

Southern belles

Forget the Côte d'Azur. Charlotte Cubitt explores lesser-known—and more affordable—areas in the South of France

THERE'S more to the South of France than the Côte d'Azur—although in recent years, we seem to have forgotten this. Now, however, the opulence and excesses of St Tropez are considered *de trop* by many second-home buyers, and plain *passé* by others. Instead, they're turning their attention to the charms of lesser-known parts of Provence, Languedoc-Roussillon and the Midi-Pyrénées. Yes, the property market has slowed down, but, according to Charles Smallwood, of Agence l'Union in the South of France, the appetite for buying into the rustic way of life in France is stronger than it has been for years. 'People want to sit outside in mid November and buy their groceries from a local market,' says Mr Smallwood. 'The French lifestyle still appeals, even if the exchange rate doesn't.'

Houses in France have always been better value than in England—40% to 60% cheaper. Even with a weaker pound, a four-bedroom stone house with swimming pool will cost a fraction of what it would in the UK.

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Admittedly, a bargain will be harder to find in *le vrai* South of France—the triangle comprising the Côte d'Azur and west from Nice to Nîmes—but those prepared to look outside the boundaries, into La Drôme Provençale, and the Languedoc-Roussillon, for example, will find they get more for their money than they would have in 2007. 'We've observed that some of our foreign clients, once interested by the Riviera, want to explore undiscovered parts of Provence and Languedoc-Roussillon,' says Valerie Davies, of buying agent Transac.

Unfortunately, there are dangers with going off-piste in the South of France. 'If you go further than an hour from Nîmes, you lose the Provençal character and the cypress trees,' says Trisha Mason of French estate agent VEF. The coastline of the Hérault is dotted with caravan parks, and amusement arcades and parts of the Haut-Languedoc



This house in the Gard is just a 30-minute drive from Uzès. €795,000



This restored village house has four bedrooms. Through VEF (020-7515 8660)

can feel dark, cold and remote. And then there's the increasing number of wind farms that mar the landscape, and the nuclear power stations lining the Rhône Valley.

