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Surfer shores

Why blow a fortune on a holiday home in a prime seaside spot, only to find crowded beaches and British accents everywhere you go? **Liz Gill** finds the best bargains on Europe's hidden coasts

What could be better than a bolt hole in the sun, just a dawdle from the sea and the tempting local eateries – not to mention a wallet-friendly taxi fare from the airport? Every summer, while queuing for the budget flight, thousands of us turn our thoughts to the idea of a second home abroad. Sadly, the reality of prices in the fashionable hotspots, even after the recession, is enough to put most people off.

If you're truly hankering after an affordable investment, why not look to Europe's hidden coasts? These are areas that, although well loved by the locals, have yet to turn the head of the traditional British second-homeer.

The locations – from the windy Spanish coast to the

beet of Italy – may be less well known, but they are also less expensive. Another plus is that there's even more space for you to knock about on the beach or get the best table for lunch. In this instance, less is definitely more.

SPAIN

Maresme, Catalonia

If you want hot sun and *matutans* R&R, then forget the clichéd costas. For beautiful countryside, good beaches, fine golf courses and lovely little villages that retain a sense of community – along with bottles of a more potent local spirit – you should be looking north of Barcelona.

Alex Vaughan, the British co-founder of Lucas Fox estate agency in the cosmopolitan city, is puzzled as to why the Maresme coast, only 20 minutes on the train from Barcelona, has so far escaped British attention. "Wealthy Barcelonians have

always had weekend homes here, but it's somehow fallen through the gap," he says. "It's ripe for discovery."

David Shrimpton and Stuart Davis, both 48, barely knew the Maresme coast before they bought a home in the area 12 years ago, after Davis's job as director of customer services for a bank brought them to the area. They purchased a six-bedroom house high above the village of Alella, with views down to Barcelona and over the Mediterranean.

They are now selling up for €1.295m (£1.125m, lucasfox.com) so they can move back to the UK, but love the area so much, they plan to buy a flat.

"We don't want to give up our ties with the place," Shrimpton says. "It's a real joy living here. Every village has its own independent character. There's no mass tourism. I think the Catalans want to keep it a secret."

Maresme is not particularly cheap: Lucas Fox's average sale price last year was €1.6m, while villas elsewhere might range from €800,000 to €3m. Flats typically go for about €400,000. Yet because it falls within the Barcelona commuter belt, and there hasn't been the same craze for big developments as further south, prices have held up during the crisis.

Costa de la Luz, Andalucía

Every Briton has heard of Trafalgar, says Glyn Lewis, founder of Andaluz Homes, but few make the connection with the Costa de la Luz, off which the battle was fought.

Yet buyers are discovering this unspoilt – and admittedly seriously windy – corner of Andalucía, midway between Cadix and Gibraltar. "We don't look here tend to be quite discerning," Lewis says. "You get lawyers, teachers, musicians – people who want something different."



"It's still an area where English is not widely spoken. Tourists are welcome, but they haven't overrun or abused the place. In fact, it's almost like being in a time capsule. It's truly Spanish, totally unspoilt."

In the decade since Lewis set up his agency (andaluzhomes.co.uk), he has seen the market soar and slump. He believes it has bottomed out and could be on the rise again. You can snap up a one-bedroom flat in the village for €65,000, or €320,000 for a beachside one with a shared pool. Villas typically range from €120,000 to nearly €900,000, while period houses in a traditional *pueblo blanco* ("white town") can be had for €100,000.

FRANCE

Var, Provence

Since Nicola Christinger, Provence manager of the property-search company Home Hunts (home-hunts.com), relocated to this area with his family in 2006, she has seen a growing number of British buyers flying to smaller local airports or using the TGV. Why? "They're following in the footsteps of the French



themselves, for whom the area has long been a favourite destination. President Hollande's holidays on the Cap Nègre, and Carla Bruni's family have a home near Alquebelle (as does Tracy Emin). "These are places for those who want to be private, rather than show off," Christinger says. New buyers are beginning to enjoy larger towns such as Hyères and Toulon. "People think they can't afford the south of France, because they only think of the Riviera," Christinger says. "But this part of the coast, between St Tropez and Marseilles, is up to 25% cheaper without any need to compromise. "It has a real wow factor. The scenery is stunning, with lots of intimate sandy coves

"The sea is just as warm and the climate just as good as in St Tropez!"

The Côte de Vermeille, left, is as beautiful as it is affordable, grab a lunch table outside Café cathedral, on the Costa de la Luz, right, the Maresme coast, below, is an alternative to the clichéd costas

16 Photos: Top: Richard Suter (Dexter Rupp)

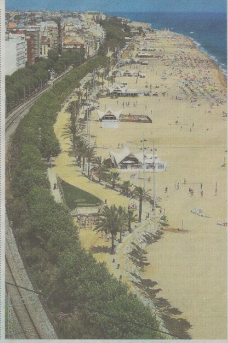


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Further inland is the Massif des Maures national park, which means there are strict building laws to prevent it becoming too developed. And prices here haven't been inflated by overindulgent foreign buyers.

You'll typically pay between €300,000 and €700,000 for a small villa without a sea view in towns such as St-Cyr and Sanary; if you want one with a sea view on the prettiest beaches, between Le Lavandou and Cavalaire-sur-Mer, you're looking at €1.2m-€2.5m.

Côte de Vermeille, Pyrénées-Orientales, Belgium, Scandinavian and German buyers have long appreciated this southwest coast's value for money, but the area that runs from Argelès-sur-Mer down to the Spanish border is relatively unknown to the



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