

FRENCH PROPERTY NEWS

INSIDE:
Find your
dream
home

The biggest and best UK guide to French property | Issue 270 | August 2013 | £3.99

Var from the madding crowd

The beautiful Provençal town of Hyères

From the ground up

Our indispensable
guide to choosing
a building plot

Down on the farm

Agricultural
architecture
in Aquitaine

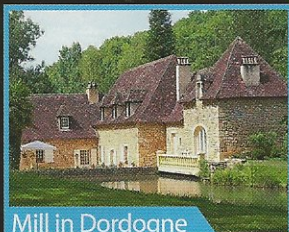
Cheap 'n' chic

Welcome to Paris'
20th arrondissement

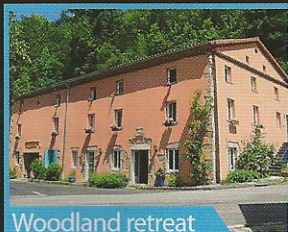
Above board

Expat B&Bs with several
strings to their bow

**Our pick
of the best
properties**



Mill in Dordogne



Woodland retreat



Thatched cottages

www.complexfrance.com



Expert legal & financial advice + Location features + Real life stories

A higher calling

The southern town of Hyères and the islands just off its coast were a favourite with Queen Victoria. **Karen Tait** finds out why they're just as appealing today

My husband's a generous man. He has bought me many wonderful gifts. But he has never bought me an island. I ponder this as I look out over the turquoise sea and gloriously white sandy beaches of the isle of Porquerolles in the south of France. This isn't entirely idle daydreaming, as I've just been told that in 1912 a wealthy adventurer called François Joseph Fournier bought the island for his second wife (for those interested in prices, it cost him 1,000,000,010 francs). Now that's what I call a wedding gift!

Porquerolles is the epitome of a dream desert island. The tropical feel is somewhat of a surprise, bearing in mind that it's just off the Provençal coast. It forms part of the Isles d'Hyères group, referring to the town of the same name on the mainland.

There's a good chance you've not heard of Hyères, despite it being Queen Victoria's sunshine getaway of choice. In fact, it is the original Riviera resort and was also visited by Napoleon, Leo Tolstoy, Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad.

It is also known as Hyères-les-Palmiers, due to the 7,000 palm trees planted all over the

commune. In fact this number is sadly dwindling owing to a pesky caterpillar, but the authorities have put in place a damage limitation programme. Palms are said to have been in the area for some 400 years, so it would be a shame for them to disappear now.

They thrive thanks to the balmy climate – 300 days of sunshine a year – along with a wide variety of

fruit, vegetables, flowers, trees and shrubs, including some exotic species.

The southernmost town of the Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur region, in the Var department, Hyères sits between sea and wooded hills (Maurettes and Maures), some 52km from St Tropez to the west (122km to Cannes), while in the other

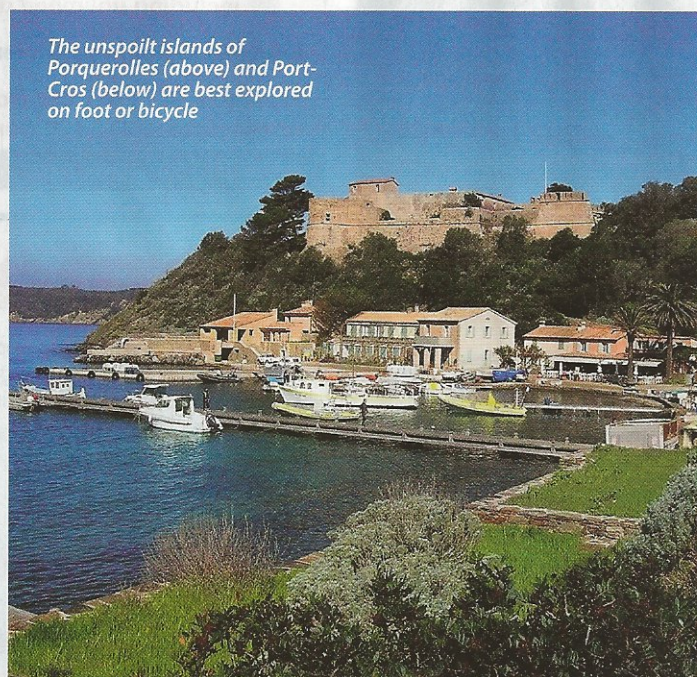
direction, Toulon is under 20km distance although Hyères is a world away from this busy city.

