, but is monumental in its scope, providing everything from historical and cultural contexts to high technical detail. When I started renovating my apartment on the Côte, I discovered very quickly that, though I might with some justification consider myself a relatively skilled US do-it yourselfer, I was no French *bricoleur*. Electricity, plumbing and solid construction



here were worlds apart from what I knew, to say nothing of how difficult it is to eyeball unfamiliar metric measurements. Had I settled in à la Brady, I could have saved hours at the hardware store, as well as at the post office and the City Treasury.

Brady also does something which I have never seen so thoroughly done in books of this genre. He gives the French language equivalent to each item discussed, in fact to each paragraph title of the book. There is nothing more frustrating to a new resident in a foreign land than to know what one wants but to not have the slightest idea of how to ask for it or to ask about it, even if one arrives with a relatively good conversational knowledge of the local language.

Are the French are addicted to or simply practiced at creating complex acronyms for institutions (URSSAFF, SIRENE, CLEIRPPA, et al.)? Whatever the cultural answer to this question, it is handy to know what these shorthand terms mean and what the organizations that they represent they do for us. Brady not only tells us about the meanings and functions of these groups, but provides two highly workable indexes, one English and the other French, reducing the frustration we are likely to experience when searching by subject and full title when we are uncertain about them.

While there is an overlap of some information, the two books are complementary--Brady's universe of "more than you ever thought you needed to know," and Davey's local drill down into the south shore of the Hexagon and how things are done specifically here. Coming from the same publishing house, a bit of material is repeated, like the "frontispiece" page entitled, "Take more of your money with you," which offers tips on foreign exchange transfers, particularly for large sums, and encourages the use of specialists for this to bypass what are often punishing rates and fees charged by banks.

Normally it is important for a reviewer to give a brief content overview and an analysis of the relevance of the topics covered. In the case of these two books, a simple listing of the table of contents would take several pages. Today, when many of us Google for immediate information with a great deal of success, we tend to be ever more impatient with dense and intractable printed information. Unequivocally, however, one can assert that the organization and presentation of the information in both books is excellent—one can quickly go to where one wants to be, and again one suspects not only the authors' competence but the principles and policies of the series' editors. Both the chapters and the topics within the chapters of Brady's *France* are actually listed alphabetically so that each section becomes a mini-dictionary of relevant matters.

So in place of exhaustive content review, here are what this reviewer found to be interesting surprises. With the sniffing pink nose of *Ratatouille* vividly in my mind and my proclivity to *gourmandise*, Brady's section on food and eating in *France*, for example, took me in an unexpected direction. It did not omit, but also did not focus on the glories of Gallic cuisine. Rather it provided ample information about food, its origins, uses and provenance, and socio-political context, everything from additives to water from the tap and in the bottle.

In both books one is stunned by the sheer quantity of telephone numbers, addresses, and URLs unobtrusively and matter-of-factly woven into the text. The facility with which this is done is a good model for printed pages in the Internet age. I was particularly gratified by Brady's ability to blend often one-liner historical information into the practicalities discussed. I like to know the "why" of what I find in another culture, the origins of words and institutions and how this affects our perception of them. Cultures are such because they are a history of group experience as well as the process of transmitting learnings and norms resulting from them. The historical dimension is often missing in intercultural studies and discourse.

Neither book is intensely illustrated. Davey's alluring centerfold snaps of the Côte are its only images, while Brady provides a number of small illustrations that picture items and logos and information tables for things that one is likely to encounter in everyday living in France. Their purpose, while generally informative, is in fact equally a matter of design, in effect breaking up the blocks of text in an eye-pleasing fashion. He also provides images of the covers of the books suggested in the bibliography, attracting more attention than such resource lists normally do. This and other inclusions raised the question for me as to whether book publishers will open their pages to paid infomercials such as found in newspapers, TV and the Web.

Both authors, experienced residents of France, have paid close attention to what goes on about them, and tend to avoid common stereotypes in delivering information. While outsiders may think of the French as free-wheeling, even chaotic, time-flexible and relational (all of which traits can be, if you like, in some fashion verified), often missed is the undertow of Cartesian rationality which forms the skeleton around which what seems like the softer tissue of character is organized. At worst this may result in heavy bureaucracy, but on the other hand there is a great deal of helpful categorization that operates even at an unconscious level. Besides massive government and industry classification systems for products and services, the French are very good at everyday standardization processes such as the color coding of milk and cream containers, allowing one to know at a glance the butterfat content of the product on the supermarket shelf.

When it comes to cultural questions and attitudes, clearly Davey's Riviera book, intended primarily for a British audience, addresses in its choice of content, a number of things that everyday Brits coming south are likely to fear, focus on or take exception to—crime, risky driving, cost of living, time habits and the like. I was reminded of the elderly British lady who stood next to me gazing into a travel agency window in Cannes. She was loudly complaining that the shop had shut down a couple minutes before 12.30 on a Saturday. Since I had experienced this as nothing exceptional for French *petits commerces*, I asked her, how long she had lived here. She responded with a tone of indignation, "Sixteen years, and the French have not changed a bit!"

One might wish that Davey could have had a few more words about cultural expectations and behaviors that often keep Brits and French resenting of each other's "arrogance." There is unfortunately more information here on finding English services and social support than there is about becoming part of the *pays* and the people in it. Brady's *tour de force*, on the other hand is a highly factual immersion into everything French without apology or comparison. Though some people would prefer the luxury of Brady's ocean liner, others are just as happy boarding Davey's raft to keep their feet dry.

As interculturalists we have a penchant for focusing on the pitfalls of communication across cultures and the impact of belief and values on behavior, it is important for us to remember that language, law and lumberyards are all cultural artifacts, part of what we have created, what we do and what we pass on to others in order to survive and succeed in our group's environment. Thus switching environments requires familiarity with the many kinds of cultural information found in books such as these as well as in the development of personal intercultural skills. Learning about differences of all sorts is part of cultural competence; being aware of what we feel about these differences and how we judge them is another part. Both are important challenges in the transition of our minds and our bodies from one place to another. These two books are evidence that the tools for doing the former are getting better and better.

**Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at [www.diversophy.com](http://www.diversophy.com)**