

COUNTRY LIFE

Buying a slice of Saint-Tropez

FRENCH RIVIERA

Property prices in France's iconic summer resort and along the Riviera are significantly more affordable than this time last year.

Cathy Hawker investigates what's for sale

Saint-Tropez and the hinterland

Whether you view it as Europe's most illustrious playground or an overcrowded melée, Saint-Tropez has been consistently en vogue since the 1950s. That was when director Roger Vadim used the quiet fishing village as the backdrop for his latest film starring a little-known French actress. That starlet was Brigitte Bardot, the film was *And God Created Woman* and, between them, they made Saint-Tropez a global brand.

Today, despite repeated rumblings about standstill summer traffic and the proliferation of designer boutiques, Saint-Tropez continues to enthrall. The Place des Lices, shaded by magnificent plane trees and populated by elderly, round-shouldered *boules* players, still charms and Club 55, the seafood restaurant on gorgeous Pampelonne Beach created in 1955 as a canteen for Vadim's crew, remains the place to be seen.

'Saint-Tropez offers a vibrancy and vitality that you don't find anywhere else on the Riviera,' says Nic Brennan of Savills (020-7016 3740; www.savills.co.uk). 'Yes, people moan about

how busy it is, but that buzz is the reason why they are there. Cap d'Antibes or St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat have similar property values, but are quieter. Buyers choose Saint-Tropez because they want to sit outside Café de Paris and have that view over the port.'

That unique atmosphere kept the town at the top of its game last year, with several notable high-ticket sales, says Mr Brennan. It remains popular, but the high rollers spending multi-millions on statement homes have largely given way to a more traditional core market.

'So far this year, buyers are mainly British and northern Europeans spending between €750,000 and €3 million,' Mr Brennan states. He highlights a refurbished two-bedroom apartment in Les Parcs de Saint-Tropez, a quiet gated community close to the town. For sale at €2.6 million, it has a separate two-bedroom studio, a garage and a quiet communal pool and grounds.

'British buyers are focused on value and, for them, the favourable exchange rate has made a significant difference,' he adds. 'Even with the slight softening of sterling against the Euro

recently, prices remain 20% more affordable than a year ago.'

The well-reported woes of the Euro have been instrumental in persuading buyers holding other currencies that this is a good time to spend. Mark Harvey of Knight Frank (020-7861 1553; www.knightfrank.com) confirms that, compared to a year ago, demand has risen threefold for American buyers and is up 30% from British clients. 'It's evident that a weaker Euro has helped create a more compelling and attractive investment backdrop,' says Mr Harvey.

He continues: 'Demand is growing in Mougins, Valbonne and St Paul de Vence and is returning to locations such as La Garde-Freinet and the Var generally, which were badly affected over the past two years.'

These are the prime towns and villages of the hinterland, the area behind the coast from Nice to Saint-Tropez and most lie within an hour of Nice airport. They offer traditional Provençal homes and a compelling French atmosphere along with more space, greater privacy and better value than along the coast.

East

This best-of-both-worlds appeal explains the enduring desirability of the Valbonne area, including Opio, Roquefort-les-Pins, Châteauneuf de Grasse and Le Rouret, says Tim Swannie of Home Hunts (020-8144 5501; www.home-hunts.com). 'These villages provide a rural lifestyle combined with easy access to the coast within 20 minutes. They have lovely restaurants, excellent local markets and the people are warm and friendly.'

In this region, expect to pay about €1 million for a modern villa with three or possibly four bedrooms in a gated community with a communal

FOR SALE
€735k

Lac de Cassien

A six-bedroom villa in the eastern Var with very private gardens and views over Fayence and Tourrettes. Lac de St Cassien is within 10 minutes, Cannes is 30 minutes away and Nice within an hour. Leggett Immobilier (0870 011 5151)

FOR SALE
€995k

Cotignac

A well-renovated 18th-century stone bastide with seven bedrooms, a pool, tennis court and six acres of land, including its own vineyard. Cotignac has been popular with artists since the 1960s and has thriving shops and a weekly market. Home Hunts (020-8144 5501)



pool and tennis courts. An older farmhouse or luxury villa with five or more bedrooms, a pool and a large garden would be nearer €2.5 million says Mr Swannie.

Inland from Cannes, Tim Clark of Leggett Immobilier (08700 115151; <http://frenchestateagents.com>) reports increased interest in beautiful Grasse as well as the small town of Cadrès. 'Perched high on a hill with sweeping views over the bay of Cannes and the Esterel hills, you can find a villa with sea views for less than €600,000—great value compared to homes directly on the coast.'

Central

The Canton de Fayence, 30 minutes from Saint-Tropez and within one hour of Nice airport, also provides relative value with three-bedroom villas in private gardens from €450,000. 'The price range between €400,000 and €650,000 is where we are seeing most demand from British and American buyers,' says Mr Clark. 'Favourable currency rates and cheap borrowing mean that demand in this "mid" price bracket is as high now as it has been for years.'

Popular market villages include medieval Fayence and Seillans. This is rural, quiet France, yet, within

easy reach, there are watersports on family-friendly, unspoilt Lac de St Cassien and a choice of activities at Terre Blanche, a 740-acre golf, hotel

and leisure resort in Tourrettes, which has Europe's largest spa and a David Leadbetter Golf Academy.

West

Historic towns and villages above Saint-Tropez and west of Draguignan include Tourtour—known as 'the village in the sky'—Cotignac and Lorgues. These form a 'golden triangle' with Nice or Marseille airports 75 minutes away and Saint-Tropez and Aix-en-Provence within an hour.

Vidauban, south of Lorgues, is a delight as is Correns, further west and inland, north of Brignoles. Formerly best known as an organic-wine-producing village, Correns came

to wider prominence when Hollywood stars Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie bought the 1,200-acre Château Miraval and married there last year.

British buyers choose stone farmhouses close to these villages, set in at least 2½ acres of land with typical prices, says Chris Moore of Home Hunts, between €800,000 and €2 million. He's selling a restored six-bedroom mas with separate caretaker's cottage close to Lorgues for €1,895,000.

'Avoid villages along the A8 motorway corridor such as Les Arcs and Le Cannet,' cautions Mr Moore. 'They're pretty, but with a motorway, a TGV and a departmental road, one has to be careful of the environment.'

FOR SALE
€2.6m

Roquefort-les-Pins

A two-bedroom carefully restored apartment in Roquefort-les-Pins with separate two-bedroom studio in Les Parcs de Saint-Tropez, a quiet gated resort with communal pool and gardens. Savills (020-7016 3740)

FOR SALE
€25m

Ramatuelle

In the hills of Ramatuelle, with exceptional views to Saint-Tropez and the bay of Pampelonne, a beautiful 10-bedroom Provençal villa with large gardens. Knight Frank (020-7861 1553)

