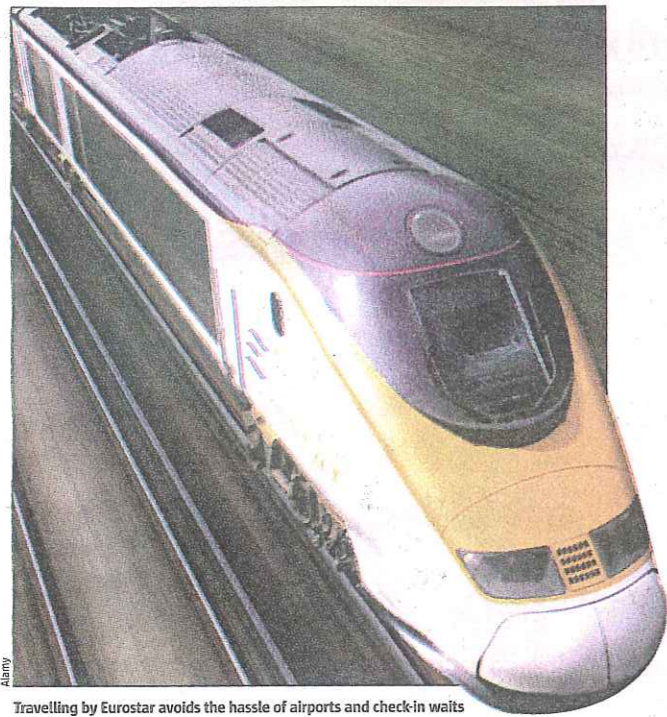


Le weekend just gets better

Even more foodies and wine lovers will be tempted to buy property abroad now that Eurostar can fast-track them to their continental homes, says **Cathy Hawker**



Travelling by Eurostar avoids the hassle of airports and check-in waits

AFTER yet another summer of airport misery, with security-alert hold-ups, baggage restrictions and lost-luggage nightmares at London's airports, taking a train becomes an increasingly appealing alternative. There is no traipsing out to an airport in the middle of nowhere and no two-hour check-in times. Add the environmental feel-good factor of choosing the greener option, and it is little wonder that Eurostar's move on 14 November to the glamorous new international terminal at St Pancras will be eagerly awaited.

For busy Londoners, time is everything. Getting to the station will be easier, says Penny Zoldan of French property agent Latitudes "For anyone living in central London it will be much easier to reach St Pancras than an airport, and journey times to Paris and Brussels will be cut by 20 minutes."

She adds: "It offers buyers a choice of ways to reach their holiday home, safety nets for when flights are cancelled and disrupted, and when routes are altered, and often makes the property easier to rent."

Languedoc

You could leave London on the morning Eurostar and be in Montpellier, the capital of the Hérault region of the Languedoc, in plenty of time for an evening meal at a three-star Michelin restaurant. "Montpellier is already very popular with British buyers with good access on the TGV [high-speed train]," says Zoldan. "Leaseback apartments there cost about €300,000

(£209,600), while €500,000 (£349,500) would buy you a large house with pool outside the city"

Karl O'Hanlon of Languedoc developer Garrigae compares the region to Provence 20 years ago, with buyers attracted by its authentic French charm and potential capital growth. "It has great weather, an amazing diversity of landscape and fantastic cities, such as medieval Carcassonne and Romanesque Narbonne," says O'Hanlon. "Buyers like coming here by train, especially if they plan to stay for a longer period." Garrigae's latest scheme, Les Jardins de Saint Benoit, is between Montpellier and Perpignan TGV stations. The 171-property site has terraced two-floor houses of one to five bedrooms, with leaseback prices from £134,500 for one-bedroom homes, including all furnishings but excluding VAT.

Avignon

Property prices are high around the historic Roman Provençal town of Avignon, with great weather, local markets and idyllic scenery making this a popular destination. "Aix-en-Provence, for example, is one of France's most expensive towns to live in," says Zoldan. "But not far away, towards the Gard, you can get a more reasonable selection, with a three-bedroom character stone property from €400,000 to €600,000 (£279,000 to 419,300)." Travel time to Avignon from London, changing at Lille, is seven hours. "The most relaxing way to travel from London to the South of France is to take the Eurostar to Lille and make a simple change of train," says Mark

The Man in Seat Sixty-One

MARK Smith from Buckinghamshire has turned his hobby of train travel into a full-time job with his inspirational website, www.seat61.com.

Known as The Man in Seat Sixty-One after his favourite seat number on the Eurostar, Smith's website provides information on train journeys across the globe, and his European section — with timetables, route maps and top tips for travellers — reminds users just how exciting train travel can be.

"I started the website in 2001 and it immediately struck a chord with people," says Smith. "But in the past two years there has been a huge upsurge in interest, partly because of environmental issues and partly because of the hassle of air travel."

