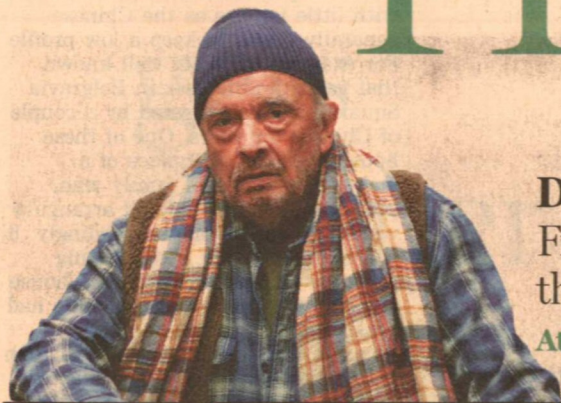


PROPERTY • INTERIORS • ARCHITECTURE • GARDENS

House & Home



David Bailey

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Grasse gets greener

France property Zoe Dare Hall on a 'rough diamond' on the Côte d'Azur that is regaining its lustre

Grasse is where the Côte d'Azur began – the town to which English, Russian and Belgian royalty flocked to build Belle Epoque mansions in the late 19th century and, in so doing, put southern France on the winter sun map.

The town is considered the perfume capital of the world – an accolade it has held for three centuries – and it produces most of the natural scents consumed in France, an industry that rakes in €600m a year. Throughout its history, however, Grasse has experienced rise and fall.

While the Côte d'Azur has expanded around it, with the honeypots of St Tropez, Cap Ferrat, Cap Martin and Cap d'Antibes able to command heart-

stopping prices for waterfront homes, Grasse lost its lustre during the 1970s.

Jill de Moleyns, a local resident and a negotiator for Riviera Estates, says: "It was where everyone wanted to come to because of its perfume reputation. Then the local council built a lot of cheap housing for the wave of north African immigration and people started to look elsewhere.

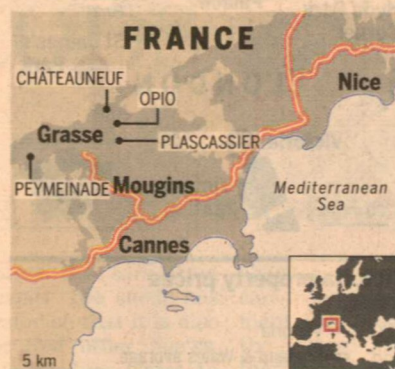
"But Grasse is getting back to the city it used to be. As the oldest part of the Côte d'Azur, Grasse has a fantastic, safe historic centre and the houses have great character."

The other appeal is price. At the lowest end, you can find one-bedroom apartments overlooking Grasse from around £120,000, and sea-view four-bedroom houses can be found in sought-after suburbs such as St Jean and St Mathieu for around £1m. Moleyns is selling one of Grasse's classic Belle Epoque mansions, the 13-bedroom Villa Norah, for €3.5m. The property was built in 1897 by a wealthy English family who were drawn to the area made famous by Queen Victoria's stay at the neighbouring Grand Hotel six years earlier.

Home Hunts, an upmarket property search agency, also reports renewed interest in Grasse's chateaux, with the town's profile having been given a boost by the reopening of the original train line from Cannes in 2005 and the recent regeneration of its main shopping area.



A wisteria-covered farmhouse, once owned by Edith Piaf in Plascassier, near Grasse, is on sale for €5.9m



Amy Bault, **Home Hunts'** manager on the Côte d'Azur, has recently sold three houses in Grasse for around €1m to British, American and Norwegian buyers. "Overseas buyers like Grasse's history and authenticity," she says. "It's a rough diamond and many people don't see beyond the few ugly blocks when they drive past, but the town is being spruced up, the ugly buildings demolished, and property is about 30 per cent cheaper than in neighbouring villages."

If the town seems too busy – Grasse's perfume factories, shops and museums attract 2m visitors a year – then the immediate countryside, which includes medieval hill villages such as Mougins, popular with expat buyers, and Opio, has instant appeal. The area was home to the late writer

Buying guide

Pros

- 20 minutes from Nice airport
- Property is around 30 per cent cheaper than in villages such as Mougins and Châteauneuf de Grasse
- Grasse has some large estates tucked away down its country lanes

Cons

- The city itself can be congested
- Few can claim to love the 1970s tower blocks – though some of these are now being demolished
- If you love the Côte d'Azur celebrity super-yacht and St Tropez scene, you probably won't like Grasse

What you can buy for...

- **€100,000** A one-bedroom apartment in a converted townhouse
- **€1m** A stone-built three-bedroom townhouse in Mougins

Contacts

- **Knight Frank**
www.knightfrank.com
- **Estate Net**
www.estatenetfrance.com
- **Home Hunts**
www.home-hunts.com
- **Riviera Estates**
www.riviera-estates.net

Marcel Pagnol, whose portrayals of bucolic, prewar Provence include *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*.

Brigitte Bardot was similarly entranced by the countryside around Grasse. In the late 1950s, while Pagnol was writing his tales of slow, sun-dappled life in the region, Bardot lived next door in Le Castellet, a historic stone house overlooking the village of Peymeinade, which is on sale for €9.5m through Knight Frank.

In Bardot's day, it was a simple, rustic house, built on Roman remains with a 19th-century tower and a small outdoor pool. Its Swedish owners, both filmmakers, have extended it into a 12-bedroom property, including a separate guest house, vineyards that produce 1,000 bottles of wine a year, a hammam and two infinity pools with views across the valley. Its owner, Peter Buranen, who has turned the Bardot pool into an orna-

'The village boys used to climb the trees to catch a glimpse of Brigitte Bardot swimming in her pool'

mental pond, says: "The village boys, including the local electrician, who still works on the house, used to climb the trees to catch a glimpse of Bardot swimming."

Fredrik Lilloe, chief executive of Estate Net France, says: "You would never know most of the grand country houses around Grasse were there as they are tucked away down quiet country lanes. That appeals to this clientele." Lilloe is marketing one of the most spectacular estates in the region, Manoir des Sources, an 1880s manor house set in 72-hectare grounds that include a river and natural springs for €19m.

Even in a prime location that sees global demand, however, vendors have to be realistic and often have to reduce their asking prices for a sale. In nearby Plascassier, a wisteria-covered farmhouse, previously owned by Edith Piaf, set in a few secluded acres with a tennis court, is on sale through Knight Frank for €5.9m, reduced from €6.9m. In Châteauneuf, the vendor of a rustic home, part of a former monastery, with views reaching to the bay around Cannes, has dropped the price by 20 per cent to €6.85m, also through Knight Frank.

According to Estate Net France's research, while prices of luxury property on the Riviera fell by 5 per cent in 2011, transactions rose by 16 per cent, partly due to better prices and a need for a safe investment.



The 13-bedroom Villa Norah is on sale for €3.5m