



House Hunting in the SOUTH of FRANCE

Think of the South of France and you automatically think of glitz and glam – and property prices to match, but, says Louise Taylor, there is more to this region than meets the eye.

The South of France has been in the spotlight ever since Peter Mayle published his best-selling book *A Year in Provence* in 1989, and the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, to give it its full name, or PACA for short, has fans the world over. Its six départements boast more than their fair share of overseas property owners, and with no fewer than four carriers (Aer Lingus, British Midland, EasyJet and Ryanair) now offering flights from Dublin and Belfast to Nice and Marseille, it has never been easier for Irish house hunters to bag a piece of the Provençal pie.

But there is much more to the South of France than Provence. To the west, the neighbouring region of Languedoc-Roussillon is fast catching up in popularity with foreign visitors and house hunters, thanks in no small part to Ryanair, which has been serving the airports of Nîmes, Montpellier, Carcassonne and Perpignan since the

turn of the millennium, and which now offers flights from Dublin to Carcassonne (Dubliners can also fly Aer Lingus to Toulouse, on the Languedoc/Midi-Pyrenees border), and from Shannon to Girona, just over the Spanish border. The secret of Languedoc's attraction is perhaps summed up by Alex Charles of property specialists Crème de Languedoc: "To my mind, Languedoc is the Wild West, the land of opportunity, compared to Provence, where the market is rock-solid and offers no surprises, good or bad."

Both of France's southernmost regions benefit from warm, sunny weather almost year-round, miles of Mediterranean coastline, stunning scenery and a laid-back approach to life, but the comparisons become more marked when it comes to property types and price points. It is the sky-high prices of Provence that have prompted many second-home hunters to turn their sights >>

to more modestly priced Languedoc, although for others, only the kudus and razzle-dazzle of the Riviera will do. Happily, with flights from three Irish cities to five destinations in the South of France, this part of the Med is now accessible to all, whatever their wish list and budget, and it is possible to find homes for holidays, downshifting, investment or retirement in either region.

LANGUEDOC

Laid-back, low-cost Languedoc (also dubbed 'le Midi', and less flatteringly, 'poor man's Provence') has a population of 2.3 million, and about half as many Anglophone residents as neighbouring PACA. It comprises the five départements of Aude, Gard, Hérault, Pyrénées-Orientales and Lozère, but the latter is land-locked and sparsely populated, hence its lower profile, ultra-reasonable prices and decided lack of foreign homeowners.

Bordered by the Pyrenees, Andorra and Spain in the south, Languedoc-Roussillon extends north as far as the Massif Central. Its coastline of sandy beaches stretches 110 miles from the Petite Camargue nature reserve in Gard, through Hérault, Aude and Pyrénées-Orientales, and its sun, sea and sand pull in 15 million tourists every year. Languedoc is also the world's single largest wine-producing region, and its winemakers are quickly gaining a reputation for some of the very best vintages around – another good reason to spend some quality time here.

The weather is warm (it can even be a little fierce, with summer temperatures over the last three years regularly hitting 40 degrees Celsius), and access to Languedoc-Roussillon is improving all the

time. The region's population is growing faster than any other in France; consequently, the government has been pumping millions into the development of the local transport infrastructure. Motorists will really notice the benefit: once you reach French soil (Irish Ferries runs an overnight service from Rosslare to either Cherbourg or Roscoff), the new A75 autoroute connects Paris to the south of France and is largely toll-free, taking drivers painlessly across both the Massif Central and, thanks to Lord Norman Foster's breathtaking Millau Viaduct, the Tarn valley. A speedier alternative is the Ryanair direct flight from either Shannon or Dublin to Carcassonne, from where it is easy to pick up a hire car (pre-booking is advisable) or to Girona (Spain), which is only a short drive from the French border.

Languedoc's key cities of Perpignan, Carcassonne, Nîmes and Montpellier all offer chic shops, fine dining and plenty of cultural diversions, and the fact that Languedoc homes cost significantly less than Provençal pads is a big pull – FNAIM (the association of French estate agents) data for the first half of 2006 shows that Languedoc house prices are consistently lower than those of PACA, and for the most part, they show far more impressive capital growth. Gerry Campbell of MacAnthony Realty comments: "The glamour of Provence will always be attractive to lifestyle clients, while Languedoc offers serious investors some very good opportunities, with excellent potential for capital growth."