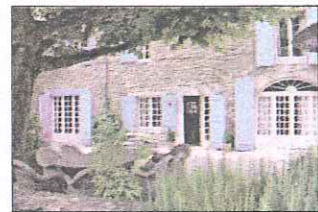
Smith, once station manager at Charing Cross and London Bridge, believes travel should be civilised and pleasant.

"A journey should be something to enjoy," he says, "not something just to be endured."

www.seat61.com



£319,000: a two-bedroom villa with swimming pool near the coast at Agde, Hérault. Through Latitudes (020 8951 5155)

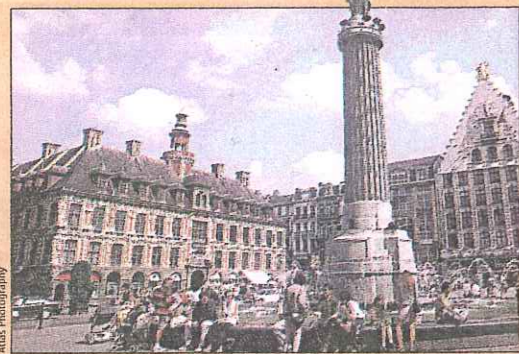


£908,000: a seven-bedroom 19th century farmhouse with gardens, pool and a paddock. Thirty minutes from Avignon's TGV station. Through Knight Frank (020 7629 8171)



£66,400-£244,600: 16 apartments and cottages in a stone watermill, 45 minutes north-west of Dijon. Through Burgundy 4U (00 33 380 208620)

Lille: 80 minutes from London

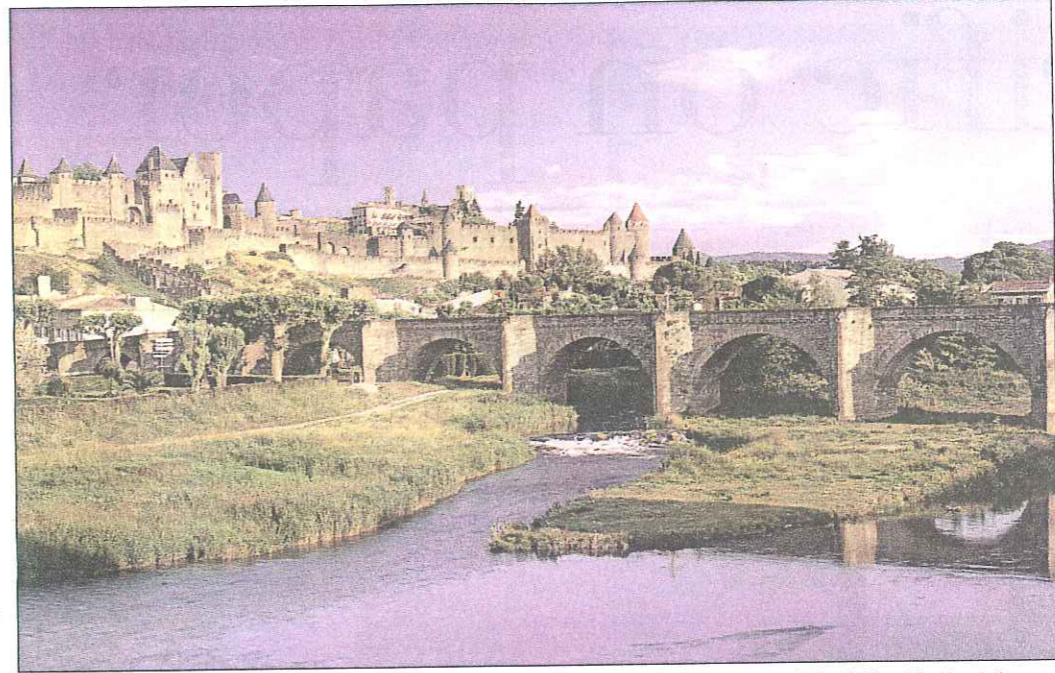


Tourists rest alongside the Column of the Goddess in Lille's central Grand Place

RATHER than changing trains in Paris, where you may well have to drag your bags across the city to another mainline station, many connections can be made through Lille in the Nord department. The station is only 80 minutes from London — "closer than the Midlands," points out Eurostar's Tom Parker.

Lille is France's fourth-largest city and a thriving shopping centre, where the chic Parisian department store Galeries Lafayette opened this

autumn. There are museums, art galleries and a beautiful old quarter, Vieux Lille, with traces of Flemish and French character. Lille's month-long Christmas market held in the Place Rihour runs from 21 November to 24 December, with arts, crafts and local delicacies, and makes an easy day trip. Children can enjoy the Ferris wheel and theatre as well as meeting Le Père Noël (Father Christmas to you and me).
www.christmasmarkets.com



The spectacular, medieval walled city of Carcassonne, in the Languedoc region of the South of France, has views over the flood plains of the River Aude

Smith of train travellers' website, The Man in Seat Sixty-One. "South of Lyon, the TGV runs along the Rhône Valley, crossing and re-crossing the River Rhône. Why not take a bottle of wine with you and enjoy the ride?"