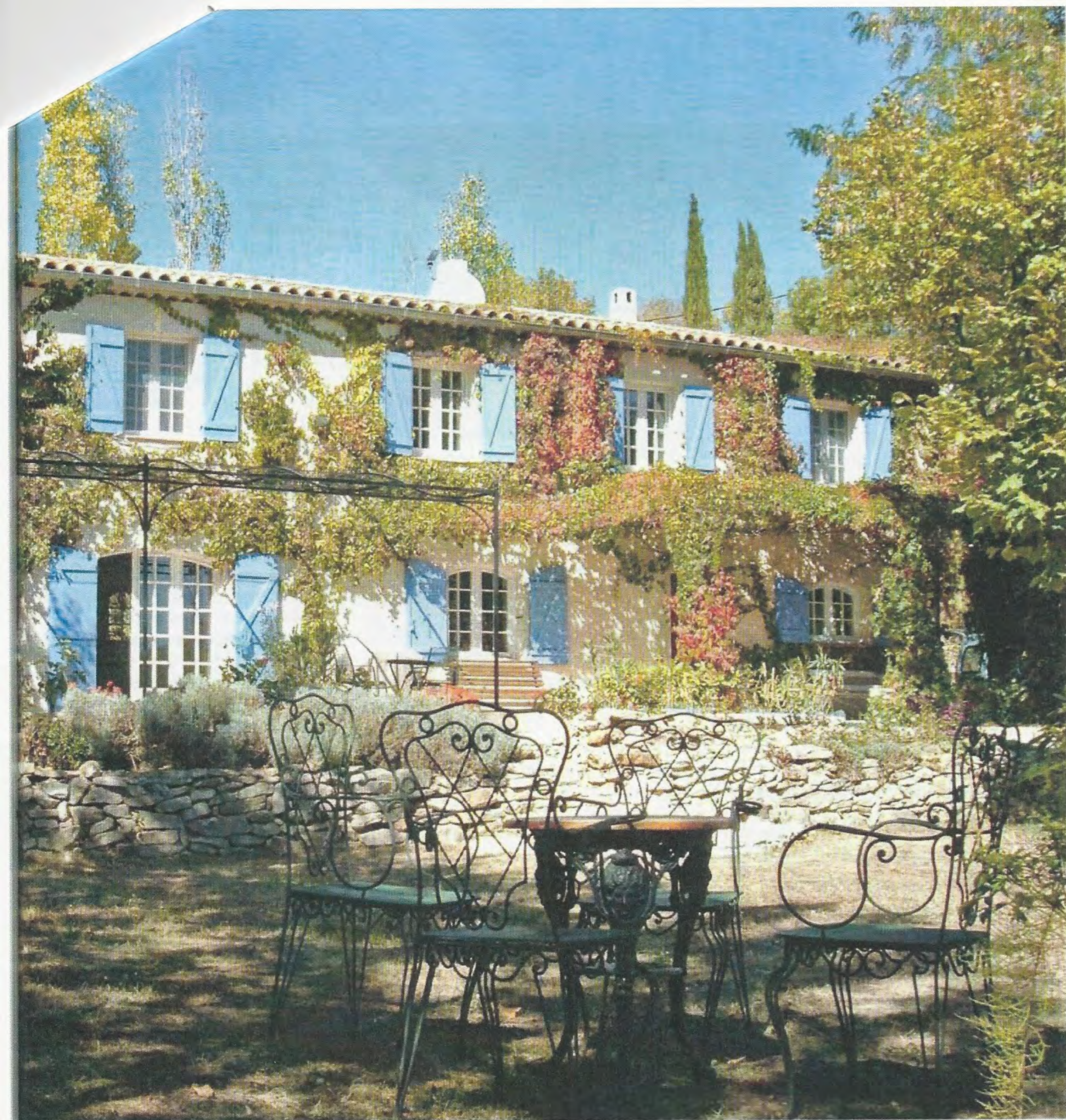
But this shouldn't put off the intrepid house-hunter. There are pockets of unspoilt countryside within these areas—Lagrasse in the Aude, for example, and the picturesque villages along the Canal du Midi. The Languedoc-Roussillon and Midi-Pyrénées might not be Provence, but they have their own distinct character and architecture. 'They have something for everyone,' says Hannah Rogerson from Quintessentially Estates. 'Châteaux, beaches, mountains and green fields.'



Lock-up in the Languedoc

The Languedoc-Roussillon, the region to the west of Provence, comprises the departments of Hérault, Aude, Gard, Pyrénées-Orientales and Lozère—and 155 miles of beaches from the Côte d'Azur to the Spanish border. With more than 300 days of sunshine, it's the world's largest wine region, producing more bottles than Australia and New Zealand combined. According to Miguel Espada, a property developer in the region, it's like Provence 50 years ago. 'There's no more space in the south-east of France. In the Languedoc, the quality of life has been preserved, and property is still good value for money.'

Mr Espada, who has worked in resorts across the world, believes that there are buyers



Var from the madding crowds: away from the bustle (and airport) is this Provençal *bastide* with gardens in the village of Cotignac. €1.3m

out there who want to enjoy the relaxed way of life in the Languedoc without the usual stresses of overseas property-ownership.

In 'town on the up' Hérépian, near Olargues and St-Gervais-sur-Mare, he has converted a former convent into furnished apartments and a spa. The project sold out within several months, and he is now developing houses in the Aude from €205,000. 'We have 20 village houses to sell, with swimming pools and a share in a vineyard,' he says. 'The residents will be part of a community; they can go truffle- and wild-boar hunting, and there'll be a spa using local plant extracts. But the houses will be managed for them when they're not here. It's a completely

new concept in this part of France.'

Situated on a 17-acre riverside site beside the small village of Saint-Laurent-de-la-Cabrerisse, not far from the pretty village of Lagrasse in the Corbières area of the Aude, the two-, three- and four-bedroom houses at Les Jardins de Saint Benoît are built using local materials and decorated in Provençal style. There are restaurants, a bar and a children's club on the site, which is surrounded by 12th-century gardens.

