

As other markets crash, British buyers return to our old favourite, France. Even with the strong euro, there are bargains to be had, says **Helena Frith Powell**

Can anything put the British off buying property in France? You might think the strong euro – currently at €1.25 to the pound – would do the trick, but while new developments in Spain are collapsing on a daily basis, investors in French property are seeing no such disasters. If anything, the market is buzzing.

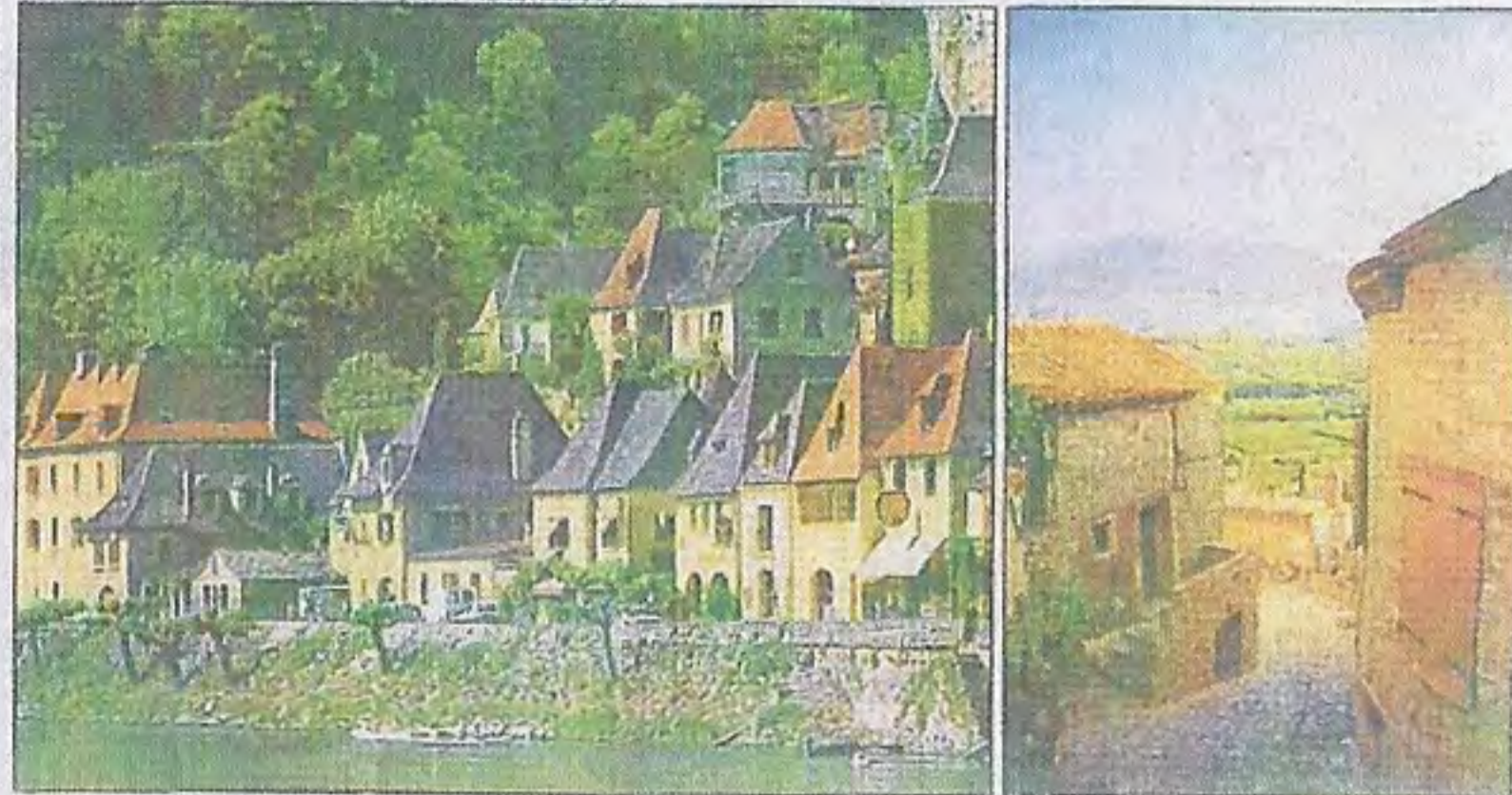
Stuart Baldock, managing director of the Riviera branch of Property Vision, a property-search company, says he has never been busier. Charles McCloud, who runs Prestige Riverside, which develops properties on the Lot, says that sales are stronger than ever. What, then, is going on?

