

BuyingInFrance

# Villas in a secret garden near Carcassonne



Irishman Karl O'Hanlon with his wife Anita and children Cara May, Daisy and Antonio in his development, Les Jardins de St Benoit, near Carcassonne in south-west France. Bottom: villas and a view

Eco-friendly villas built on the site of a former monastery in south-west France come with a working vineyard and olive groves

They call it "the secret Mediterranean", an ancient region of dramatic landscapes, great beaches and an earthy quality you won't find in the fashionable Riviera further along the coast.

The Languedoc is carpeted in vineyards rolling down to long sandy beaches, with mountains and valleys and moorland garigue scented with wild herbs and orchids. Proximity to the Spanish border brings fiestas, friendly locals and a laid-back atmosphere that encourages visitors to leave their cares behind them.

A few years ago, Dubliner Karl O'Hanlon gave up a successful banking career to move permanently with his family to the south of France, linking with Languedoc natives Miguel Espada and Cecile Viennet to develop eco-friendly resorts in the villages which dot the countryside.

So far, they have built apartments in a restored convent, waterside apartments in scenic Marseille and a hamlet of stone houses in the Corbiere. Their company Garrigae's commitment to expressing the character of the landscape and quality finish has earned the company two Bentley international property awards to date, including their latest leaseback/private ownership scheme, Les Jardins de Saint Benoit.

This is taking shape on a former monastery site on the edge of a village called St Laurent de la Cabrerisse in the Corbiere, half an hour from Carcassonne.

The site is what the French call a *coup de coeur*. Medieval walled gardens sloping down to the river are being restored and residents



will collectively own the working vineyard and olive groves. It is planned that a crumbling pigeonier will house the children's club, which will include a separate pool for splashing around.

Grown-ups will have their own indoor and outdoor pools and a luxurious Mediterranean spa which will use the fruits, herbs and flowers in the vineyard and olive groves.

All 161 terraced houses and villas will have private gardens and come fully furnished and fitted out to a high standard. Architecture echoes the narrow laneways of the village, with cobbled stone paths, natural limestone walls and painted shutters. Interiors will combine a traditional French country look with a modern twist, blending lime-washed walls, ironwork and traditional textiles with state-of-the-art lighting and equipment.

The vineyard estate will have no security gate, the idea being that residents will integrate seam-



lessly with the existing village.

A pedestrian path and river bridge will access the village café and boulangerie in a few minutes. Concerts staged in the new piazza will be open to villagers and a local market will take place in a traditional halles planned for

St Benoit.

This is a sale and leaseback development, one of the French government-backed schemes which guarantee investors rental returns for a fixed period. Buyers can buy a villa as a pure investment, or opt to use it for a

number of weeks/months per year, letting it out for the rest of the year.

Most buyers so far have decided to use their house for a month or two each year. Owners will be encouraged to come out for the vendange, when the grapes are harvested and for the olive season in early winter. Truffle hunting, wine-tasting and orchid-spotting with local vigneron Jean Pierre Mazard and tours of the historic Cathar castles will also be available.

There are quiet spots to swim and picnic along a riverbank. Beaches, water sports and a wildlife safari park are a half an hour's drive away.

Prices range from €205,000 for furnished two-storey one-bedroom houses of 45.6sq m (491sq ft). Two-bed houses of 55.0-67.9sq m (599-731sq ft) cost from €255,000. Three-bedroom terraced houses with 82.89sq m (892sq ft) of space are priced from €370,000. All the large villas with private pools are sold. These

prices are exclusive of Vat, under the French government-controlled leaseback scheme, so buyers who opt to buy for private use only should add Vat at 19.6 per cent. Completion of the entire village is scheduled for late 2008.

Four different packages are available to purchasers. Pure investors can expect a rental return of 4.22 per cent. Owners can also opt for a gross return of 5.12 per cent, translating to 3.5 per cent cash and 1.62 per cent personal use. A return of 5.59 per cent with 3 per cent cash and 2.59 per cent in personal use is also possible.

Those intending to spend more time in Saint Benoit can simply include their house in the accommodation pool for 50 per cent of all rental return and six months owner-use.

The resort will be managed by Patrick Baccheiri, former Director of Club Mediterranee. Douglas Newman Good is handling Irish sales.