



Darren Taylor

Darren Taylor, managing director of kitchen retailer Searle & Taylor, recalls one memorable trip by van to deliver a kitchen to the South of France and how going to Italy to buy a CNC machine got him in a bit of a spin

Lost in France...

As this month's issue has an international flavour, I thought I'd share my own experiences of exporting and purchasing from abroad. As glamorous as it may be, and as much as I would love my retail business to sell kitchens all over the world, I've only ever sold one kitchen as far away as the South of France.

As independents, we know people buy locally, but back in 2000 a very happy client was so pleased with the kitchen we made for his UK home that he asked us to replicate the same design for his holiday home on the Côte d'Azur.

I was so excited by the prospect that I decided to offer a 'personal delivery' service with my then business partner and good friend Jeff Searle. It seemed like a good excuse for a 'jolly' with a bit of work thrown in. We duly overloaded our old Luton van with a full bespoke solid oak kitchen that we had just built, with fresh lacquer fumes that positively oozed into the cab.

We set off with the romantic notion that we would take it in turns to drive the van while the other slept and/or admired the stunning French scenery. We decided not to bother booking any accommodation along the way until we reached the sleepy little 'plein sud' village 24 hours later, where our client had booked us into a B&B for the following night. This was prior to the advent of satnav and smartphones, but we had a map, so what could possibly go wrong?

Arriving in France, we decided to take full advantage of our trip by going via Paris, whereupon it all went very bad indeed. We got horribly lost and found ourselves deep in the city, driving on the wrong side of the road in the dark down some tiny Parisian streets in a large Luton van, trying to read the map using a lighter. What with all the chemical fumes, it's a miracle we didn't spontaneously combust.

What happened next was like The Blair Witch Project meets Groundhog Day. However hard we tried to leave Paris, driving for what seemed like hours through a maze of tiny streets to get to the Périphérique and on to the South, we just kept finding ourselves back where we started, over and over again. Looking back, I blame the



cellulose in the lacquer, as we must have both been off our heads.

After many hours, and what seemed like thousands of francs spent on diesel, we eventually arrived at our beautiful French destination and unloaded the van. We ran through the fitting instructions with the local carpenter as best we could and then raced to the local restaurant before it stopped serving. I hadn't spoken French since school, and I soon discovered that neither had my business partner. How rude that the waiter didn't speak the Queen's English, when we were starving and fuming – or should that be fume-filled? So I rang my wife, who speaks fluent French, and passed her over to the surprised waiter to explain his menu. She then chose what she knew Jeff and I would like, and at last we were able to relax with a nice meal washed down with bucket-loads of wine. Plus ça change!

Buying from the Continent is much easier, and with it comes well organised trips for preferred dealers. Not only are they educational, but they keep retailers like me sane, as we all know that this business can be challenging. I've always imported kitchens and appliances from Germany and Austria, together with worktops from Spain and Italy, so I've been fortunate enough to go on many superb trips and have received excellent hospitality from grateful suppliers.

One memorable trip was in 1998 to Rimini, in Italy, when our business was

manufacturing kitchens directly, and we were in the final stages of buying a CNC router for our workshop. Back then, CNC was very new for us kitchen manufacturing folk and Mark Wilkinson had just bought his SCM Record 110 router that he was kind enough to let us view. Once we saw it working, and what it could do, we wanted one too.

I recall the cost was around £85,000, including software and tooling, so this was a considerable investment. The salesman invited me out to the huge factory in Rimini in an attempt to clinch the deal and, aged 24, I thought this was a fantastic opportunity. It was a three-day trip and, in all honesty, I can't remember anything about the factory, the CNC machine or the various demonstrations I was allegedly shown.

All I do remember was miles of golden, sandy beaches, bars and a new drink: vodka and Red Bull – my basic diet for the entire trip. I remember standing outside by the hotel pool, with a towel wrapped around my waist, and my mate pulling the towel so hard that it sent me into a cartoon spin. When I recovered and looked up, dizzy and naked, I was standing in direct view of a busload of ladies arriving at our hotel to take part in the Miss World contest. Huge thanks still goes to the Italians for looking after me during the trip, as I also managed to lose my ticket home and they kindly bought me another. I bought the machine.

Nowadays, such trips abroad are rarer, but they are fantastically useful. Not only are they fun and a good way to get to know suppliers and meet other like-minded dealers, but they are also educational. I'm always amazed by vast factories with clever machinery making millions of kitchens in an environment that you could eat your dinner from. In this regard, the Germans really do have the best kitchen factories I have ever seen. And the way they present displays in their huge showrooms is awe-inspiring. No disrespect to UK manufacturers, as we do make some beautiful furniture, but the amount of good quality kitchen product that comes out of Germany is hard to ignore, as most of us have it in some way or another in our own showrooms. **kbb**



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