



## Rachel Johnston escapes the festive frenzy at a blissful restored *mas* in Languedoc

Weeping willow, jasmine and mimosa: not your average Christmas decorations, but perhaps a welcome respite from the sometimes laboured glitz of tinsel and baubles at this time of year. Everyone benefits from an injection of sunshine and nature in the winter months, and if you're green-fingered or just love being outdoors, this wonderful old home in Gard, Languedoc-Roussillon will be intoxicating.

Its eight-acre gardens are a fragrant sprawl of plants in their thousands, including around 300 roses all irrigated by the property's own wells. The walled pool garden is full of exotic sub-tropical species and, in summer, banks of rosemary and lavender fill the air with heady scent. What's more, everything cultivated here is entirely *bio*, and the house itself is a characterful, blue-shuttered beauty.

### Past and present

Owners Tim and Pippa Forster stumbled upon the property quite by chance 13 years ago, while staying with a friend near Uzès. "Its history fascinated us," says Tim. "With Roman roots, it was a sheep farm 600 years ago and grew in the 17th century – with the prosperity of the village – into one of the area's major producers of silk."

Incredibly, despite its age, the Forsters are only its third owners. Their predecessors bought it in a semi-derelict state and made part of it into a holiday home in 1970, and Tim and Pippa completed the project with a major programme of new roofing, flooring, wall

strengthening and insulation. The original sheepfold and granary have been lovingly restored and let to date as self-contained gîtes sleeping up to 12, separate from the main house with their own parking area and entrance through the orchard. The original silk farm, Le Mûrier (The Mulberry Tree), is a romantic hideaway for couples and each dwelling has its own private terrace.

Tim and Pippa have welcomed visitors into the *mas* itself on a bed-and-breakfast basis too, offering a sumptuous bedroom with organic cotton bedding and locally handmade toiletries. They have also run cookery days, the spoils of which are often eaten in the spectacular internal courtyard with its Roman-tiled roof and worn stone steps, one of the couple's favourite features.

The rest of the house is equally attractive, with a *salon* of 100m<sup>2</sup> and a south-facing terrace leading from the dining room. Upstairs are three bedrooms and three bathrooms, the master suite boasting a jaw-dropping 60m<sup>2</sup> balcony of its own, and the large *grenier* is waiting to be renovated.

### Natural habitat

The Forsters enthuse particularly about the local area, which is like the Provence of Peter Mayle's books as it was before becoming popular and crowded. "The location sold it for us: yards from a pretty, lively village in unspoilt countryside and within a short drive of some of the most wonderful towns in France. We couldn't resist it. The beaches of

the Mediterranean can be reached in an hour and we are so well connected, with four regional airports nearby and the TGV linking us direct from Avignon to Paris."

Situated in the foothills of the Ardèche and Cévennes mountains near the border with Vaucluse, the pretty village in question is medieval Lussan with its laid-back charm and amenities, while Uzès, with its famous twice-weekly market, is a 15-minute drive away. The region is famous for cycling – the Tour de France comes by most years – and getting to know the towns of Nîmes, Avignon and Montpellier are a given living here.

The property is being sold as a private house but with all the trappings to continue the gîte business if desired: linen, fixtures and fittings, furniture (for the interiors and for the 11m heated pool), garden equipment, five bikes and even a flock of rare-breed British hens that wanders through the aromatic herb garden and lays delicious eggs. The Forsters' website, contacts and existing advertising will also be passed over.

"Romantic weekend breaks, cookery classes, painting holidays – the possibilities are endless here," remarks Nicola Christinger-Grant of Home Hunts, the agency marketing the property. For €1,500,000, what a Christmas present you'd have for yourself, your family and supremely lucky guests. ■

Home Hunts  
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