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The Var's a rising star

Rocky coves, peaceful villages and unspoilt coastal views are typical of the Côte Varoise. It's where those in search of the authentic Riviera are now buying, says Anna Tyzack

ALTHOUGH Saint-Tropez in the South of France is widely regarded as the place to be seen, the coastline to the west of it attracts homeowners who would rather not see anyone at all. The French president is one such person. Since 1968, Fort de Brégançon, a small island off the coast near the 12th-century village of Bormes-les-Mimosas, has been the presidential summer retreat—Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife, Carla Bruni, enjoy early-morning swims in the deserted emerald sea.

'It's much less crowded than the Côte d'Azur, with beautiful natural scenery, pretty fishing villages and empty beaches'

Miss Bruni fell in love with this unspoilt stretch of coast long before they married. Her house on nearby Cap Nègre is surrounded by the parasol pines, eucalyptus and Barbary

figs that populate this part of the French Riviera. According to Tess Sheeran, Savills' representative in the area, this western part of the Var coastline between Saint-Tropez and Marseille—the Côte Varoise—is becoming increasingly popular with British second-home buyers who would once have looked to the Côte d'Azur. 'It's much less crowded, with beautiful natural scenery, pretty fishing villages, and empty beaches,' she says. 'Yet you can still be based within striking distance of Saint-Tropez.'

Traditionally, second-home owners settled on the eastern part of the Var coastline around Cannes in order to be within 40 minutes of the airport and railway station at Nice. For those looking for good value and peace and quiet nearby, Jonathan Gray of Beauchamp Estates recommends the coastal villages to the west of Cannes, such as Le Trayas, Agay and Boulouris-sur-Mer, which are within easy reach of Nice airport. 'For €10 million—the price of a beach *cabaña* on Cap d'Antibes—you can buy whatever house you want here,' he says. In the village of Le Trayas, a historic

FOR SALE €8.5m **Plage de Cavalière, Le Lavandou**
A newly refurbished 19th-century *château*, 900 yards from Cavalière Beach, with landscaped gardens, an eco swimming pool and large terraces. *Sheeran Serre/Savills: 020-7016 3740*

three-bedroom villa boasting panoramic views is on the market for €2.3 million through Beauchamp Estates (00 33 493 94 45 45).

The coast west of Saint-Tropez was considered more difficult to get to, but in the past 20 years, the arrival of the TGV to Marseille and Toulon, and numerous flight routes to Toulon-Hyères and Marseille airports have opened the area to buyers. According to Nicola Christinger of Home Hunts, who has helped several buyers previously based on the Côte d'Azur to find homes west of Saint-Tropez, it's now almost easier to reach the western villages of the Var coast than those closer to Nice. Her clients appreciate the understated charm of the area and the absence of any 'bling'.

'When you arrive, there's much less traffic. In places such as Cap d'Antibes, even if you have a sea view, it could take you half an hour to get to a beach,' she explains.

Visitors to the Côte Varoise discover a rugged and rocky coastline, with red-coloured coves, small creeks and endless sunny days with clear skies. 'By the time tourists started to come to the area, planning rules had become more stringent, preventing developers from cramming the waterfront with apartments,' says Mrs Sheeran. Instead, there is an abundance of individual properties with beach access and their own west-facing gardens, enjoying spectacular sunsets over the sea. In certain areas, it's still possible to find a house with a sea view for less than €1 million.

The highest prices on the Côte Varoise are found in Saint-Tropez and its surrounding medieval villages, such as Gassin, Ramatuelle and La Croix Valmer, where Joan Collins owns a home. Those who can afford to buy here can enjoy the best of two worlds: they're part of a 'proper' French village, yet a stone's throw from the buzz ➤



FOR SALE €3.55m **Golf de Valcros**
A contemporary, four-bedroom property in the heart of a gated *domaine* that boasts an international golf course. The house features a large kitchen, sitting room with a fireplace and indoor and outdoor pools, plus a landscaped garden dotted with olives and palms. *Home Hunts: 00 33 9 70 44 66 43*

France

of Saint-Tropez and the beach clubs lining Pampelonne Bay, says Emma Rhys of Leggett Immobilier, who owns a second home surrounded by vineyards near the polo club at Gassin.

These communities have remained largely unspoilt, with winding streets, authentic weekly markets, butchers, bakeries and an enchanting array of Belle Epoque beach houses and Provençal stone *mas*. On the beach near Gassin, a four-bedroom villa is on the market for €5.975 million with Home Hunts (00 33 970 44 66 43), and at Ramatuelle, a four-bedroom home with attractive gardens and an infinity pool is on the market for €4.9 million with Knight Frank (020-7629 8171).

Over the hill from La Croix Valmer, into the lesser-known part of the Var coastline, prices drop considerably. 'The roads are quieter, but the surroundings are every bit as beautiful,' comments Mrs Sheeran. Rayol Canadel, a small resort with a marina and a sandy beach sheltered by pine woods, is a good place to begin a property search. Buyers should explore Cap Nègre, a few miles further along the coast, and venture inland to the pretty village of Bormes-les-Mimosas and its jumbled, brightly coloured houses with views of President Sarkozy's Fort de Brégançon.

