



# It's a corker!

by Liz Rowlinson

## Languedoc offers fine wine, sunshine and plentiful Provencal charm – without the rip-off Riviera prices

**P**ERHAPS it doesn't have the razzle-dazzle and pizzazz of the star-studded French Riviera, but neighbouring Languedoc is just as charming.

Dubbed the 'thinking man's Provence', the region tends to attract bookish types after a restful retreat.

Compared to its boisterous neighbour, Languedoc, which rubs shoulders with Spain, is laid-back and fancy free.

Famed for the prodigious quantities of wine it produces, Languedoc-Roussillon (to give it its full title) shares many of Provence's attributes: 300 days of sunshine a year, beautiful beaches and a rich history.

But its long sandy beaches get a lot less crowded in the peak summer months.

'It also remains more French than Provence,' says Penny Zoldan, of French property specialist Latitudes. 'Provence has become extremely cosmopolitan. But Languedoc offers a traditionally French experience.'

Indeed, tourist figures are rising healthily, swelled by interest in the impressive cliff-top Cathar castles

and the two UNESCO world heritage sites: the medieval town of Carcassonne, and the Canal du Midi with its lively waterside bistros.

What's more, property prices are about 30 per cent cheaper than in Provence, a fact which attracted web designer Alex Charles to the area. He moved to Languedoc-Roussillon from Provence in 2006.

After settling in the village of Roujan near Beziers, he has set up a tourism and property-finding website, *Creme de Languedoc*, with his business partner, Greg Taylor.

'Part of the reason the area is so attractive is the fact we are spoilt for local airports,' says former Londoner Alex, 37. 'And Beziers is definitely up-and-coming thanks to new investment. There are plenty of new restaurants and an expanded airport which Ryanair is flying to from Bristol from March 31.'

According to the FNAIM (French Federation of Estate Agents), Beziers prices went up by 38 per cent in anticipation of Ryanair's arrival. Regional prices rose by twice the

national average rate (3.8 per cent) in 2007 and you can still get two-bedroom period apartments in the centre of Beziers from £110,000 to £150,000.

Better accessibility has played its part and there are now five airports spaced throughout the Languedoc region. These are well-served by low-cost airlines.

The TGV from Paris takes only five hours and the new A75 motorway from the French capital has reduced journey times by car.

**T**HIS all amounts to an attractive proposition for second-home owners. But where should you buy? 'If you're looking for the typical Provencal lifestyle, but on a smaller budget, then look west of the Rhone river – which divides the two regions,' says Tricia Mason, of French property specialist VEF.

'The landscape is exactly the same for 60 miles on either side of the river, but you pay £375,000 for a four-

bedroom farmhouse in the eastern-most Gard *departement* of Languedoc and upwards of £600,000 in Provence,' says Mason.

The Gard is also close to the Camargue – the triangle of protected lakes and salt marsh in the Rhone delta. You don't get many farmhouses in the 20-mile-deep coastal zone, but look behind the main A9 highway, in wine-producing country, and there are plenty of rural properties.

In the Aude *departement*, the Minervois, you can get a farmhouse for £188,000 – only an hour from the coast. This area is Mason's top tip.

'The area around Carcassonne is very popular with British buyers,' says Zoldan. 'If you move into the Herault, around Beziers and Montpellier, a third of buyers purchase new-build.'

Alternatively, if you like the idea of living in a magnificent 18th-century chateau, French developer Garrigae has a unique project, offering furnished apartments from £185,000.

The conversion of the Chateau de

la Redorte Estate & Spa is being overseen by its owner, the Countess Dominique d'Artois. While the chateau will contain four penthouses, two outbuildings will be converted into a further 38 apartments, which are being sold on a leaseback basis.

Investors can rent their apartment out for an annual return of 4.66 per cent; or you may wish to use the facilities yourself. The chateau is in the village of La Redorte with beaches just half an hour away.

Beyond the wine-growing band is the Haute Languedoc, which rises into a rugged landscape of mountains and gorges.

If you want something buzzy, the most expensive cities in the Languedoc are Montpellier and Perpignan – the best places for buy-to-let.

Last year, the FNAIM published a profitability league table – with surprising results. Rental yields of between 3 and 4.5 per cent a year for Provencal Cannes, Nice and Antibes compare poorly with Languedoc's Beziers (5.8 per cent), Narbonne (5.7 per cent), Montpellier (5.6 per cent) and Perpignan (5.3 per cent).

'In the regional capital of Montpellier, where a studio will cost around £135,000, studios and one-bedroom apartments always get snapped up first,' says Mason.

'But the city is the best bet for investors,' says Zoldan. 'Many international companies are moving in, so there's a growing workforce.'

If you're after a coastal buy-to-let, studios on the coast near half-Catalan Perpignan start at £90,000. The westernmost Pyrenees-Orientales *departement* also has much to offer. The beach resorts of this stretch are relatively modern – so they can lack character – but there are gems, such as the sophisticated port of Collioure.

Home owners in this area have Perpignan or Girona airports to choose from, and the new TGV links Perpignan and Barcelona in 50 minutes.

■ LATITUDES (020 8951 5155, latitudes.co.uk); CREME de Languedoc (020 8123 7172, creme-de-languedoc.com); VEF (020 7515 8660, vefuk.com); GARRIGAE (0800 520 0614, premierchateau.co.uk).



Moving: Locals Alex Charles and Greg Taylor

Pictures: GETTY

## ON THE MARKET ... and solid stone



**Traditional house, Herault, £240,000**  
IN A hamlet near the medieval town of Lodeve, this four-bedroom, two-bathroom home also comes with garage, pool and covered terrace. Montpellier airport is an hour away.

■ LATITUDES (020 8951 5155, latitudes.co.uk).

**17th century house, Pyrenees-Orientales, £263,000**  
THIS restored stone house is in the quaint village of St Marsal, near the popular town of Ceret and breathtaking mountain scenery. It has four bedrooms, stables and a garden.

■ VEF (020 7515 8660, vefuk.com).



**Farmhouse, Herault, £317,500**  
THIS restored mas is in an excellent condition, with three bedrooms, a pool, 8,000 sq m of land and a separate workshop. Close to the town of Bedarieux, it is 30 minutes from Beziers.

■ CREME de Languedoc (020 8123 7172, creme-de-languedoc.com).