The development won't suit those in search of isolation on their holiday, or those wanting an older house with traditional features. But for someone after a conveniently located and tastefully decorated lock-up-and-leave holiday

home that generates a guaranteed rental income without them lifting a finger, Mr Espada's project is extremely attractive. His company, Garrigae, has other projects in Languedoc-Roussillon and Provence (0871 218 7066; www.garrigae.com).

Meanwhile, Latitudes is selling a substantial vineyard and six-bedroom house in the Hérault, close to Montpellier, for €1.89 million (020-8951 5155; www.latitudes.co.uk).

An alternative to Aix

The Belgians have discovered Uzès in the Gard, but the town is not well known in England. Situated 15 miles from Nîmes, and less than an hour from Avignon, it was an

important cloth-manufacturing centre in the 16th century. Its stone streets and squares are incredibly clean and tidy, and, twice a week, the town becomes a vast market, selling traditional Provençal fabrics, herbs, furniture and books. Well-heeled shoppers drive from as far as Marseille and Toulouse to browse the stalls in the Places aux Herbes. 'Uzès is a lively town all year round,' says Valerie Davies of buying agents Transac. 'There are annual wine and truffle festivals and the surrounding countryside and local villages match any that you might find in Provence.'

Properties in the Uzès area are about 20% cheaper than across the Rhône Valley in the Luberon, and in the Alpilles. 'There's a great variety of properties to suit every budget,' says Miss Davies. Townhouses in Uzès are different from those on the other side of the Rhône. 'The story starts behind the front door,' says Miss Davies. Many have vaulted ceilings, plasterwork and internal courtyards, as well as sunny private gardens at the back. 'They keep cool in summer and warm in winter, and they rent out well. When you're not there, you can just lock the door—you don't have the maintenance costs of running a country house.'

The Languedoc, the world's largest wine region, is like Provence 50 years ago. The quality of life has been preserved, and property is still good value for money'

The town is surrounded by small villages such as Blauzac and St-Quentin-La-Poterie. Here, there are large *manoirs*, with parkland and outbuildings—less rustic in style than those of Provence. 'Only minutes away from Uzès is the impressive Gorges du Gardon and the famous Pont du Gard, and you're not far from the sandy beaches of the Camargue,' says Miss Davies. She can show potential clients an 18th-century estate near Uzès, with a manor house, stables, a garage, a swimming pool and 25 acres for €1.9 million, and a village house with six bedrooms, a courtyard garden and a pool for €1.65 million (07984 466092). Meanwhile, for €795,000, VEF is selling a restored village house with four bedrooms and pool, a 30-minute drive from Uzès (020-7515 8660; www.vefuk.com).

A home in the Drôme

Impoverished provencophiles should look no further than the Drôme. The region has two distinct parts divided by the Rhône valley—Provençale (east) and Ardèche (west)—and has all the characteristic features of a Provençal *département*. There are black



Vaucluse: Transac (07984 466 092) are selling this Florentine-style house. €8m.

olives, truffles, lavender and goat's cheese, and good Côtes du Rhône wines. Madame de Sévigné, one of the greatest *femme de lettres* in history, is from Grignan in the Drôme; le Pays de Grignan comprises 14 fortified villages, surrounded by lavender fields and oak woods where the famous black diamond truffle is found.

Drôme Provençale is dotted with picturesque villages and castles overlooking the vineyards; La Garde Adhémar, Le Poët-Laval and Montbrun-les-Bains are three of the 100 most beautiful villages in France. The Drôme Ardèche on the other side of the valley is France's least-known region among the British. But, according to Trisha Mason from VEF, it's not as isolated as one might suppose. 'The mountains to the west offer skiing and lots of mountain-based sports, including pot-holing, hang-gliding and, of course, breathtaking walks.'

There are golf courses, a marina, and a variety of architectural styles, including converted churches, mills, villas and stone houses. The Drôme has both the lavender plains and olive groves of Provence and the rolling countryside of the Ardèche, and the house prices are up to 30% cheaper than in the Var or Vaucluse. In the Drôme Ardèche, VEF is selling a stone *mas* with gardens and separate studio for €795,000, and near Grignan, Latitudes is selling a renovated four-bedroom *mas* with outbuildings, pond and woodland for €1.1 million, and a restored stone house at Tulette, midway between Orange and Nyons, for €598,500.

