

HOME

HOME 32



What's the pull? It's the epicentre of the Blue Ridge Mountains for lovers of The Hunger Games, The Last of the Mohicans and Cold Mountain – all were filmed around Asheville. The small and relatively liberal college town is a supporter of the World Tai Chi Day and alternative country music. Plumes of smokers around pub doors put the ash into Asheville: the city slogan is “any way you like it”; anti-smoking laws are rarely prosecuted. President Obama holidays at the historic Grove Park Inn, there's an action movie festival, organised by Aaron Norris, brother of Chuck.

Where to live South French Broad, a leafy bike-friendly area south



of downtown. Nearby Five Points is gentrifying fast, while Montford's Victorian homes are being converted into chichi B&Bs. South Asheville is dominated by the 250-room chateau-style Biltmore estate, built in 1895.

The cost of living House prices are rising by 4% a year in the 80,000-strong city. Two-bedroom flats downtown rent for £1,000 a month, while mock-tudor four-bedroom new-builds start at £150,000.

What the locals say Watch out for the invasion of “leaf peepers” in autumn – tourists flock to admire the fiery foliage.

Who to call 001 828 337 7575, beverly-hanks.com, 001 828 348 7593, myashevillerealestate.com, 001 828 348 8278, mymosaicreale.com

John Harlow



Eurostar now links London to Marseilles in six and a half hours – giving British buyers a new way into the market. **Alexandra Goss** discovers what's on offer

Track and yield

Air travel is all well and good, but those poky Plexiglas windows and fuggy cabins don't allow for any appreciation of the gloriousness of the French countryside. Now, though, Francophiles can board the Eurostar and (from £99 return) spend six and a half hours ogling at chateaux, vineyards and lavender fields all the way to Marseilles.

Launched on May 1, the new high-speed route, which also stops at Lyons and Avignon, is a typically Gallic way to travel to the sun-bleached south of the country – chic, unhurried and, apart from the soggy croque-monsieurs in the buffet car, rather romantic. It certainly isn't for the time-poor execs who spend their weekends wheeling carry-ons through the business lounge at Nice airport, or for those who would rather not spend a tedious hour at Lille on the return journey going through customs and baggage scans.

Judging from the packed carriages and carnival atmosphere on the first journey from St Pancras, the service should be a hit. More than 55,000 tickets have been sold for trips to the end of October – and that's before the process of refurbishing the existing fleet and adding 17 new trains, plus installing wi-fi in the carriages, begins later this year.

Continental estate agents, who are still punch-drunk from the financial crisis, tax hikes and, lately, the worrying lack of Russian buyers (there are even whispers that hard-up oligarchs are being forced to sell their Riviera boltholes), are hoping that the five-times-a-week service will help to rekindle the British love affair with French property.

“International buyers have started to come back this year, led by the Brits,” says Mark Harvey, partner and head of the team covering France, Monaco and the Alps at Knight Frank estate agency. Harvey says 28% of Knight Frank's inquiries in 2014 came from UK buyers, so far this year, they have accounted for almost half.

So, what has changed? Currency, for one: the pound is 11% stronger against the euro than it was this time last year (notwithstanding any post-election bounce), and there is a perception that parts of the country are a safe haven for investment. It is understood that the Qatari royal family are now buying properties in the south of France, the first time they have purchased outside Monaco. “This is a big confidence boost to the market,” says Giles Hannah, senior vice-president of Christie's International Real Estate.

House prices have also come down, in some cases as much as 35% from peak levels. François-Xavier de Vial, director of the buying agency Home-Hunts, believes that the perception of François Hollande and his tax policies has also changed. “The introduction of the 75% wealth tax caused us a lot of problems at the beginning,

and put buyers off. Now they understand that it can be mitigated using a mortgage.” French loan rates have dropped to all-time lows. It is now possible to secure a rate of 2.55% fixed over 20 years, down from 3.5% in May 2014. This translates to a saving of more than £45,700 (£33,700 in interest over the life of a £400,000 loan, according to French Private Finance.

“The Eurostar route isn't going to transform the market, but it should give some areas a boost,” says Nic Brennan, associate director of the global private portfolio at Savills estate agency. “It also gives you options. Dare I say, French air-traffic control has been a nightmare these past few months.”

AVIGNON Much more than simply the site of a famous bridge, this walled city is still blessed with the graceful architecture

and self-confidence of a one-time seat of papal power. Today, its well-kept cobbled streets radiate a distinctly 21st-century edge, with fashionable boutiques, wholefood shops and small, yappy dogs toted round in designer handbags.