Languedoc is noted for its relaxed pace of life and is a popular hideaway for those seeking peace and tranquillity (Tom Haran, founder of Dublin's very first burger bar, the highly successful Captain America's, owns a bolthole in the medieval town of Pézenas). It has its

On the market

Name: Stone village house
Price: €290,575 (incl. all taxes and fees)
Location: Near Cailian, Provence
Property type: Village house
Number of bedrooms: Two
Features: 90 square metres of living space, original features retained, 30 minutes from beach
Agent: VEF



Name: Provençal Bastide stone house
Price: €397,045 (including all taxes and fees)
Location: Near Lorgues, Provence
Property type: Bastide house
Number of bedrooms: Four
Features: Dates back to 1760, swimming pool, mature garden, cellars
Agent: VEF



Name: Villa des Angers
Price: €640,000
Location: Three kilometres from Grasse,
Property type: Villa
Number of bedrooms: Five double or twin
Features: Very large villa, five double bedrooms, three bathrooms, 12-metre private pool, large gardens, stunning view, garage and space for four cars
Agent: Marlborough International Property



Name: Domaine de Fayence, VAR
Price: €500,000 plus
Location: Two kilometres from Fayence
Property type: Villa
Number of bedrooms: Four
Features: Own pool, in gated four-star complex, kids club, restaurant, spa, indoor and outdoor pools, tennis courts, business centre, conference rooms, concierge
Agent: Marlborough International Property

Name: 19th-century Provençal Estate
Price: €797,215 (incl. all taxes and fees)
Location: Near Lorgues, Provence
Property type: Estate
Number of bedrooms: Four bedrooms
Features: Second house, lovely swimming pool, 10,000 square metres of land, large garage, cellars
Agent: VEF



Name: Cévennes manor house
Price: €750,000
Location: Cévennes National Park, Languedoc
Property type: Manor house
Number of bedrooms: Six
Features: Ten hectares of land, large pool, mature garden, barn
Agent: Crème de Languedoc



own ancient language, Occitan, and many towns close to the Spanish border have a Catalan feel. Not all of Languedoc is picture-postcard pretty: at the westernmost end of the coastline, the Côte Vermeille features a large number of 1970s purpose-built resorts, including Argelles-sur-Mer, Gruissan, Saint-Cyprien, Port Baracès, Port Leucate and Cap d'Agde. This is a happy hunting ground for cheap and cheerful resale apartments sure to please sun-seekers, with the added bonus of good investment and rental potential. Prices start at around €85,000 for a basic, one-bedroom apartment, going up to €100,000 for a larger option within a complex with leisure facilities. Although Languedoc property values have risen by 50 per cent in the past five years, house prices here are still a steal for the Irish, with the best value for money found further away from the coast. At the northernmost point in Lozère, a farm with outbuildings and land can be bought for about €175,000. Prices start to climb the closer you get to the Med: within an hour of the sea, stone-built townhouses to renovate can be bagged for around €320,000, or closer to the coast, a three-bedroom apartment in a small town centre location will be priced from around €150,000. City centre pads can offer good capital gains: in the centre of Montpellier, apartments showed 11.2 per cent capital growth for the period July 2005 to July 2006. A renovated studio here currently costs about €200,000 and has great letting potential (with a student population of 70,000, the Montpellier rentals market is particularly buoyant).

According to some agents, up to 70 per cent of those buying in Languedoc are doing so for investment purposes, and almost all purchase off-plan or existing city centre homes with guaranteed

rental income. However, those who buy for purely personal use want to live the French lifestyle to the max and prefer the charm of older, character properties, many of which can be found inland in the winemaking villages of the Aude and Hérault, where traditional stone-built terraced houses sell for around €90,000. Thanks to its wealth of comparatively inexpensive period property combined with excellent links to the rest of Europe, Languedoc is a popular choice with relocators and downshifters. Larger, stone-built properties with land, such as farmhouses and wine *domaines*, can be converted into comfortable family homes with income-generating gîtes on the side; in the Hérault, Lottché Marshall is marketing a renovated farmhouse set in 2.4 hectares with two fully equipped, ready-to-let gîtes, for €780,000.

