

FRENCH PROPERTY NEWS

February 2017

Karen Tait

FPN LOCATION

BLACK DIAMONDS *and* VIN ROUGE

Karen Tait explores the truffle and wine country of Hérault before visiting a new coastal development on the Etang du Thau.

I thought I knew Languedoc-Roussillon (now part of the new Occitanie region) pretty well. My family has a holiday home in Aude so I've visited many times, exploring the beautiful and varied countryside and coastline, and on occasion touring new developments being built there. But a recent trip to the Hérault department showed me that there's always something new to discover.

On all my trips to Languedoc-Roussillon I'd never realised it was an important truffle area. Perhaps that's because it's overshadowed by the more commonly known fact that it's the largest wine-producing region in the world. Maybe because when you say truffles and France in the same sentence, it's usually linked to Dordogne. However, the south-east of France, including Provence, actually produces 80% of France's truffle harvest. The black truffle season runs from November to February, with white truffles in summer, and numerous truffle markets are held throughout the region, including at Uzès, Bagnols-sur-Cèze, Anduze, Clermont l'Hérault and Villeneuve-Minervois.

I'm lucky enough to have been truffle hunting before – not in Dordogne or Provence, but in Champagne-Ardenne. On that occasion we were in a natural wooded environment, with a dog snuffling out the precious 'black diamonds' (historically pigs were more commonly used). This time it was a dog again – the adorable 10-year-old Sammy – but we were on a specially created plantation of green oaks. His owner, the oh-so-chic Elena Anton-



A black diamond – or truffle – is unearthed

Our precious horde of truffles, collected in the morning and eaten for lunch



Marty (how do French women manage to look stylish even in combat trousers and walking boots?) of Mas d'Antonin in Argeliers, offers truffle-hunting tours and olive experiences.

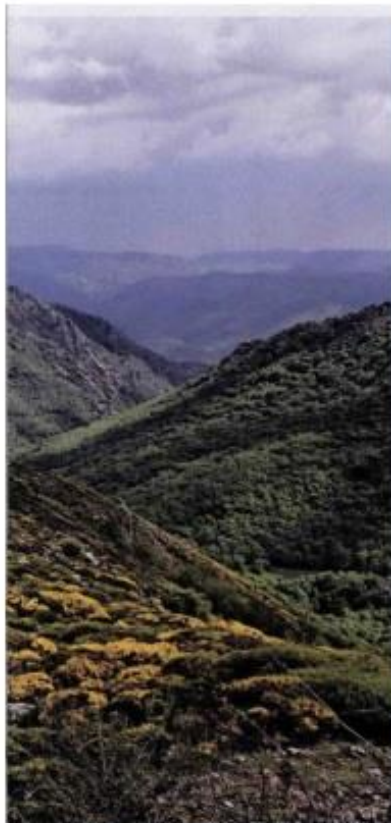
Another difference between my truffle-hunting adventures was that this time we were allowed to dig out the coal-like treasures ourselves. It's fair to say we got very excited at that point, at times abandoning the penknife for our bare hands to scabble in the earth (even one member of the group who had just had an immaculate manicure!).

Heavy rain is the truffle's nemesis, of which there had been plenty before we visited, and at first we feared we wouldn't find enough for our cookery session to follow. Sammy kept rooting out rotten nuggets, not that it stopped him trying to wolf them down before Elena relieved him of them (Sammy received a chunk of cheese in return for every truffle). Luckily he was soon unearthing perfect truffles too, with their distinctive marbling when cut open.

Truffle extravaganza

Our cookery session took place at Seigneurie de Peyrat near Pézenas, where we also sampled some of the estate's wonderful wines – red, of course (the area is known for its Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Mourvèdre, Grenache and Syrah grapes) and white, but also a wonderful rosé, all presented to us by the château's Cécile Espada. I've tried a few cookery courses but this was so relaxed and informal. The truffle was the star, but in contrast to gastronomic truffle dinners I've experienced, this was kept delightfully simple.