Le Lavandou, a lively seaside resort at the foot of the Massif des Maures, has an international marina, upmarket boutiques and restaurants, as well as some of the most beguiling beaches in France, stretching 7½ miles along the bay and looking out over the Iles d'Or—the 'golden' islands of Porquerolles, Port Cros and Le Levant. 'The outlook over the islands epitomises this part of the Riviera,' says Miss Christinger. 'It's much more interesting than the flat seascape of the Côte d'Azur.'

FOR SALE €3.5m **Bay of Saint-Tropez**
Situating below the village of Gassin and surrounded by vineyards, this six-bedroom house features large living spaces, pretty gardens and a wooden-decked pool. There's also a separate annexe. *Leggett Immobilier: 0870 011 5151*



FOR SALE €5.5m **Cap Bénat**
On a private, gated *domaine*, a fully restored and architect-designed home with six bedrooms overlooking the sea towards Le Lavandou. Pool, gardens, boat house and direct access to the sea. *Sheeran Serre/Savills: 020-7016 3740*

Her favourite beaches are Aiguebelle, where Humphrey Bogart, Christian Dior and Winston Churchill spent holidays, Cavalière, which has a sailing club for catamarans, windsurfing and dinghy sailing, and St Clair, renowned for its private beach clubs and waterfront restaurant, aptly named Bistr'eu Ryon. 'We often go there for lunch and take a boat trip out to the islands in the afternoon,' Miss Christinger advises.

Among the most valuable pieces of land in the area is Cap Bénat, a gated *domaine* with 24-hour security, where homes have manicured gardens with citrus and palm trees, and access to private beaches and tennis courts. 'It's the Var's equivalent of Cap d'Antibes and Cap Ferrat,' says Laetitia Hodson of Chesterton Humberts. A plot of building land with staggering sea views is currently on the market for €1.5 million, and an architect-designed villa is for sale at €5.5 million through Sheeran Serre (00 33 6 80 64 03 75) and Savills (020-7016 3740).

Over the past 18 months, Miss Hodson



FOR SALE €4.9m **Ramatuelle**
A strikingly contemporary, five-bedroom villa a short distance from all the action at Pampelonne beach, which is within a gated community. The decking area around the pool wouldn't look out of place at a fashionable nightclub in Ibiza. *Hugo Skillington (00 33 4 94 44 10 44) and Knight Frank (020-7629 8171)*

has noted increasing demand from British buyers for homes on *domaines* along the Varoise coast. Contemporary properties on a private gated estate adjoining the 18-hole international golf course at Valcros, in the hills behind Bormes-les-Mimosa, appeal to golf lovers who wish to be based near the coast. Home Hunts is selling a five-bedroom contemporary villa with views over the islands on a secure and private gated *domaine*, a five-minute drive from the golf course (00 33 9 70 44 66 43).

Heading east, the stretch of coast between Toulon and Hyères, two unprepossessing seaside towns, is among the most beautiful on the Riviera. Mrs Sheeran recommends buyers look to the port of Carqueiranne (popular with kite surfers and famous for its beaches and *bouillabaisse*) and Mr Gray advises that buyers look to nearby Le Pradet, a sprawling village with wild coves and sandy beaches.

At the far westerly end of the Côte Varoise, the former shipyard of La Ciotat, ➤

France



FOR SALE €12.5m **Brignoles**
Le Canadel is an exquisite 18th-century property with all the Provençal trimmings: six bedrooms, staff accommodation, a pool, a tennis court, a vineyard and about 425 acres. The gardens have been described as among the most beautiful in the world. *Knight Frank: 020-7629 8171*

an attractive port with a Renaissance-style town hall, is also worth considering. 'It used to be really working class, but it's been smartened up over the past few years,' explains Mrs Sheeran. At this end of the coast, prices tend to be higher, due to demand from the Marseillaises who buy weekend houses in and around the village of Cassis, (a smart Saint-Tropez lookalike, where the Bloomsbury Group owned a home), and the traditional resort of Bandol, which was made fashionable by Aldous Huxley, Thomas Mann and Marcel Pagnol, long before Brigitte

FOR SALE €2.7m **Bandol**
A Provençal *mas* situated in a commanding position, with panoramic views, spacious living areas and two independent apartments surrounded by a garden with olive trees and a beautiful pool. *Home Hunts: 00 33 9 70 44 66 43*



FOR SALE €2.1m **Rayol Canadel**
Situating between the Cap Nègre and Saint-Tropez, this seven-bedroom villa looks over the islands of Porquerolles and Port Cros and enjoys direct access to the beach. There's a large garden with eucalyptus, olive and lemon trees, parasol pines, mimosas, a pool and a terrace. *Sheeran Serre/Savills: 00 33 6 80 64 03 75/020-7016 3740*

winter months and quality properties aren't staying on the market for long.'

For some buyers, the 'unexplored' Var will always lack the cachet of other parts of the Riviera. But this, according to Miss Christinger, is also its main selling point. 'It's the rustic charm and natural beauty of Côte Varoise that appeals to my clients, not the bars or shops. It's not cliquey or crowded and you won't necessarily find the *Daily Mail* for sale in your local *tabac*. This, in my opinion, makes it an ideal location for a beach house.'