In times of trouble and insecurity there is always a flight to quality, so our old favourite, France, is an obvious choice. Despite the centuries-old antagonism, we feel secure in France. We know French habits and understand their ways – we may be irritated by them, but we feel at home. And, importantly, we know there are enough potential purchasers just like us keen to buy our home should we ever choose to sell.

"People feel really comfortable with France," says David Frere-Smith, managing director of French Property Links, a property portal with more than 17,000 listings across the country. "In addition, we are finding they are gravitating towards the old, old favourites such as Provence and the Dordogne."

While prices have been rising steadily throughout the country since the late 1990s, the strong euro is having a two-fold effect that can only be good news for British buyers. First, agents are encouraging vendors to be realistic about selling prices if they want to

David Rixon/The Travel Library, Art Karabchi/Etsy, David Hughes/PhotoLibrary



Above, the Dordogne, a favourite haunt for Brits. The price is right in the Pyrénées-Orientales, in Languedoc, above right

target the British market. Second, there is less competition for properties, as some of the more speculative purchasers have fallen by the wayside. So, where should you look?

PROVENCE

If it is a rare breed of Englishman who thinks about moving to France without considering Provence and the Côte d'Azur. For the first time in history, however, we are no longer the largest single group of foreign buyers: the Russians have taken over, especially at the top

end. This means British buyers are having to look further inland.

"People are edging westward, away from the overcrowded and expensive Côte d'Azur, in search of something more French," Baldock says. "As they do so, the areas they are moving into are becoming less seasonal. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence has almost become a multi-Aix-en-Provence, humming all the way through from spring to Christmas. The quality of hotels and restaurants in the area has improved beyond recognition over the past five

years or so – as, of course, have the wines of Provence."

Hervé Hosen, who owns and runs Provence Dream Property, based in Aix, says he has seen a slowdown in what he terms the middle market as a result of the rise of the euro. "The low price range, €200,000-€300,000, is dynamic," he says, "as is anything over €800,000 and running into the millions. The medium range, however, has been badly affected."

Some parts of Provence are not as popular as others, mainly due to the

landscape, but this makes them affordable. The countryside between Saint-Émy and Avignon is a popular hunting round, as is the Luberon.

Valerie Lucien, an agent with Actuel Immobilier, an agency based in Saint-Émy, says it is possible to find a large farmhouse there, ready to move into, for about €800,000. "That is a lot less than in other areas of Provence," she says, "but the region is less popular because people like to see olive trees covered with olive trees. Apart from the price, the other upside is that there are fewer people."

If it's olive trees you're after, then the village for you is Maussane-les-Alpilles, nestled at the foot of the Alpilles mountains, south of Saint-Rémy, which has 7,000 of them. You can pick up a medium-sized village house there for less than £475,000.

GASCONY

Otherwise known as Little Britain, the Dordogne is synonymous with Brits settling in France. In some villages, they outnumber the locals, so, if your idea of the good life is cricket matches and a plentiful supply of Jaffa Cakes, this is the place for you. The southern Dordogne is

budget flights from the UK to many regional airports, including Biarritz, Bordeaux, Pau and Toulouse.

"Like many areas in France, Gascony has seen a steady rise in property prices, but it still represents good value for money," says Fiona Bennett of Property Gascony, an estate agency based near Pau. She is marketing a 19th-century farmhouse with attached converted barn and swimming pool for £237,500; a fine stone *maison de maître* with beautiful outbuildings and gardens is for sale for £600,500.