Elena's gingham-cloth-covered basket revealed slabs of bread, sandwiched with truffle butter. After drizzling her own olive oil over the top, these were grilled and served sliced up with little slithers of smoked duck – I can't begin to describe how delicious it was. We also sampled local saucisson and Lucques olives with our wine, all standing around the château's kitchen table, chatting away



We abandoned the penknife for our bare hands, scrabbling excitedly to unearth the precious black diamonds



LOCATION **FPN**

Properties are available in the Chateau de la Redorte from €145,000 – or you can stay in the luxurious hotel rooms



The character-packed rooms of the Couvent d'Hérépian



Cheese course anyone? Brie filled with mascarpone and truffles



and helping out where we could. There's something very special about enjoying a hedonistic overload of truffles in such a casual, friendly way.

We then moved to the formal dining room, with its grand carved fireplace and soaring windows. The setting may have been elegant but the repas remained delightfully simple – the best scrambled eggs I've ever tasted (loaded with truffle, of course) and then a cheese course, including a huge brie sliced in half and spread with a mascarpone and truffle mix. And then to top it all off, we could grate or slice as much truffle as we wanted over the top! Now back at home, I'm suffering from serious truffle deprivation...

Heritage preserved

We were accompanied through all of this by Miguel Espada, husband of Cécile and developer of several projects throughout the region via his company Propriétés & Co. He has

always loved the business of property, having worked on building sites before moving on to the financial world, and then returning to his first love of bricks and mortar (or more likely, stone and mortar in this part of the world).

His latest development, La Baraquette, is only in the early stages (more of that later) but the quality of his work is easy to see at some of his previous projects. The evening before our truffle hunting, we stayed at Château de la Redorte close to the Canal du Midi between Carcassonne and Béziers. This project involved the grand but rather rundown château being transformed into a beautiful hotel, with elegantly understated suites, spa, wine-tasting 'tunnel' and restaurant – where we enjoyed local vintages and a wonderful truffle-themed dinner.

In the gardens, new houses have been built surrounding a swimming pool – the last few have just been completed, these are for sale from €145,000 to €365,000. I was particularly

pleased to see the end results of this project having visited it at the start and reported on it in FPN's September 2011 issue.

The evening following the truffle extravaganza, we stayed at Couvent d'Hérépian, one of Miguel's earlier Languedoc projects and one of my favourite places in France to stay (this was my second visit). The converted 17th-century convent manages to combine understated luxury with an almost spiritual tranquillity, from the chic bedroom suites to the vaulted spa and underground bar, while the stone staircases, simply lit with tea lights on the steps, radiate history and reverence. Stunning mountain views complete the whole experience.

By way of contrast, our evening meal was in L'Artichaut, a local restaurant that was more Hard Rock Café than quintessential French bistro – a pleasant surprise, with some of the best meat in France on the menu (from cattle on the Aubrac plateau not far away).

FPN LOCATION

Lagoon life

Next morning we headed to the coast and La Baraquette. This 6.2ha project on the shores of the Etang du Thau is Miguel's most ambitious to date. Due to complete in 2019 (the first stone was laid last October), it is different to the previous ones in that there is no historic building at its centre. Instead, an extension to the port village of Marseillan will be built, with around 60 properties and a newly planted vineyard between the sea and the residences.

This working vineyard will give homeowners a unique insight into life as a winemaker. It will be planted and managed by the Seigneurie de Peyrat, along with a larger vineyard close by, and buyers will not only be purchasing their property, they will also receive a share in the vineyard and the wine produced from it.

The gently sloping site ensures panoramic sea views from all parts of the development, and there'll also be a traditional square with boules areas, shops and restaurants, as well as a five-star hotel, all showcasing the best of local products. La Baraquette is just a few minutes' walk from the port of Marseillan itself, which is lined with restaurants and is home to the Noilly Prat distillery.

We couldn't visit Marseillan without sampling this fine vermouth, beloved of Ian Fleming, James Bond's creator, especially in his martinis. The distillery tour is a real eye-opener, revealing just enough of the botanical ingredients that go into Noilly Prat without giving the secret away. The odours emanating from the vast barrels were mouth-watering – I could wear it like a perfume – and the tasting afterwards didn't disappoint. Local oysters were washed down with the 'original dry' and 'extra dry' (only available in Marseillan and America) while foie gras accompanied the 'ambré', and local macarons and chocolates went with the 'rouge'.



