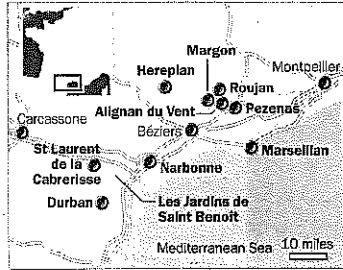


# ALL CHANGE BY THE MED

Rupert Wright meets a developer determined to reflect the perfection of Languedoc



WITH ITS beaches, mountains and blue skies, Languedoc in southern France has one of the most famous landscapes in the world. And to make it even more agreeable, the best villages boast fine stone houses, squares shaded by plane trees, fountains and countless butchers, bakers and cafés.

Property developers have tended to ignore this part of the Mediterranean, partly because of the problems of dealing with French bureaucracy. However, the housing boom of the past ten years has created a monster, the *lotissement*. This is the French word for a housing estate. Imagine a campsite, with tents pitched almost on top of each other, and then transform those tents into houses. They are built cheaply of breezeblock, then covered in *crépi*, cement rendering that hides all sins. There is normally a plastic swimming pool in the garden. The French call them *potailiers*, chicken coops.

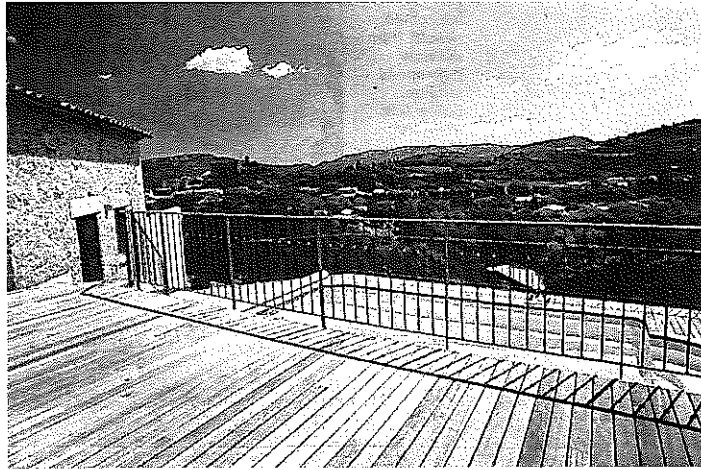
The problem is, many French people like them. They sell their old stone houses that need

## Gardens dating from the Middle Ages run along the riverbank

a lot of restoration work to foreigners, and buy a new house on the outskirts of the village or town. The *lotissement* creators are changing the landscape. Beautiful villages near Montpellier, such as Alignan-du-Vent, Margon and Roujan, have been ringed with new houses.

Miguel Espada, head of Garrigae Investissements, aims to bring high-quality developments to Languedoc. He says that the problem is that too many officials let disappointing developments happen. However, he married into one of the oldest and grandest families in the region, the Viennets. "It wouldn't be possible to stay in the family and build something that isn't beautiful," he says. He and his Irish partner, Karl O'Hanlon, plan to build and sell properties that will be leased back to them to run as boutique hotels.

On a sunny November day, we visited Durban, a village half an hour's drive from both Carcas-



sonne and the Mediterranean. This was one of their first developments. The houses of *Domaine des Pins* are built on a hillside with a great view of the ruined medieval castle and the wild Corbières. There are good-sized rooms, large gardens and sunken swimming pools. All 15 homes have been sold, although the company is building 13 more; five are still on the market.

A 15-minute drive takes you to St-Laurent-de-la-Cabrerisse. It's a typical Languedoc village, with a river running through it, a wine co-operative, good shops, a café, a restaurant, even a faded Dubonnet advertisement on a house wall. Gardens dating from the Middle Ages run along the riverbank.

Just above is a former vineyard where Garrigae plans to

build a spa complex surrounded by 171 houses with their own gardens, called *Les Jardins de St Benoît*. The idea is to create a development of well-built homes that blends with the village, O'Hanlon says. There will be no cars; people will park or be dropped off on the outskirts (rail and air connections are 40km away in Perpignan and Carcassonne). Each Sunday a market will be held in the centre of *Les Jardins*.

Prices here start at €205,000 (£137,879) for a one-bedroom townhouse, €255,000 for a two-bedroom townhouse, and €442,000 for a three-bedroom villa. There are various formulas to attract buyers based on the French

## FACTFILE

- There is a helpful website, [www.creme-de-languedoc.com](http://www.creme-de-languedoc.com), established by an English couple, that offers advice on all aspects of Languedoc life, including buying property.
- If you want plenty of sunshine, avoid homes in mountainous areas. The foothills, on the other hand, offer lovely countryside and consistently good weather. Prices are higher on the coast.
- Not to be missed is Les Halles, the covered food market in Narbonne, where you can buy oysters, wine and wild boar.
- Dine at Le Jardin des Sens in Montpellier and you may catch a glimpse of Gérard Depardieu, a local resident. The restaurant has three Michelin stars.
- Premier Resorts, 020-8940 9406; [www.garrigae.com](http://www.garrigae.com) or [www.st-andreol.com](http://www.st-andreol.com)
- Rupert Wright is the author of *Notes from the Languedoc*, Ebury Press (£7.99)

leaseback scheme, which saves purchasers VAT of 19.6 per cent if they lease back to the developer for nine years. To invest in an already established spa development, you need to travel further east to a beautiful spot in Provence, 45 minutes' drive north of St Tropez and within reach of train connections in Nice. I first visited the *Domaine de St Andréol* four years ago. Then I found a glorious golf course winding through a hilly Provençal landscape. The developers promised to keep their buildings away from the course, and they kept their word. Instead of building dense plots, they built a series of hamlets. One of these, with just 40 houses, had more than €1 million spent on planting alone.

The next stage is a series of flats and townhouses. Prices have doubled in six years, but you can pick up an apartment for €400,000 and a townhouse for €450,000. They are also sold leaseback to avoid VAT. Thereafter the company looks after everything: cleaning the house, finding a babysitter and ensuring safety. You just need to remember your golf clubs when you visit.

Above and left: Garrigae properties are intended to blend in

