

17th JULY 2011

STEFAN SCIBOR-KAMINSKI visits an overlooked region of France and discovers two building projects ideal for wine lovers

French paradise you hear about on the grapevine

THE SOUTH of France has long been popular with British holiday-makers and second-home owners but as Provence and the Côte d'Azur have become busy and expensive, those seeking an idyllic, unspoilt French lifestyle without the price tag, are heading to the neighbouring wine-rich Languedoc-Roussillon Region.

Nestled among the rolling hills and vineyards are old chateaux and pretty medieval villages where locals enjoy a glass of wine or play petanque on village squares. Small, family-run restaurants serve fresh salads or local specialities such as cassoulet (a bean and duck stew) or sanglier (wild boar) when it's in season. The pace of life is relaxed and the local people are friendly and eager to please.

"A good sized, well located, two-bedroom house will cost about £180,000 (€205,000)," says Mathieu Cany, director of Sextant Properties. Mathieu predicts a modest appreciation over the next few years and a certain increase when the high speed train extension to Barcelona via Languedoc is completed in 2016.

In the past year, the average price for two-bedroom houses sold in Languedoc was £141,000 compared to £224,000 in Provence, according to the French Land Registry and over the past eight years house prices have risen by eight per cent annually in Languedoc.

The price range is as diverse as the area with hot-spots such as the medieval towns of Beziers and Carcassone commanding a premium. Carcassone is on the Unesco World Heritage List and a Unesco-listed canal flows through Beziers. Rural houses are cheaper but the whole area shares a relaxed, authentic charm.

Languedoc-Roussillon is located on the western side of France's Mediterranean coast with 137 miles (220km) of white sandy beaches and rows of vines stretching as far as the eye can see inland, making it the largest wine-producing region in France.

Spain and the ski-resorts of the Pyrénées are a couple of hours' drive to the south west and there are five main airports all with flights to the UK.

As well as the sea, there are gorges and caves to explore; hiking, rafting, several golf courses and an aqua park in Cap d'Agde.

The summers are hot (28C) and winters mild (10C) with 300 days of sunshine a year, so it's no surprise the region's population is growing at one per cent a year with many French as well as Britons buying retirement homes.

"Most Britons buy second homes here because of the lifestyle and climate," says Mathieu. "They tend to be over 40 with families but there is considerable interest from other nationalities and the French themselves."

Tim Swannie, director of Languedoc specialists Home Hunts, adds: "The property market in Languedoc-Roussillon is very busy at the moment; it started to pick up for us towards



NEW-LOOK: Comtesse Dominique d'Artois at the chateau in Redorte which will become a vineyard and spa resort, left

the end of 2010 following a difficult 18 months or so. Property prices definitely came down in 2008-9 by around 10-15 per cent and buyers seem to be taking advantage of this.

"We have had quite a lot of interest in vineyards as well as properties with character in the countryside, particularly with some land around them."

With 15 million tourists a year and growing, it is the third most visited area of France. Rental potential is high, especially in the four star

luxury sector which has increased by 40 per cent between 2004-8 according to INSEE, the national office of statistics.

Local developer Garrigae was the first to start building and managing luxury developments in the region. Its approach is unique. "We take great care to preserve and share the local culture and heritage and our developments reflect our passion for the local way of life," explains founder Miguel Espada.

In the medieval town of Pézenas, once home to the French playwright Molière, Garrigae is converting a 19th century mansion house and distillery to apartments with a large outdoor swimming pool, spa offering full treatments, mini-gym and conference facilities. A wine cellar and bar will serve local produce.

More than half of the 38 apartments have already been sold off plan. A studio is available for £84,160 and two-bedroom apartments start at £127,350.

An imposing 18th century chateau in the village of Redorte is also under development. Three bedroom villas in the grounds start from £280,200 and an apartment in the chateau itself is on sale for £176,000.

Le Chateau de la Redorte has a secret tunnel which will be converted into a wine cave under a joint venture with a local wine producer. Owners will be able to blend and taste wine with the chatelaine, Comtesse Dominique d'Artois. Off-plan developments in France are tightly regulated and give the buyer a lot of protection. Building work cannot begin until 55 per cent of the development is sold off-plan. Developers must take out insurance which guarantees completion once construction has begun.

Another advantage of buying off-plan is the French leaseback scheme, where VAT at 19.6 per cent can be reclaimed as long as the property is let out and the owner does not occupy it for more than 182 days a year.

Garrigae incorporates this discount in its prices and deals with the tax authorities itself. It has a range of leaseback options including a straight-forward guaranteed net yield of 4.5 per cent per annum. Alternatively, owners can have a lower cash yield of 2.84 per cent but get 3.1 per cent personal use credit which can be used to stay either in their own villa or in any other



HOME FROM HOME:
The two bedroom villa in Les Jardins de Saint-Benoit resort, which Kim Knight bought off-plan in 2007 for £257,000 so she could be part of the local community rather than live in an ex-pat gated development



Garrigae resort. Kim Knight, 54, from London, bought a two-bedroom villa at Les Jardins de Saint-Benoit resort near St Laurent de la Cabrerisse off plan in 2007 for £257,000. "I wanted to be able to integrate with the local community and not be isolated in a gated ex-pat resort," she said. "I was attracted by the relaxed lifestyle, healthy living and the uncommercialised, authentic way-of-life."

● **INFORMATION:**

Sextantproperties.com/020 7428 4910; garrigae.com/+33 (0)4 67 931460; home-hunts.com/020 8144 5501