Set amidst typical Provençal landscapes of lush pine forests, salt marshes and sandy beaches, Hyères and the islands are popular with the French, especially in summer, although they're relatively unknown by the British. Hyères is much more than just a seaside resort though; it has a charming old town, a peninsula sheltering a wide range of wildlife and, of course, the islands.

THE OLD TOWN

The medieval quarter is built on a hillside overlooking the sea. You enter the maze of twisting cobbled streets via the ancient Porte Massillon – there are various arched gateways, along with charming old houses, many painted in typical Provençal pastels with contrasting shutters and doors, and ancient stone door and window frames.

Lined with cafés and restaurants, the main square, Place Massillon, is the place to sit and watch the world go by. Enjoy a spot of lunch after a hard morning's shopping in the daily market or in the many shops along the ancient streets. On a hot day,



The unspoilt islands of Porquerolles (above) and Port-Cros (below) are best explored on foot or bicycle

© Hyères Tourisme

an ice cream, *pression* or *verre de rosé* is just the ticket. The square is dominated by the 12th-century St-Blaise tower (also called the Tour des Templiers, from its association with the Knights Templar). Several churches date from this time too, including the Collégiale St Paul.

There is a vantage point at higher levels, from where you can admire the Provençal plains and sparkling Mediterranean. The Porte Pensicola leads you even higher, where the underlying rock joins the streets and walls. Here you'll find the Parc St Bernard (just one of the town's several parks), a large terraced garden with a view across the rooftops (I snapped this month's cover photo from here). Behind the park lie the ruins of the château that once defended the town, while at the very top of the park the Les Palmiers district is home to the Villa de Noailles – this Modernist house with Cubist gardens was a meeting place for the artistic set of the 1920s and is well worth a visit.

There are traces of ancient civilisations too, including the

There's a good chance you haven't heard of Hyères, despite it being Queen Victoria's sunshine getaway of choice

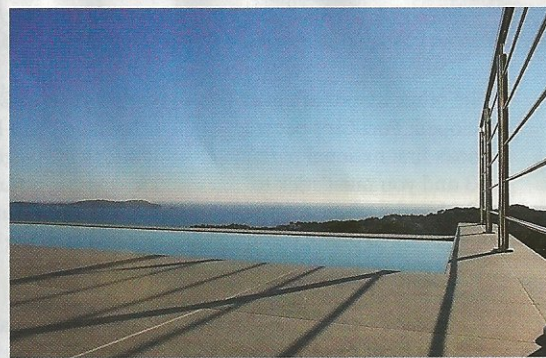
ruins of the Greek town of Olbia, dating from 4BC, as well as Roman remains. The 'modern' town, between the *vieille ville* and the seaside resort, has wide tree-lined boulevards, some with double rows of palms, and Victorian villas and hotels.

The seaside resort and peninsula have the usual hotels, campsites, restaurants, tourist shops and attractions (including Magic World fun park), in a setting of salt marshes (once an important source of income for the area) and umbrella pines. The busy marina is also lined by restaurants.

The Presqu'île de Giens peninsula is almost an island itself, 'connected' to the mainland by a sandbar and the Route de Sel, bordered by salt flats and marshland which attract rare and beautiful wildlife and plants,



On the hillside above the village of Carqueiranne, this contemporary villa enjoys breathtaking views towards the islands of Porquerolles and St Mandier. The five-bedroom house was completely remodelled in 2012 with only the exterior walls remaining untouched, and there is also an independent apartment. It's on the market for €1,730,000 (www.home-hunts.com)



including pink flamingos, herons and egrets, rare orchids and sea lilies. Here you'll find the village of Giens, a small port, the Tour-Fondue and the ferry connecting to the islands.

THE GOLDEN ISLES

Just off the point are the tiny islands of Petit Ribaud and Grand Ribaud; picturesque but not

accessible. Porquerolles is the largest island, but at around 7.5km by 1.5km it's still intimate in scale, with neat little beaches backed by eucalyptus and pine trees. The only village, next to the harbour, was founded in the early 19th century. Having bought the island in 1912, Fournier (the bountiful husband) built the hotel, Le Mas du Langoustier, still in existence

today, and planted 450 acres of vines and hundreds of trees.

In 1971, the French state bought most of Porquerolles. It enjoys protected status, hence the landscape remains unspoiled, with oak, olive, fig and juniper trees, lavender, rosemary, rock rose and myrtle as well as other Mediterranean flora. Building here is all but forbidden. ▶



From above clockwise: A two-bedroom apartment on the ground floor of this Art Deco style building close to the centre of Hyères, €325,000; a contemporary five-bedroom 'mas' with pool and 7ha vineyard, just 10 minutes from the beaches of Hyères, €3,900,000; a rare opportunity to purchase a 290m² plot close to the town centre, with permission for a four/five storey villa (as seen in artist's impression) and pool, €636,000 (www.frenchestateagents.com)

The other islands are even less developed; Port Cros became France's first national park in 1963 and you must stick to marked paths when exploring, while Levant is part given over to the French military and part naturist centre.