Though Flybe offers services to Avignon from some UK airports, and it is possible to fly to Marseilles, the new Eurostar line offers another way in – if you treat yourself to a standard premier ticket (from £199 return), you can arrive fed, watered and with scarcely a crease in your chinos in 5hr 49min.

“You can also take home a lot more wine and cheese,” points out David Kampfer, regional co-ordinator at Leggett Immobilien estate agency – Eurostar allows two suitcases per person, plus a piece of hand luggage.

Buying in town means you have the attractive option of being able to let your property for Avignon's renowned arts festival in July; helpfully, the requirement for foreign owners to pay a “social charge” of 15.5% on rental income and capital gains was recently overturned by the European Court of Justice. A

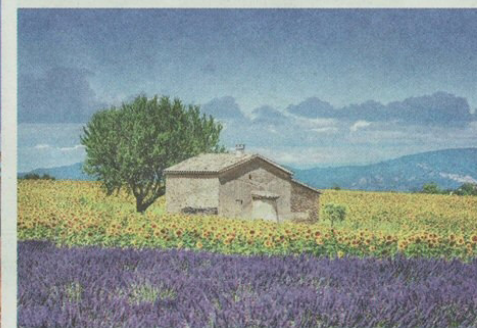
design-conscious home with three bedrooms and a 650 sq ft terrace, within walking distance of the TGV station, is on the market for €690,000 (020 8144 5501, home-hunts.com).

The new train service also allows easy access to the landscape around Avignon – the sleepy, pine-scented Provence of vineyards and blue-shuttered homes immortalised by Peter Mayle. This is the ultimate middle-class nirvana, where Britons can buy a charming old farmhouse for €500,000, earning them summers in the sunshine, an enviable wine cellar and crucial bragging rights among the PTA.

A 20-minute drive from Avignon, the quiet, narrow streets of the medieval village of Barbentane are free from cars and tourists and smell pleasantly of jasmine. A restored stone house in the centre with two bedrooms, a terrace, useful parking space and a wine cellar is on sale for €529,000 (00 33 4 90 54 73 76, colpaertwehrle.com).

And then, of course, there is Aix-en-Provence, a brainy pocket of the Parisian Left Bank but with prettier gardens, sparklier fountains

PLUS
TIMES
One lucky member and a guest will win a holiday in San Francisco, including a Kuoni Wine Lover's Tour. To enter, visit mytimesplus.co.uk



As you'd expect, properties in Aix don't come cheap – particularly if you want to be close to the plane-tree-lined Cours Mirabeau. A two-bedroom flat in a converted townhouse in the Mazarin district, so close to Mirabeau that you can almost smell the cappuccinos and expensive cologne, is on the market for €1.3m (home-hunts.com). For those with bulkier budgets, an 18th-century manor house within striking distance of the centre costs €2.995m. That gets you six bedrooms, six bathrooms and 2.29 acres of beautiful gardens, a swimming pool and even your own fountain (020 7861 5034, knightfrank.com).

MARSEILLES France's second city has 2,600 years of history, and almost as many prejudices stacked against it. For too long synonymous with drugs, gangs and violence, Marseilles is visibly sloughing off its old, seamier skin and growing a glittering new one.

Over the past decade, more than €660m has been ploughed into this sunbaked, Mediterranean spot, which was crowned the 2013 European Capital of Culture. Norman Foster, the starchitect behind Wembley Stadium and the Gherkin, has helped to reimagine the Vieux Port, pedestrianising much of it in a gentle pale granite to echo the shade of the original limestone cobbles and adding the gleaming, reflective Ombrière, a “shadow place” that offers much-needed shade to broiled tourists and craggy fishermen hawking the fruit of their nets.

Visitors throng an embarrassment of new museums, especially the cubelike Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations (MuCEM), with its dark, filigree-effect concrete casting a lacy shadow, while the beautiful people sip espressos in the chic cafes that have sprung up of late. Smaller touches such as restoring streetlights, cleaning the facades of the imposing Napoleon III

and a Latin *foie de vivre*. You can see why the French themselves voted the stomping ground of Zola and Cézanne the most desired town in which to live: your neck aches from looking at the endless grand bourgeois mansions, while the biggest stress is deciding whether to buy cherry or plum tomatoes from the picturesque market.



