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Where to buy property in Provence, France

After a year of waiting, Brits are back buying in Provence

Helen Davies

Friday August 13 2021, 12.01am BST, The Times

Lavender fields in Provence
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Raise a glass of Château Minuty Prestige! Good news at last: fully vaccinated Britons no longer need to quarantine on their return from France, and it's not just holiday bookings that have surged, but holiday home viewings, especially in the deep south, for stone farmhouses surrounded by olive groves, lavender fields and vineyards. New post-pandemic requirements include fibre-optic broadband, and to be within a short stroll from a boulangerie and a Michelin-starred restaurant.

"People used to say I have always dreamt of owning a house in Provence, now they say I want to buy a house in Provence," says Rudi Janssens, founder and general manager of Janssens Immobilier and an associate of Knight Frank. "The dream has become a priority. Demand is up 45 per cent and prices are up 20 per cent by the coast, and 10 per cent inland."

The result is a sellers' market. Traditionally it might take two summers to sell a rustic farmhouse near a terracotta-tiled village of the sort beloved of British holiday home buyers. Today, according to Janssens, properties are selling within three months.

Saint-Tropez
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"I've never seen anything like this intensity in 22 years," he says. "The French are also buying as never before. It is about finding a family refuge as well as financial security."

He already has viewings booked in for a four-bedroom, four-bathroom farmhouse with a pool near Taillades with a view of the Luberon mountains that has just gone on sale for €1.35 million (£1.14 million).

Brice Bonato, co-founder of Sextant Properties, an agency with more than 300 agents across France, says demand for properties in Provence has risen by 45 per cent in the past year. His clients are looking for a restoration project or a traditional *mas* in the hills with large gardens and have between €300,000-€500,000 to spend.

A new Provençal enclave for expats is Les Alpilles — a craggy, little-known mountain range with a cluster of medieval villages about an hour northwest of Marseilles. The "golden triangle" here is between Eygalières, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence and Maussane-les-Alpilles, the latter a gourmet favourite with three boulangeries, a fishmonger, a cheese specialist, a wine merchant and a butcher.

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Easy access to the good things in life without having to negotiate parking is an attraction across the region. For the first time in five years, Sonya Clarke, Engel & Völkers' local agent on the French Riviera is also witnessing bidding wars, and a waiting list of buyers for some properties. "Now more than ever you need good people on the ground such as a broker, a builder and a property finder," she says.

Brits are also making a beeline for the "golden triangle" of villages — St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, Beaulieu-sur-Mer and Villefranche-sur-Mer — and the hilltop villages above Mougins. Here the budgets are bigger — €1 million to €6 million — and so too are the requirements.

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"Buyers now want at least two bedrooms if they are looking for an apartment so that they can work from home or friends or family can visit," says Clarke. "Or in the countryside they want more land and a pool but also to be within walking distance of beaches and bars. Everyone is much more focused. No one is window shopping, they are actually buying."

Tim Swannie, director of buying agency Home Hunts, agrees buyers are more determined than ever. His British clients are keen on Villefranche-sur-Mer, and further over in Provence, the Var villages are proving popular (Fayence, Cotignac and Lorgues for example) where he is helping a British family who have flown over to view properties, but half had sold by the time they landed.

He has agreed 14 sales based on virtual viewings alone, and predicts a busy September. "A lot of properties are currenty rented out so visits can be tricky, but we expect September to be our busiest month on record. New inquiries are coming in daily."

How to do a deal

• From signing the initial contract (compromis de vente) to completion (acte de vente) usually takes three months.

• Once you've had an offer accepted, return the paperwork as soon as possible as there is a ten-day cooling-off period.

• You must use a notaire; you can appoint your own or share the vendor's, who may already be familiar with the property, smoothing the process.

• Use a specialist lawyer to advise on inheritance and tax matters, but also to liaise with the notaire.

• Cash buyers will be able to move quicker, but if you need a mortgage, arrange it early on as the paperwork can take a couple of months. Use a specialist broker to speed things up.

• Rural properties may be subject to a right of first refusal by the French agricultural body SAFER. "Every property with land over 2,500 sq m has to be offered to SAFER first, this takes two months, but you can pay for them to fast-track their answer to four weeks," advises Joanna Leggett of Leggett Immobilier.

• Plan building surveys or reports as soon as possible and use companies that can supply them quickly.

• Plan currency exchange as early as possible — use a specialist company and book to get the best rate.

For sale

Saumane-de-Vauclus, €1.49 million
Set in almost 2.5 acres, this house is in the village childhood home of the Marquis de Sade. The four-bedroom farmhouse has three bathrooms, a pool, annexe and outbuildings.
Contact knightfrank.com

Taillades, €1.35 million
Provençal charm with all the mod cons: this farmhouse features four bathrooms, all with en suite bathrooms, and glorious views over the spectacular Luberon landscape.
Contact knightfrank.com

Lorgues, €1.995 million
This sprawling stone mansion in the town centre has 15 bedrooms and bathrooms and is currently run as a successful self-catering and bed and breakfast business.
Contact frenchestateagents.com

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Ramatuelle, €4.8 million
This five-bedroom villa is in a prime position in the centre of the St Tropez peninsula, within walking distance of the beautiful Bay of Pampelonne.
Contact frenchestateagents.com

Avignon, €890,000
Built in 1850, this four-storey townhouse near the pope's palace has soaring ceilings and an independent studio. Almost 2,000 sq ft of living space includes five bedrooms and three bathrooms.
Contact christiesrealestate.com

Grimaud, €1.69 million
A high-spec five-bedroom villa a hop away from the pretty seaside village. The glorious half-acre of gardens include extensive terraces with barbecue area, pool and hot tub.
Contact frenchestateagents.com

Grasse, €1.83 million
You get panoramic sea views from this four-bedroom stone house, perched in the hills of the so-called perfume capital. There's a summer and winter kitchen, plus an acre of land.
Contact savills.com

Cannes, €2.8 million
A former flour mill turned chic bolthole: this four-bedroom villa offers marvellous views over the French Riviera coastline. Inside, you'll find stone fireplaces and high-beamed ceilings. There are gorgeous gardens, a pool house and summer kitchen.
Contact home-hunts.com

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