The good weather enables year-round outdoor activities and there's plenty on offer from the usual swimming and sailing to diving, tennis, golf, hiking in the hills, horse-riding, cycling and other sports. For over 40 years the town has hosted the Semaine Olympique de Violes, attracting more than 1,000 competitors.

For those who prefer less rigorous activities, the town also has a casino, botanical garden and zoo, not to mention glorious beaches for sunbathing. There are several festivals each year, including the International Festival of Fashion and Photography and Jazz Festival. Restaurants abound, serving Provençal specialities as well as dishes with a North African influence, while the wine tends to be Côtes de Provence. There are local vintages too – I enjoyed a wine-tasting at Château de la Clapière, a *domaine* with a difference (the first time I've seen wine bottles lavishly decorated with Swarovski crystals!).

Access could hardly be easier – Toulon-Hyères airport is located between Hyères town centre and the beach, served by Ryanair from Gatwick and Cityjet from London City, as well as flights to Paris and

other parts of Europe. Hyères is on the main Paris-Lyon-Nice railway line, there's a good bus network for getting around without a car, and the A570 *autoroute* starts at the edge of the town centre.

AT HOME IN HYÈRES

With all these attractions on offer, and located on the ever desirable Riviera coast, it should come as no surprise to hear that prices in and around Hyères are on the steep side. To counter this, the highly popular holiday destination offers great potential for those with a mind to renting their property out.

As is typical on the Med, villas are plentiful, often modern and luxurious with a pool, and frequently painted in Provençal

The majority of buyers are attracted by the natural beauty of the coast, as strict laws protect the environment

colours. There's a good choice of apartments too, especially in the town and resort, some on developments with shared facilities, while Victorian villas and ancient houses in the old town come up for sale less frequently. A little inland you can find traditional stone farmhouses.

"Average property prices are €3,500 and €3,750/m² for apartments and houses, with a top range of around €6,600/m² for the Giens peninsula or the best sea views," says Helen Shackleton, an agent with Leggett Immobilier

who lives on the Riviera. "The town is divided in two although there are no strict lines; there is the town itself with many medieval buildings and streets, and the beach areas. For a two-bedroom apartment, on average you're looking at €200,000 without garage/parking for the town centre and €350,000 in beach areas, while for a four-bed house with pool, it's more like €625,000 in good areas, and €1m plus for properties on the coast.

"In terms of Var, Hyères is above average in price terms, as you would expect for a coastal town, but if you look at the coastal towns of PACA then Hyères has a more reasonable price bracket – for example, Le Lavandou to the east

has an average of more like €4,000/m², Bandol or Sanary-sur-Mer on the other side of Toulon are similarly higher. Ramatuelle is €7,500/m², St Tropez €10,000/m², while Cannes or Antibes average €5,500/m². A justification for the lower prices is perhaps that it is a town rather than a village and set on a plain rather than right up against the mountains so has a greater supply of properties.

"Properties on the islands are rare; the planning regime is very strict. Of them all, Porquerolles is more likely to have opportunities.

There was a scheme of apartments on Porquerolles about 18 months ago, which was the first new project in many years, with prices around €10,000-12,000/m² or €790,000 for a two-bed duplex."

Although the Var coastline is not as well known by Brits as further up the Riviera in Cannes and St Tropez, Nicola Christinger, Home Hunts' Provence manager, comments that "the larger local towns such as Hyères and Toulon have acted as a magnet in recent years because of the increasing accessibility via the TGV and smaller airports, which have opened up the region to buyers and tourists.

"Despite easy access from the UK, this coastline never feels overcrowded and rather than having to fight for a place to put your towel on a beach, the choice of intimate sandy coves is a novelty for those lucky enough to have already discovered this area," she explains.

"The majority of buyers are attracted by the natural beauty along the coast, as strict laws protect the environment so there are still many forests and nature parks which have been preserved.

"Hyères benefits from a microclimate which is really attractive to buyers – each time I bring clients to this part of Provence they say it is like a breath of fresh air, with simply stunning scenery. It is only when you have visited that you understand its reputation as 'Var from the madding crowd!'" ■

www.hyeres-tourisme.com