PROVENCE

Pretty, pricey, and ever popular: for many, the jewel in the French property crown is still Provence. A little larger than Languedoc, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur covers 50,500 square kilometres, and with 4.5 million inhabitants, it is more densely populated than its sister region. For some, PACA represents a quintessentially French dream, complete with charming stone-built character homes, no-expense-spared luxury villas, and jaw-dropping views over azure seas and fields of purple lavender. Inland, the Var and the Luberon attract well-heeled second-home owners (of all the French regions, PACA has the largest number of homes used for holidays and retirement) and the world-famous Côte d'Azur or French Riviera remains the playground of the rich and famous, stretching from ➤



Picture 1: A former mill in Hérault, through James Properties France

Picture 2: Domaines de Saint-Étienne, from Premier Resorts

Picture 3: A typical villa with pool, from Savills

Picture 4: Lavender fields in the Vaucluse



Case study

Dubliners Joe Colwell, 59, and his wife, Sheila, bought a two-bedroom apartment on the French Riviera in March 2006, making a long-cherished dream come true. The property is within a complex at Cannes La Bocca, and will be used regularly by the couple and their four grown-up sons.

Says Joe: "We'd been coming to the south of France on family holidays for years, and I always wanted to live the dream. I went to an exhibition in Dublin out of curiosity, and ended up coming down on a viewing trip to see what was available. We had a budget of €200,000 and wanted to buy a family holiday home near Nice, but none of the properties within our price range really had the 'wow' factor. Then we viewed a nearly new resale apartment in Cannes – even though, at €375,000, it was far more than we'd planned to spend – and realised this was The One. It was in a great location, in excellent condition, within a complex with 24-hour security, golf, tennis courts and two swimming pools. It had everything we wanted and more, so we made an offer and signed on the same day."

The Colwells returned to Ireland and downsized their Dublin home to help fund their French purchase, and today they are adamant they did the right thing. As Joe says: "I'd been planning this for thirty years, so no, I most certainly don't have any regrets!"

Menton near the Italian border to just beyond Cannes.

House hunting in this region is not for the faint-hearted. Real estate in Provence is more expensive than most other parts of France, with a studio flat costing up to €175,000. Those on a tighter budget need not despair, however: to the north, in Haute Provence, the *département* furthest from the coast and nearest the Alps, small rural cottages exchange hands for around €150,000, and for €250,000 you can buy a comfortable family home that would set you back €400,000 in the Vaucluse, and €600,000 in the Alpes-Maritimes. The closer you get to the airports of Nice and Marseille, or the Eurostar rail connection at Avignon, the more of a premium you will pay, so compromise on location, the number of bedrooms or perhaps the pool, and your PACA property search may be more successful.

Planning your retirement in the South of France? Les Senioriales are a collection of purpose-built developments for mature, active people built in prime, secure locations and providing extensive amenities and social activities. A budget of around €290,000 will secure a two-bedroom house in a condominium five minutes from the city of Avignon, complete with use of clubhouse facilities and a heated swimming pool, and although the compact size of such homes might surprise Irish buyers (French homes are measured in square metres of living space and tend to be on the small side; the largest apartments in this particular development measure 85 square metres), the fact that these properties are brand new, low-maintenance constructions makes them very practical for older folk.

Of course, with some serious cash to splash, the Riviera is your oyster. A cool couple of million euros will net a luxury penthouse apartment in Nice with stunning sea views, while inland, a *crème de la crème* character home with infinity pool and manicured gardens in fashionable Luberon will cost at least €3 million. More realistically, Savills is currently selling a restored stone townhouse in the centre of a pretty village in the Luberon, for €245,000, or a villa with pretty garden, gorgeous alpine views and a quiet location in Alpes de Haute Provence for €480,500. If golf is your bag, check out the villas at the Saint Endréol Golf & Spa Resort (a more accessible priced option, with brand new homes selling from €400,000 to €704,000), but if you really want to push the boat (or luxury yacht) out, how about a four-bedroom, three-bathroom



© iStockphoto.com/Canal du Midi
Boats floating in the sun?

hillside villa at Le Cannet, with swimming pool and all mod cons, selling through Savills for €1.22 million?

Of course, even if you buy outside the more sought-after areas you can still rub shoulders with the Beautiful People. And when the novelty of glamour-a-go-go wears off, there are more natural charms to be enjoyed: extensive woodland, rugged mountains and spectacular gorges, not forgetting the pretty fishing villages and fine, sandy beaches dotted along the PACA coastline, particularly in the Var *département* between Hyères and Fréjus-Saint-Raphaël.

Homes here may not come cheap, but in return for your euros, you get the cachet of a Provence address, plus excellent climate, stunning scenery, fine beaches, superb cuisine, and access to some of Europe's most fashionable resorts. Another bonus is the fact that, although Provence's potential for capital growth is outstripped these days by other, less established areas, a property in this most exclusive part of France is never likely to depreciate, and in this will continue to attract holiday rentals and longer-term visitors, year in, year out. ☀

For more property contacts see page 157.

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