Health warnings

- Choose a house near an established airport—budget airlines have a habit of cancelling flight routes to lesser-known destinations
- Do you want the responsibility of running a house in France? Make sure there are locals who will keep an eye on your property. Consider buying into a development that will be looked after when you're not there
- Make sure your house is situated in an area that doesn't go to sleep in winter. Towns such as Uzès are lively throughout the year, which makes off-season visits more pleasant
- If you're buying as a rental investment, consider how suitable the house is for children/the elderly. Houses on the edge of villages and within an hour's drive of an airport and TGV station are easier to let.
- Property viewings are difficult if you aren't based in France. Consider using a buying agent to do all of the ground work for you, such as Property Vision (www.propertyvision.com) or Transac (www.transac.ch)

No time Toulouse

If you don't mind the odd cloud, Toulouse is a convenient second-home epicentre. The city itself is the Paris of the south, and the departments surrounding it—Aveyron, Lot, Tarn, and Tarn-et-Garonne—might not have as many hours of sunshine each year as their southern neighbours, or a coastline, but they certainly have reliable access. 'Toulouse airport is home to Airbus, so it will always be a solid choice for flights, and the TGV stops in Montauban,' says Charles Smallwood. 'People are getting nervous about flights being cancelled, but planes are always going to fly to Toulouse.'

Compared to the south, property in the Toulouse area is cheap. 'This is peaceful,



Latitudes are selling this house in the Drôme Ardeche for €598,500 (020-8951 5155)



This large farmhouse has luxury stables and is 10 minutes from Uzès €1.9m (020-7515 8660)

tranquil rural France,' says Charles Loftie of Loftie Immobilier. 'It has been discovered by the British in the past 20 years, but you can still get very good bargains.' Restored stone houses, with gardens and pools, can cost as little at €300,000, and for less than €2 million you can buy a small *château* or country estate. Since the banking crisis, prices in the area have fallen by up to 20%, according to Mr Smallwood, but there's still interest from British buyers: 'They're usually looking for characterful houses within walking distance of *boulangeries* and bars.'

In the Tarn, a 20-minute drive from Albi, and within easy reach of Cordes sur Ciel, one of France's most beautiful villages, Mr Loftie is selling a *maison de maître* for €940,000 (00 33 56 33 06 024). The house is surrounded by more than 15 acres of land and looks out over a well-stocked lake.

Aveyron, which was, until relatively recently, known as the 'lost valley', contains a part of the Cévennes National Park and the historic castle of Najac. Roquefort cheese originates from the village of the same name, and Millau, the region's largest city,

is home to the world's tallest bridge, Norman Foster's impressive Millau viaduct, which was opened by President Chirac in December 2004. 'It's a good area for horse-riding, fishing and swimming—you're not near the sea, but there are plenty of lakes,' says Mr Smallwood. He is selling a stone house, which is situated just 10 minutes away from Najac, for €365,000.

Tarn-et-Garonne, which includes the towns of Montauban and Moissac, featured in the film *Charlotte Gray* and has a world-heritage site with a well-known Romanesque cathedral. Tarn is renowned for Albi, birthplace of Toulouse-Lautrec, and Chris Patten has a farmhouse near here. Just outside the town of St Antonin, Agence l'Union is selling a stone house with a pool, a vegetable garden and wonderful views, for €485,000.

In the Lot, the shutters have a darker hue, and the stone-built villages appear even sleepier on first sight. But this is *foie gras* country, and gourmands will find an astonishing array of gastronomic restaurants, including La Récréation in a former schoolhouse in Les Arques (where a small museum is dedicated to the famous sculptor Ossip Zadkine), and Le Gindreau at St Médard. Meanwhile, near the riverside town of Cajarc, Agence l'Union is selling a restored house with a swimming pool and summer dining room for €472,000. 🐦