

COUNTRY LIFE

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Holly Kirkwood

FRANCE

The hidden Riviera

Coastal Languedoc combines the joys of viticulture with waterside living in an area that isn't just a playground for holidaymakers, says Holly Kirkwood

THE stock of authenticity is on the rise. As the prime streets of the world's major cities blend into one long parade of Jimmy Choo and Cartier outlets, and some of our most-loved holiday spots have lost their innocence, property buyers are on the hunt for places of character.

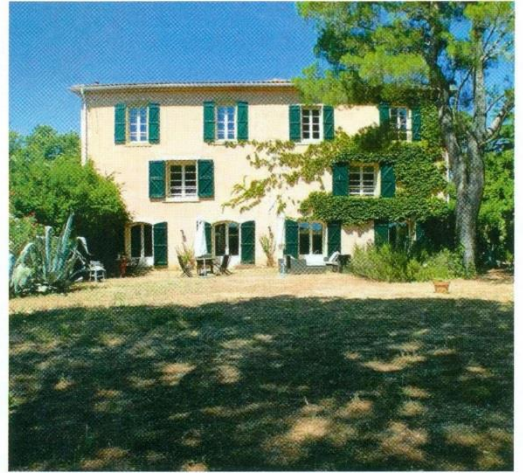
In France, most mere mortals have been outspent everywhere from the Alps to the Côte d'Azur, but, happily, a lesser-known area in the south retains its identity—and this authenticity is a very great part of the appeal.

Head directly west from Saint-Tropez past Marseille, and you find the coastal Languedoc region, which hasn't changed much in hundreds of years. The charming historic centres of Pézenas, Sète, Bouziguès and Marseillan are peppered with wonderful *épiceries*, antique shops and restaurants cooking eclectic local food a far cry from the strict diet of

duck and goats' cheese enforced further inland.

Phil Rees from Home Hunts in the Languedoc often finds properties for English buyers in the area, who are also interested in its character: 'The small wine-making villages have enormous charm and look much the same as they would have a century ago. It's a place that enables British purchasers to fulfil their dream of buying a beautiful old house and bringing it back to life.'

As you bowl along rural lanes lined with plane trees, vineyards stretch in every direction. The Greeks and Romans cultivated wine in this rich soil and the area is the home of Picpoul de Pinet, an inexpensive but delicious white that just happens to match perfectly with the area's other great product: oysters. The Étang de Thau, a beautiful saltwater lagoon that runs from Sète and Agde, serves as a giant nursery for the finest oysters and mussels in the Mediterranean



FOR SALE
€988k

Pézenas

This beautiful *maison de maître* offers more than 450sq m of interior space and extensive bedroom and living accommodation (Home Hunts 020-8144 5501)

and the beach between the lagoon and the sea is one of the loveliest unsung stretches of sand in France.

The Étang de Thau might be pretty—its pink flamingoes are certainly an arresting sight—but it also provides work for a thriving local community that includes generations of shellfish farmers and the fishermen who steam in and out of local harbours. The fruits of their labours are served on starched linen in London or Paris, but the best place to enjoy them is sitting on a wooden deck by the water, with the tang of salt in the air and a glass of something cold in your hand.

It's just this scene that developer Miguel Espada, founder of Propriétés & Co, aims to re-create at his new project, La Baraquette (00 33 4 67 11 87 15; www.proprietes.co.uk). Located on the edge of the charming harbour town of Marseillan, on a spectacular piece of raised land overlooking the sea, he's building a small number of properties right behind their own vineyard.

Designed with indoor/outdoor living spaces and lots of natural light, the architecture is inspired by the pale-coloured stone and ironwork of the pretty town houses. There are three options for buyers: the show-stopping waterfront villas start at £1.25 million and offer 650sq m of space, including a games room, wine cave and underground sauna; one- to three-bedroom patio villas from £406,000; and apartments with large windows to let in the Mediterranean light, with either views of the sea or the new town square, where prices start at £239,000.

The town square itself—Place de la Baraquette—will have shops stock-

FOR SALE **Béziers**
€455k

This three-bedroom, modern Languedoc-style villa is located in a pretty village between Pézenas and Béziers. The property has five bedrooms, open-plan living, a well-equipped kitchen and a great pool area. Leggett Immobilier (00 33 4 68 26 90 71)



'It's a place that enables British purchasers to fulfil their dream of buying a beautiful old house and bringing it back to life'



FOR SALE
€2.69m

Pézenas

Completely renovated, this superb stone *mas* boasts 470sq m of living space, with open reception rooms, and five large bedrooms, plus a separate apartment. The 33 acres of land includes olive groves and AOC vineyards, which can be replanted.

AB Real Estate
(00 33 4 67 36 36 80)



ing local produce, art galleries, cafes, a wine-tasting cellar, a gym and a spa; the boutique five-star hotel will offer 40 suites, fine dining, a cocktail bar and its own spa.

Sustainability is a watchword here: cars will park underground and all owners will all be provided with an electric Citroën Méhari. The economic growth of the local area is also important and the mayor, who hopes to grow his tourism trade, is fully on board. For properties that join the rental pool, Propriétés & Co will maintain the houses, gardens and all the landscaping and buyers will receive a 20% rebate on their pur-

chase from the French Government (essentially, the VAT).

Miguel has lived and worked in the region for many years—he spearfishes with his sons in the lagoon at the weekends—and he has an established track record for sensitive restorations. 'I find this area to be very real and I have a great belief in developing its potential, but in a sustainable way only,' he explains.

He and his wife, Cécile, are currently restoring the magnificent 400-year-old *château* at Seigneurie de Peyrat, which has been in her family for a century, along with its marvellous wine estate. Cécile will be in

FOR SALE
€1.6m

La Baraquette

There will be seven waterfront villas at La Baraquette, each with an infinity pool and a spacious wooden deck to take in the splendid Mediterranean views. From €1.6 million through Savills (020-7016 3740)

charge of the vines at La Baraquette and the cases of wine that owners will receive annually. There will be wine tastings and events on site throughout the year.

With sea views in France at a premium, prices here are easily half of what you would pay on the Côte d'Azur, according to Charles Weston Baker from Savills, sales agents for the development (020-7016 3740). 'The South of France simply doesn't have much seafront land left,' he says. 'Considering this, La Baraquette offers tremendous value.'

He continues: 'With daily flights from London to Béziers, Montpellier or even Toulouse, it's quick and easy to get here and, with properties of this quality, we aren't surprised at the great level of interest we are already seeing in La Baraquette.'

Miguel is experiencing something similar: 'Three of the four first waterfront villas have already been reserved,' he admits.