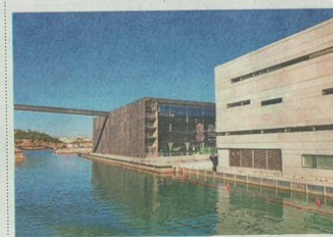
AVIGNON

Dating from the reign of Napoleon III, this *maison de maître*, just southeast of the city centre, has eight bedrooms, five bathrooms and three receptions. Sit back and wait for the house guests in descent. 020 7861 5034, knightfrank.com



MOLIERES-SUR-CEZE

A 90-minute drive from Avignon, this six-bedroom farmhouse is a bit out of the way, but at this price you can't be picky. There's a large garden and a barn ripe for conversion, but only two bathrooms. 0870 011 5151, frenchestateagents.com



THE SUNDAY TIMES

10.05.2015 / 33

10.05.2015 / 35

Fast food Take the Eurostar from London and you could be sitting in the Place du Palais in Avignon, in only six hours



Guy Harro-Tony



LE PARADOU

The village of Le Paradou, at the foot of the Alpilles, between Avignon and Marseilles, is a byword for Provencal charm. This restored 17th-century coaching inn in the centre of the village has nine bedrooms (spread over a main house and guest property), a pool and, for when it rains, a home cinema system. 020 7349 9772, aylesford.com



AIX-EN-PROVENCE

Set in 1.7 acres within striking distance of Aix, this 18th-century bastide has been renovated to create five bedrooms, three bathrooms and an annexe. While a new owner may wish to do a spot of redecorating, they can't quibble with the garden, which has an olive grove, a vegetable patch and a feature pool. 020 7861 5034, knightfrank.com



MARSEILLES

Hidden off a nondescript street a couple of blocks back from the Vieux Port, this impeccable home is set around a tropical courtyard with palm trees and a swimming pool. The two huge reception rooms and an indoor/outdoor dining area are perfect for entertaining; upstairs are five bedroom suites and a study. 020 8144 5501, home-hunts.com

"The face of Marseilles has changed completely – it's quite bourgeois now"

turned into an achingly hip home, stashed with midcentury-modern furniture and upcycled tchotchkes. As far from the Provencal gingham-tablecloth, shabby-chic stereotype as you can imagine, the townhouse typifies the "bobo" (*bourgeois bohème*) revolution rippling through Marseilles – the five ensuite bedrooms are let out to design-conscious guests for up to €200 a night. It's on the market at €2.1m; the estate agent tells me that an English architect is already keen to buy it, but "needs to convince his wife" (home-hunts.com).

That marital coercion sums up the essence of Marseilles, which is still gritty and brusque, immortalised in the press as France's murder

capital thanks to the drugs gangs, which have a habit of bumping off their business associates with Kalashnikovs. The hulking presence of Algerian ships in the gleaming new port symbolise the racial and economic tensions in a city that is risen between its more prosperous south and the poorer, more African north.

Marseilles is also an unproven market as far as the British are concerned – a factor that could either be a blessing or a burden. "The face of the city has changed completely – it's quite bourgeois now," says de Vial of Home-Hunts, a Parisian who has lived in the city for more than a decade and become its ardent champion. "It's a bit like Liverpool – people either love it or hate it."

HOMES FOR ALL SEASONS.

VILLA OMBAK, TAMBORA, BALI

VILLA LA SOLANA, IBIZA, SPAIN

CHALET RENARD, HAUTE-NENDAZ, SWITZERLAND

THE HIDEAWAYS CLUB

THE CLASSIC COLLECTION

LA RETRAITE, PROVENCE, FRANCE

Why invest in one second home when you can enjoy many.

Own an equity share in a diversified portfolio of luxury villas and chalets, and travel the world from home to home. All properties are beautifully furnished and meticulously managed for you to enjoy as soon as you arrive. With every detail taken care of by your dedicated Personal Concierge, you can relax and make the most of your precious holiday time. Welcome to The Hideaways Club.

Investment in the Classic Property Fund starts from £88,000. This investment carries the risk of potential loss of capital.

+44 (0)20 7205 2416 | thehideawaysclub.com



VIEW OUR PORTFOLIO

Investment in this scheme is restricted to certified high net worth individuals or sophisticated investors. Evidence of the certification will be required before detailed information can be provided to you. The price or value of, or income from, investments can fall as well as rise. This investment carries a risk to your capital and an investor may get back less than the sum invested. You may have difficulty selling this investment at a reasonable price and in some circumstances it may be difficult to sell at any price. Do not invest in this unless you have carefully thought about whether you can afford it and whether it is right for you. This financial promotion has been approved for the purposes of Section 21 Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 in the United Kingdom by Smith & Williamson Corporate Finance Limited, 25 Moorgate, London EC2R 6AY, which is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.