Top: From the barrel to the glass – don't miss a tour of the Noilly Prat distillery when you're in Marseillan

Above: The pretty port at Marseillan

Below: Luxury villas at La Baraquette will have infinity pools overlooking the development's own vineyard and the Etang du Thau



Oysters from the Etang du Thau are said to be the finest in France – this area really is heaven for gastronomes. It's also a particularly interesting location for a new property development



DID YOU KNOW?

'Baraquette' is the word for traditional seafront shacks used as holiday homes





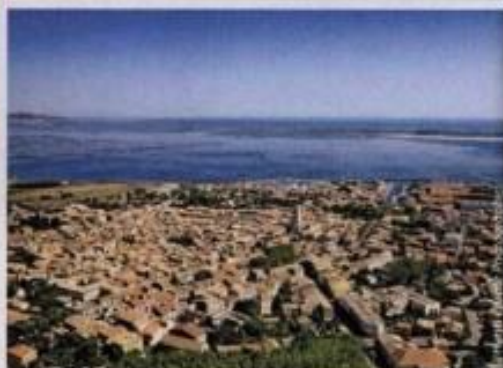
The south of France is your oyster

The oysters farmed in the Etang du Thau are said to be the finest in France – this area really is heaven for gastronomes. It's also a particularly interesting location for a new property development. With much of the Mediterranean coast already built up, especially to the east along the Côte d'Azur, not to mention busy and expensive, Hérault offers a more tranquil, authentic experience, with working wine villages and fishing ports as well as holiday homes. Despite the simple pleasures of the area having long made it popular with French holidaymakers, it has been relatively unknown – the secret is out now though.

Even at these early stages, the development is winning accolades. Anthony Peregrine of *The Sunday Times* called it "the most ambitious of all Mediterranean holiday developments", while Charles Weston Baker, Director of Savills, said it was "one of the best developments I have seen in many years" and Bruno Zermati, Director of Sotheby's Realty, said it was "probably the first world-class sustainable seafront resort in the south of France".

Sustainability is at the heart of La Baraquette, which will be a car-free community. At the 'front' of the development, directly behind the vineyard, a string of luxury villas will look out over the vines and the peaceful waters and oyster beds of the Etang du Thau, the largest of the coastal lagoons along this stretch of the Mediterranean. Private infinity swimming pools will make the most of the view, while 'light, spacious, natural and local' have been the guiding principles of the designers at Barcelona-based Slow Life Architects.

The development will also offer apartments, which take their inspiration from the unique poet ambience and its elegant *maisons vigneronnes*, and patio villas, whose solid stone walls and rooftop terraces evoke the spirit of Languedoc farmhouses. With delivery expected in 2019, prices are from approximately €252,000 for apartments, €740,000 for patio villas and €3.9m for the waterfront villas.



Top: Oyster beds on the Etang de Thau
Above: The village of Marseillan

In the vicinity

Visit Marseillan and you probably won't want to leave. But if you do fancy exploring a little further afield, there's loads to see and do. Just along the coast, Sète is a fascinating harbour town with plenty of shops and restaurants, as well as being a major port on the Mediterranean. At the other end of the Etang, Agde is a popular seaside resort with a busy marina; it's also home to Europe's largest naturist village.

Less than 20km inland from Marseillan, the market town of Pézenas is popular with holidaymakers and British househunters, with its narrow cobbled streets and lively squares lined with boutiques and restaurants. If you fancy city life, Montpellier is just 48km away, while in the opposite direction Béziers is just 30km. It's an easy area to access too, with airports at Montpellier, Béziers, Carcassonne and Toulouse.

Despite all its attractions, Languedoc still lags behind Provence when it comes to property prices, so it's a great option for buyers with smaller budgets who want all the attractions of the south of France. However, with chic developments such as La Baraquette coming onto the scene, added to all the attractions of the Mediterranean coast and vineyard-clad countryside, Languedoc is no poor neighbour. In fact, it's all the richer for its simple pleasures. ■

labaquette.com
chateau-redorte.com
couvent-heropian.com
depeyrot.com