Burgundy

Trisha Mason of VEF says a budget of £140,000 to £174,600 would buy you a character-filled three-bedroom property in Burgundy, eastern France. "If I was really looking for interesting value for money I would use the TGV station at Le Creusot to access the Burgundy area," says Mason. "The area remains relatively undiscovered, the architecture is charming, the

'Burgundy is an undiscovered and wonderful part of France'

landscape is very French, with vineyards and canals, and it is an area where property is undervalued."

David King of David King Associates agrees, saying prices in Burgundy have been steadily moving up by about six per cent annually for several years, and he has noticed a year-on-year increase in British buyers in the area for the past five years.

"Burgundy is an undiscovered and wonderful part of France and now with good accessibility on the Eurostar, people are starting to pay attention. It is also a good base to explore central Europe: once in



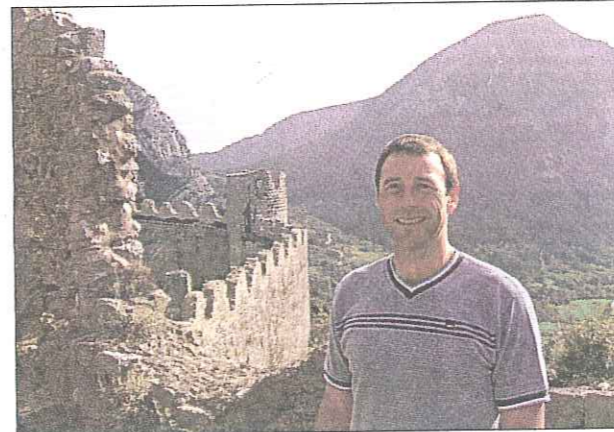
£300,000: a four-bedroom stone property in Burgundy. Through VEF International (020 7515 8660)

Dijon, you have trains running to Venice, Milan, Turin, Nice, Avignon, Geneva and beyond."

Burgundy 4U is selling Beaunotte, 16 apartments and cottages in a stone watermill 45 minutes north-west of Dijon. The seven-acre grounds will have a communal tennis court and pool. Prices are from €35,000 to €350,000 (£26,400 to £244,600).

Brussels and Catalonia, see page 48

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Alex Charles enjoys the Languedoc countryside around the spectacular Château de Puilaurens

'Let the train take the strain'

ALEX Charles, co-founder of the specialist property and tourism web company Crème de Languedoc, left London four years ago to live in the South of France but crosses the Channel regularly for business, preferring to travel by train.

"The benefits of the train far outweigh the other options," says Alex. "I can take as much baggage as I can carry and work in quiet, comfortable surroundings, watching the countryside flash past."

"The train is a much more pleasant environment, allowing me to stretch out or take a meal in uncrowded conditions, and is also the most environmentally friendly option."

With advance booking, Alex can get a return from London to the Languedoc from as little as £158 return. "Once you have added up the train fares to the airport or parking charges there is not much difference," he says. "Let the train take the strain."

Crème de Languedoc: www.creme-de-languedoc.com

Factfile

- Eurostar fares start at £59 return for London to Paris or Brussels and £55 return to Lille. Passengers can book up to four months in advance.
- Eurostar sells tickets to 60 destinations in France.
- A return ticket from London to Brussels is valid for travel anywhere in Belgium.

Contacts

- Latitudes: 020 8951 5155; www.latitudes.co.uk
- Garrigae: 00 33 467 118757; www.garrigae.com
- Crème de Languedoc: www.creme-de-languedoc.com
- The Man in Seat Sixty-One: www.seat61.com
- Eurostar: 0870 518 6186; www.eurostar.com
- VEF: www.vefuk.com; 020 7515 8660
- David King & Associates: 020 8671 1111; www.dkassociates.co.uk
- Beaunotte: www.beaunotte.com
- Burgundy 4U: 00 33 380 208620; www.burgundy4u.com



From £251,000: 12 apartments on the waterfront in Marseillan, Languedoc. Through Garrigae (00 33 467 118757)



£474,000: a three-bedroom stone character house, with swimming pool, at St Rémy de Provence, Vaucluse. Through Latitudes (020 8951 5155)



£286,000: a stone farmhouse in 2.5 acres; interior needs rebuilding. Fifteen minutes from Valence in the Drôme-Ardèche region. Through VEF (020 7515 8660)



£330,000: a three-bedroom house at Meursault, Burgundy. Beaune, less than 10 minutes away, has motorway and TGV links to Paris. VEF (as before)