

OVERSEAS

The Languedoc, a beautifully unspoilt tranche of the southern French coast, is frequently overshadowed by its ritzy neighbour, the Côte d'Azur. However, those who have been outpriced, or seek a little less razzmatazz, should venture west from Montpellier to discover a world of ancient wine estates, lagoons with flocks of pink flamingos and long sandy beaches.

What the *Lonely Planet Guide* calls the "Cinderella of the south" is beginning to attract property-hunters driven by the area's unspoiled national park scenery, its accessibility (it's within 2.5 hours of eight main airports) and its historic villages, which remain sensibly priced.

"We have seen a surge in inquiries for Languedoc over the past 12 months," says Trevor Leggett, the chairman of Leggett Immobilier, an estate agency. "International buyers spend an average of €180,000 (£156,000) — compared with €474,000 in Paca [Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur] — and it offers exceptional value for money if you're looking for sun and traditional French culture."

The Languedoc's 13th-century Cathar rulers built some great defensive castles and fortified towns, including the Unesco-listed Carcassonne, and the region is dotted with elegant châteaux connected to vineyards that are too onerous for the region's winemakers (who produce about a third of French wines) to maintain.

About a decade ago Karl O'Hanlon, the founder of the developer Domaine & Demeure, came up with what proved to be a winning formula of renovating unloved châteaux attached to wineries and adding turn-key holiday homes.

With his father, a passionate promoter of Languedoc wines, he moved to the region in 2006 and in 2011 his first project, Château Les Carrasses near Béziers, consisted of 27 properties while the next, St Pierre de Serjac, which was completed last year, had 36.

O'Hanlon, who is about to launch his third project, says that he was able to tap into growing demand for the region. "I arrived at a time when the low-cost airlines starting going into the Languedoc [Béziers, Montpellier, Carcassonne, Perpignan], its wine tourism was growing and the first wave of pioneer property buyers were beginning to discover the region," he says. "I could see that the next generation would want turn-key properties and my formula hasn't



Domaine & Demeure is developing Château Capitoul, which overlooks Étang de Bages in the Languedoc

Why the Languedoc is the next big thing

This southern French region has the sun, culture and beauty of the Côte d'Azur — without the bling, says Liz Rowlinson

changed — we offer the charm of a working wine estate with the attributes of a private club and the services of a five-star hotel."

It's a formula that seems to have a wide reach — O'Hanlon's latest project attracted 17 different nationalities.

They tend to be entrepreneurial, successful business owners. The average age of an owner at St Pierre de Serjac is 46. Several of these have already reserved on the new project Château Capitoul, which is much closer to the coast than its forerunners — five minutes by car, or a gentle 5.5km cycle.

On the edge of Massif de la Clape, a rocky national park where Julius Caesar created a vineyard in the 2nd century BC, Capitoul is a working winery with 60 hectares of vines producing award-winning syrah and grenache blends. On the umbrella pine-wooded 240-acre site overlooking



This nine-bedroom 19th-century château near Béziers is on sale for €1.26 million through Leggett

Étang de Bages — one of the salt lakes populated by flamingos — there will be 46 two to five-bedroom properties built in contemporary styled buildings with reclaimed terracotta tiled roofs, limestone renderings and oak beams.

They will be furnished down to the corkscrews based on owner consultations with interior designers, with completion due early in 2020. Prices range from €450,000 to €1.5 million, with an average (furnished) price of €5,300 per sq m.

Owners are expected to rent out their properties, says O'Hanlon, who is transparent about the profit margins.



Properties in Château Capitoul will start at €450,000 for two bedrooms

"On the current two projects the owners have covered their homeowner association fees [running costs] with their rental income of around €10,000 per year," he says. "The rentals scheme is totally flexible and they can block out the weeks they want for their own use." Within the turreted 19th-century château will be a fine-dining restaurant, a bar, a spa and an indoor swimming pool. A further restaurant near the winery will offer local seafood seared on a wood-fired plancha.

The owners will also receive 60 bottles of the estate's wine a year and, should they own a boat, will find moorings in Gruissan marina, five minutes' drive away. This area is a haven for water sports, biking and bird watching, and the lagoonside fishing villages of Bages and Peyriac-de-Mer offer great little low-key restaurants.

Head down tree-lined lanes to the Roman town of Narbonne for Michelin-starred restaurants, or to the popular harbour town of Marseillan, where any properties that come up for sale "get snapped up quickly" by British buyers, according to Claudia Goetting, Leggett's local agent. Prices are about €3,000 a sq m, or €120,000 for a village house. "Marseillan aside, most buyers request to be half an hour from the coast around Béziers or Pézenas. Capestang on the Canal du Midi is also a hotspot," she says. Tapas restaurants and a six-day bullfighting *feria* at Béziers add an appealing Catalan twist to the region.

Phil Rees, a consultant for the buying agent Home Hunts, recommends Capestang, a classic well-kept French village, as well as the "golden triangle" of Pézenas, Montpellier and Clermont-l'Hérault, where you can get a *maison de maître* for about €800,000 or a six-bedroom village house with land for about €1.3 million. "This area enjoys all the benefits of Provence and the Riviera without the security worries, traffic, high prices and the bling," he says.

ASK THE EXPERT

Q We rent out a house on a standard Assured Shorthold Tenancy agreement. Unfortunately during cold weather the gas-fired boiler broke down and the house was without heating for two weeks while our plumber sourced a new part. The tenant wants a rent rebate. Are we legally responsible while a boiler is being mended?

Under section 11(1)(c) of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 a landlord must "keep in repair and proper working order the installations in the dwelling-house for space heating and heating water". Most Assured Shorthold Tenancy agreements include similar obligations, although the precise form varies from one agreement to another.

A number of factors must be considered when deciding whether a landlord has broken its repairing obligations. The Supreme Court recently confirmed in the case of *Edwards v Kumarasamy* that a landlord is not liable for disrepair to anything in the tenant's

possession until the landlord is made aware of it, ie, the tenant gives him notice that there is a problem. The test for notice is whether the landlord is given sufficient information about the existence of defects "as would put a reasonable man on inquiry" about whether repairs are needed.

The other point is that the landlord's obligation to repair on notice is not absolute. The landlord is not in breach of covenant until a reasonable time has been allowed for repairs to be done.

It is obviously a matter of fact and degree in each case whether the landlord has acted promptly.

However, it is unlikely that any landlord would have broken his obligation to repair if the boiler breakdown was not foreseeable, the plumber attended quickly and repairs were delayed only while a crucial part was ordered.

If you acted promptly after first receiving notice of the boiler breakdown, it is probable that you will not have to pay compensation to the tenant while the boiler was out of action.

Mark Loveday

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