"We are finding both French and non-French sellers to be far more realistic about prices," she says. "Sales are brisk, while growth will occur only when the level of supply starts to shrink, which is bound to happen, so now is a good time to invest."

THE DORDOGNE

In southern France, the Languedoc region still represents good value for money, with many of the charms of Provence and the Riviera, but at a lower price. Are agents suffering because of the strong euro? "Personally, I have seen no difference at all," says Simon Kerridge, of Languedoc Property Finders, who was an estate agent in London for 13 years before moving to France in 2001. "If anything, the quality of the buyers we're seeing is going up."

Bargains are to be found away from the sea and in the hills, where the stunning landscape – pine trees, rivers, winding mountain roads, isolated churches and hilltop villages – is reminiscent more of Scotland than France.

"The Languedoc is still considerably cheaper than Provence, with property prices 30% lower on average," says Alex

traditionally the most popular and most expensive; if you venture towards the north, you can pick up a bargain (though this may be because it gets rainy north of Brantôme).

Antony Mair, who runs Ribérac Property, says that now could be a good time to buy: the market in the Dordogne is heavily dependent on British buyers, who are thin on the ground because of the strength of the euro and the property slowdown at home. "We had one buyer pulling out of a sale and the price being renegotiated," he says. "There is much more scope for this kind of thing at the moment, especially if the seller is repatriating funds to the UK. And in a slow market, you can find bargains if you come across someone who needs to sell in order to move back to the UK."

LANGUEDOC

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Charles, of Crème de Languedoc, a property website. "In fact, the further from Provence you go within the Languedoc, the more prices tumble. The Aude and Pyrénées-Orientales départements are cheaper than Hérault and Gard, and in areas away from the coast, beautiful three-bedroom villas with gardens and pools can be found from only £200,000."

Garrigae, an agency that operates throughout the south of France and the Alps, has found a way to soften the effects of the stronger euro: it allows buyers to pay their 10% deposit at last year's more advantageous exchange rate. "Most of our customers put in a deposit of about 10%, then mortgage the balance in euros," says Karl O'Hanlon, the managing director. "The guaranteed rental income the buyer gets on the property is also in euros, so it is essentially a euro transaction, bar the deposit."

Property Vision, 00 33 4 93 92 79 35, www.propertyvision.com; Charles McCloud, Prestige Riverside Developments, 0845 054 6464, www.prestigeriverside.com; Provence Dream Property, 00 33 4 92 54 72 69, www.provence-dream-property.com; Property Gascony, 00 33 5 62 08 37 62, www.propertygascony.com; Ribérac Property, 00 33 5 53 90 52 88, www.riberacproperty.com; Crème de Languedoc, 020 8123 7172, www.creme-de-languedoc.com; Garrigae, 00 33 4 67 11 87 19, www.garrigae.com

WHAT A GAUL
More on the market across La Manche at timesonline.co.uk/frenchproperty

Gallic calm



Gascony: Near Lectoure, on the Gers and Tarn-et-Garonne border, this five-bedroom, 450-square-metre renovated farmhouse has four acres and a pool. For sale for £795,000 with Simply Gascony; 00 33 5 63 94 48 34, www.simplygascony.com



Languedoc: In Villeveyrac, this 190-square-metre house has three bedrooms, a walled garden and a wood. For sale for £518,000 with Languedoc Property Finders; 00 33 4 67 00 11 71, www.languedocpropertyfinders.com



Provence: A 15-minute drive from Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, this renovated hillside house has four bedrooms, a pool and several terraces and old fountains. For sale for £1.15m with Actuel Immobilier; 00 33 4 32 60 18 62, www.immobiliersaintremy.com



Dordogne: This 15th-century mill house, near the village of Monflanquin, needs renovation. It has four bedrooms and a separate one-room studio. For sale for £255,000 with French Property Links; 01243 539119, www.frenchpropertylinks.com

Despite the old antagonism, we feel secure in France

The green hills and lavender fields of Provence



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