

Languedoc has all the charm of Provence with property half the price, says **Cathy Hawker**

FOR years Languedoc languished in the shade of Provence, its glitzier neighbour, where tourism and second-home ownership was more in demand. For Francophiles, Languedoc has been described as Fulham to Provence's Chelsea. But with equally good weather, endless coastline, medieval villages, infinite local culture and, importantly, lower house prices, Languedoc is the place to invest your property money, as it will gain value.

Languedoc stretches from Provence to the Pyrenees, with a coastline along the Mediterranean, sandy beaches, marshes and saltwater lagoons where birds and wildlife thrive and the oysters are delicious.

The region has five airports: Perpignan, Béziers, Montpellier, Carcas-

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sonne and Nîmes, with airports also in Toulouse to the north and Girona across the Spanish border to the north. There are TGV stations at Montpellier and Perpignan, with a new link to Spain planned next year.

Coastal property prices to the west in Provence have soared, which makes Languedoc look increasingly good value. Prices peak in the attractive city of Montpellier.

You can shop in Montpellier and Toulouse, ski in the Pyrenees and stroll around historic towns and villages. Best of all, prices are very sensible compared with the Côte d'Azur, which is why Karl O'Hanlon settled



The area around Béziers has more châteaux than Bordeaux because it produced so much wine. The town also has an airport



From £171,000: flats in Château des Pèlerins near Béziers. Call 0870 626 5203

Romantic to its core

there and began a business converting historic buildings.

"It has an abundance of character buildings with tons of atmosphere, lively villages, preferably not too far from the coast and with easy access," says O'Hanlon. He is an energetic family man and ex-banker who has worked in Languedoc for seven years, selling new-build property and restoring historic ruins into hotels but his new company, *Domaine & Demeure*, aims to restore old châteaux and domaines into affordable family homes.

Capestang

The company's first project, deep in the Hérault countryside, Château des Pèlerins is a Loire-style château, all romantic turrets and steep slate roof in a green and peaceful 12-acre park next to acres of vineyards. A range

of outbuildings — barns, coach houses and winery — are arranged around cobbled courtyards.

"This was built in the 18th century and owned by one family until 2007," says O'Hanlon. "This area around Béziers has more châteaux than Bordeaux because it produced so much wine," says O'Hanlon.

His plan is to turn the estate into 25 units, from a 430sq ft studio to a 1,700sq ft three-bedroom house, with fully furnished prices from £171,540 to £571,800, by 2011. Most will have their own entrance and several can have private pools. There will be a tennis court, large pool and children's play area in the communal gardens.

The local market town of Capestang, next to the Canal du Midi, is within two miles and there are four airports (Béziers, Carcassonne, Montpellier and Perpignan) within 80 minutes' drive.



£445,650: at Narbonne, a four-bedroom house with pool. Winkworth (020 8576 5582)



£601,000: five-bedroom house near Narbonne. Call Winkworth (as before)

Pézenas

West of Béziers, in the medieval town of Pézenas, French developer Garrigae has plans to convert the town's 300-year-old distillery into 30 apartments. *Distillerie des Templiers* is available freehold on a leaseback basis with guaranteed financial rental returns of up to 4.2 per cent. Completion is expected in 2012.

"Our projects are about pushing people out into the community to discover lively villages and visit wine producers," says Miguel Espada of Garrigae. "British people want comfort, services and a natural setting."

Furnished prices at *Distillerie*, excluding VAT at 19.6 per cent, range from £140,750 for a studio to £404,660 for two bedrooms.

Simon Kerridge of Languedoc Property Finders says British buyers are looking for a character property with outside space for between £263,000 and



£461,000: five-bedrooms and modernised in Codognan, Gard. Winkworth (as before)

£527,800. "But centuries ago they didn't build workmen's cottages with gardens. Many buyers end up in a newer property just to have a garden."

Contacts

- **Domaine & Demeure:** 0870 626 5203; www.domainedemeure.com
- **Garrigae:** 0871 218 2103; www.garrigae.com
- **Languedoc Property Finders:** www.languedocpropertyfinders.com



The Allen family moved to Uzès

A peaceful corner

A LOVE of the South of France and a desire to find a peaceful corner there took John and Linda Allen from Southampton to Uzès in the western Languedoc. Last year they bought an off-plan four-bedroom house with pool at Le Hameau du Temple, a development of 16 stone houses in Garrigues Ste Eulalie, paying £615,700.

"This area has beautiful countryside, delightful towns and a good mix of cultural and historic sites," says John, 47, director of a

software design company. The couple and their two children plan to spend a month or two in their holiday home every summer. John says: "This is a small, sustainable development by a local developer. We just didn't want the headaches of doing something up. It was also important to have good train access."

Prices at Le Hameau du Temple start from £521,600. Through Chesterton International (020 3040 8210; www.chesterton-international.com).

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