

Provence, by the fast train

A new Eurostar route is about to start driving British buyers to the south of France. **Liz Rowlinson** sees what's on offer

On May 1, Eurostar will reach the glittering blue waters of the Mediterranean for the first time since it started 21 years ago. Although it has been running direct to Avignon once a week since 2012, this summer it will run all the way through to Marseille, taking six hours and 27 minutes from St Pancras via Paris and Lyon.

The prospect of swapping the check-in at Gatwick for a leisurely lunch or an afternoon kir as you glide past the vineyards of Burgundy or the peaks of the Rhône valley seems a highly civilised idea, without the need for an overpriced airport taxi at the other end.

It's certainly a welcome development for many British second-home owners in the Bouches-du-Rhône department that spans Avignon and Marseille. And it is helping – with a little help from the weak euro – to draw new buyers, reports Nic Brennan of Savills International department. "This new route will open up the options for home-hunters who prefer to take the train. There's going to be negligible difference in the journey time, and taking the Eurostar will be less stressful than flying," he says.

It's also a practical way to travel with children, or if you need to work on your journey, adds David Kampfner of Leggett Immobilier. "One client looking to buy in Montpellier has been excited at the prospect of travelling direct to Avignon by train. The effect has been much wider than we anticipated."

Most UK property-hunters prefer to be within an hour of an airport, so the catchment area around the Avignon-Marseille axis encompasses the plains of the Camargue to the west, Les Alpilles and popular towns near Aix-en-Provence in the south; the lavender fields and yellow sandstone houses of Peter Mayle's Luberon to the north, and Toulon and St Tropez looking east to the Riviera.

History shows that new train and air routes can have a dramatic effect on the fortunes of an area. "Property prices exploded when the Paris TGV line to Aix came in about 13 years ago," says Katie Saturno of Leggett's Aix-en-Provence office. "But we have seen a steady new influx of Brits snapping up properties in attractive villages around Aix, where there is a good choice of international schools: Les Milles, Egulles, Fuveau, Trets and Le Puy-Saint-Réparate." Sextant Properties reports

a 50 per cent increase on last year in inquiries in Avignon and Marseille but attributes it to sterling's seven-year high against the euro, UK pension reforms and the sluggish market in rural France. "With French property prices expected to drop around five per cent in 2015, it is a buyers' market," says Catherine Ryall of Sextant.

With British buyers getting an "extra" 20 per cent deduction on prices due to the exchange rate and vendors reducing asking prices by 10 to 20 per cent, it seems a good time to buy that Provencal bolt-hole. "There are some incredible properties that are ideal for *chambre d'hotes*," says Kampfner. "Many British buyers still seek to come here for that change of lifestyle and it offers much better value than the Côte d'Azur."

The typical request is for a stone *mas* (farmhouse) with three or four acres and possibly two or three *gîtes*, within an hour of the coast

(lamaisonpoynder.com). "When I moved down here 25 years ago the slower pace of life took 10 years off my age," says Jenny, 69, originally from south London. "The area has a broad appeal. I am fully booked this summer with guests from America, Asia, Australia, South Africa – it's a wonderful way to meet people from all walks of life. I have guests coming with children for whom taking the train is a no-brainer – the daily service will certainly provide visitors with greater flexibility." With six grandchildren elsewhere, Jenny is selling her home through Leggett (see below). Avignon itself has a



In demand: the new direct Eurostar service will make it easier to reach picturesque towns such as Vaucluse, Luberon

wonderful medieval ambience within its ancient ramparts and is great for a cultural fix (13 museums for starters) but British buyers tend to head for its fringes. "Avignon and its surroundings are much less built-up than the traffic-clogged Côte d'Azur and if

you travel a little outside the city you can get excellent three-bedroom properties for around €600,000 (£435,000)," suggests Ryall. Nicola Christinger, of Home Hunts in Les Alpilles, cherry-picks an area full of old-world charm and breathtaking scenery only 15 minutes

south west of Avignon. "It's a relatively unknown area called Montagne, a stunning rugged pine-forest area of over 6,000 hectares, belonging to two villages, Boulbon and Barbeniane," she says. "Both have a typical Provencal feel, where you can sip chilled rosé and watch

the locals playing pétanque. Property prices are not as expensive as more well-known Alpilles towns such as St-Rémy-de-Provence, which is only 15 minutes away." And to finish up, what about Marseille itself? The joint contender for France's second-largest city – with

Lyon – has shed its bad reputation and is reinventing itself as a vibrant multicultural centre. There's been €7 billion spent on the waterside regeneration – including a Norman Foster-designed events pavilion at the old port, shopping malls and the new Euromed business district.

For holidaylettings.co.uk, Marseille has shown the biggest increase in bookings of the areas affected by the new Eurostar route. "It's rather the forgotten part of the Côte d'Azur, with access to some great beachside areas. There are fantastic apartments overlooking the harbour and towards the Calanques (20km of dramatic limestone canyons and inlets that run to the lovely little harbour town of Cassis)," says Kampfner.

In the city itself, you can buy a three-bedroom 93 sq m duplex in a building designed by Le Corbusier for €245,000 (£250,000) or a contemporary architect-designed three-bedroom house with large garden for €635,000 (£460,000) (both through Sextant). And remember, there are no baggage limits on Eurostar, so you can stock up with all the Provencal rosé and tapenade you can carry.

For sale

● Blow the budget
Beautifully renovated five-bedroom farmhouse north west of Aix-en-Provence in 3.75 acres of olive trees, garden with tennis court and pool. (€389,200/£275,000; 020 7349 9772; aylesford.com)



● British-owned b&b
This 300 sq m six-bedroom home in the popular L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue comes with two gîtes and a pool. (€990,000/£717,346; 08700 115 151; frenchestateagents.com)



● Best of both worlds
Nineteenth-century bastide in Boulbon offering almost 200 sq m of living space, with four bedrooms, garage and a large walled garden with pool. (€480,000/£290,000 to £434,000) bracket but if you can show that a property has a proven record of generating income, buyers are prepared to look over €1 million (£724,500)," he adds.



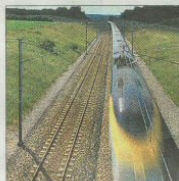
● Breathtaking views
Four-bedroom hillside home with fantastic views over the Calanque de la Redonne. Four bedrooms, two baths and parking. (€890,000/£644,560; 08700 115 151; frenchestateagents.com)



● Grow your own
Beautifully restored five-bed farmhouse in the Vaucluse, complete with its own boutique vineyard (€695,000/£500,000; 00 33 4 90 65 08 16; provencetransactions@



'Taking the Eurostar will be less stressful than flying'



On track Eurostar is opening up new areas of France

and near a small village. "Interest tends to be in the €400,000 to €600,000 (£290,000 to £434,000) bracket but if you can show that a property has a proven record of generating income, buyers are prepared to look over €1 million (£724,500)," he adds.

In the latter category is a well-established b&b on the Bartheleasse island in the Rhône, 5km from Avignon. Entered via private gates, the Provencal bastide property offers 10 bedrooms and a private pool on two hectares of land. It's €1,365,000 (£980,000) through Leggett.

Jenny Park runs a six-bedroom b&b and house rental in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, a desirable area south east of Avignon bordering the Luberon that is famed for its 300-odd antiques dealers