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CELEBRITIES and the South of France go together like summer and a chilled glass of rosé, but for the super-cool, get-away-from-it-all class, west is best. Just 30 minutes from St Tropez but a million miles from its high-wattage razzmatazz – welcome to the Var.

Trendsetters David and Victoria Beckham led the way to the region in 2003, buying a grand, 19th-century house in Bargemon, a small medieval village hidden among wooded hills.

Oscar-winning actress Helen Mirren followed. The three-bedroom home she has owned for 10 years in Saint-Paul-en-Forêt is newly on the market for £464,500 through HomeHunts.

Mirren's mas – a traditional Provençal farmhouse – has exposed stone walls and is surrounded by olive trees and vines in large grounds. The star of *The Queen* and *The Audience* uses one side of the farmhouse for living, while the other side is ripe for renovation.

GREAT-VALUE PROJECTS

"People often don't realise that they can buy something half an hour from the coast in an authentic, peaceful village with lots of character and get so much more for their money," says Catherine Meyer of HomeHunts.

"There is plenty of choice at every price level, with renovation projects relatively easy to find."

Meyer, originally from the UK, lives with her property developer husband and four children in Saint-Paul-en-Forêt and says it is the natural beauty and ease of life that appeal.

"We are in a quiet location 45 minutes from Nice airport and 35 minutes from Saint Raphaël, where even small villages are fairly cosmopolitan," adds Meyer. "The mairie [town hall] has lists of local activities such as cooking, tennis clubs and dancing, and there's an international school in Grasse. For us, it was easy to fit into the local community."

Traditional sights and smells of Provence are easy to find – the fountains in shaded squares, tall, thin cypress trees, dense lavender fields and colourful local markets. An hour away there's skiing at Gréolières, 10 golf courses and excellent antique markets.

PERFECT TIME TO BUY

The combination of property prices back to levels last seen in 2006, France's record-low mortgage rates and the weakness of the euro against the pound has created the perfect storm for British buyers, says Meyer. "After seven years of slowdown,



From £14,250 a week: La Bergerie, a luxurious, staffed stone house with six bedrooms and spacious gardens

Follow the stars to find peace in Provence

Taste the brand Beckham lifestyle with a great-value bolt hole in historic, rural Var just 30 minutes from 'St Trop'. By **Cathy Hawker**

owners are agreeing to interesting price reductions," she adds. "Many opportunities have appeared, including wonderful authentic stone mas and bastides [Provençal manor houses] that previously commanded high prices. The top end of the market is 20 to 30 per cent lower today."

Popular medieval hilltop towns and villages include Fayence and

pretty Seillans, both an easy drive from the hiking and watersports on undeveloped Saint Cassien lake. HomeHunts has a three-bedroom townhouse with shutters and a garden in Fayence for £291,500 and a two-bedroom, 1,829sqft house and garden in Bargemon for £270,300. An attractive 19th-century mas with scope to expand in Fayence with a pool, mature gardens and six bedrooms has been reduced from £1.23 million to £726,800.

A four-bedroom renovated mas near Seillans in 11 acres is £877,860, while a covetable house in Fayence recently renovated to the highest standards by an English family is on the market at £1.71 million.

■ HomeHunts: visit home-hunts.com – 020 8144 5501

■ **£464,500:** Oscar-winner Helen Mirren is selling her traditional stone farmhouse, far left, set in beautiful, expansive grounds and surrounded by olive trees and vines in the Var region of Provence



LONDONERS' GETAWAY

Laura and David Rich-Jones searched Provence for five years before they found their perfect place in the Var. Laura spotted it, then excitedly rang her husband, who approved. The London-based couple bought a large plot at **Terre Blanche**, a 741-acre golf, spa and leisure resort in Tourrettes.

The scrolled, cast iron gates of Terre Blanche swing wide to a peaceful, exclusive estate of secluded mansions. Opened in 2004 with two championship golf courses, a David Leadbetter golfing academy and Europe's largest spa, the resort is half as big again as Monaco, sitting just 30 minutes from the coast and 45 minutes from Nice airport.

"I knew immediately it was the place to build our house when I saw the views," says Laura. "Unlike the coast, this area doesn't change pace too much from summer to winter and provides a perfect getaway from the madness by the sea."

Through their company, Richstone, the couple used their 20-year experience of UK property development to create La Bergerie, a dreamy stone mansion with six bedrooms and generous private gardens, in which there is a glamorous, creamy marble

pool, barbecue dining room and colonnaded, cool escapes for the hottest summer days.

Pared-back interiors with linen fabrics and furniture collected from Sweden, Belgium and Maison & Objet in Paris mix with paintings bought in nearby Saint Paul de Vence and prints by French graffiti artist, Jef Aérosol.

It all sounds ultra-sophisticated – but it is also a much-loved family home where Laura and David enjoy big summer holidays with their children and friends.

Completed in 2012, La Bergerie is let, fully staffed, throughout the year from £14,250 a week, including food and drink. Previous guests include groups of friends, families, and stars escaping the paparazzi during the Cannes film festival who use Terre Blanche's helipad.

"Some of our guests bring their own piano or a private DJ for house parties," says Laura. "There are plenty of lovely villas in the South of France, but very few that are expertly staffed and take extra care. We can arrange wine tastings, cookery lessons, art tours – whatever guests want."

■ **La Bergerie:** bergerieterreblanche.com – 020 8878 5333



Trendsetters: ex-England soccer star David Beckham and his fashion designer wife Victoria launched the A-list love affair with the Var, buying a sprawling mansion in the medieval hill village of Bargemon, above, in 2003

Impeccable: at La Bergerie, owners Laura and David Rich-Jones created a colonnaded barbecue dining room for guests – welcome shelter on scorching Provençal summer days

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