

**Lagrasse  
and the Corbières**

# HOUSE HUNTING



For our family, the number one priority when looking to buy a house in France, was the weather. Much of England's green and pleasant countryside is extremely beautiful but only because it rains so much! Ideally we wanted a contrast to our life in England and also to be able to go swimming every day. So when considering which area of France to choose we wanted plenty of sunshine, clean rivers and proximity to the sea.

I was advised that anywhere south of Limoges, the weather is consistently hotter and drier than elsewhere in France. Even so, there are pockets of the south where it rains a great deal; like in the Cevennes, a range of mountains in south-central France made famous by Robert Louis Stevenson in his book "Travels with a

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Donkey in the Cévennes”, which cover parts of the départements of the Ardèche, Gard, Lozère and Hérault. This good advice led us to look even further south and so the Corbières and Aude region appealed above others as house prices and living costs were considerably more affordable than in Provence and the Cote d’Azur. People have christened the area “the other South of France” and as an alternative to the Cote d’Azur it has excellent credentials. The region’s tourist offices never fail to miss an opportunity to stake the claim that “we have over 300 days of sunshine a year” which is clearly a positive sign. The Mediterranean Sea is just as warm and beautiful “round the bend” from Marseille so why pay between 25 and 50 percent more for everything and be hemmed in by too many tourists in expensive and showy glitterati resorts like Nice, Saint Tropez and Cannes? The beaches here with their golden sand are just as pretty as the ones in Provence with far less people on them.

Admittedly, we too have our strong winds similar to the Mistral that pummels the Cote d’Azur. There is the Tramontane wind which during the low season can be so ferocious, bombarding seaside towns like Collioure and Banyuls, it can literally send people mad. The dry Cers wind brings cold weather from the Northwest while the Marin wind brings warm, humid air from the Mediterranean Sea. Before we make the journey to the coast for a day out on the beach, we always check the wind speed first. We have found that speeds of anything over 20 km/hour means that sunbathing on the beach is uncomfortable with the wind blowing sand in your face so we simply choose not to go on those days. During the year the coast plays host to world-renown windsurfing competitions, especially at Leucate, but of course this only adds to its many attractions. People comment when visiting this coastal region, especially in towns like Bouzigues as the sun sets on the horizon over the port of Sète in the distance or in the beautiful fishing village of Collioure where Matisse, Derain and the Fauvist art movement set up shop, that the unspoilt, sea-lined townships are more like those of the Cote d’Azur back in the 1920’s and 1930’s before commercialisation.

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### **Collioure harbour**

The way of life here is more relaxed and far less commercial than the topiary-obsessed Cote d'Azur with its chocolate box houses and endless tourists. Over recent decades, many artists have settled here in the Aude, attracted no doubt by cheaper living costs and the remoteness of the untamed Corbières with its mountain scenery, dramatic gorges and, most especially, the extraordinary translucent light to work by. There is a more “hippy”, laid back ambience to the area; in fact the colloquial term for the down-to-earth people of the locality is, in French slang: “roots”! Moreover, for us, the Mediterranean Sea lies in striking distance of most villages and there are many rivers and lakes to swim in.

We started searching for a house at least five years before actually finding the right one, trawling the internet in our spare time at home in England. The estate agent photographs of French houses for sale with their higgledy-piggledy rooms, dilapidated outbuildings and scruffy patches of land were absolutely hilarious. It was as if vendors were trying their utmost to put people off buying them! Even when more than just two or three photos were available on the estate agent's website, it seemed obligatory to show

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as much clutter as possible strewn throughout the rooms of the houses. Photos showing kitchens with the shopping still in its plastic bags dumped on the table or bedrooms scattered with unwashed clothes and other debris were “de rigueur”. Instead of presenting the properties from their best angles, the photographs would show dark and dingy rooms, crumbling masonry and unattractive surrounding scrubland. No wonder it can take years for houses to sell in France.

We had a number of near misses before finding the right house. The first property we visited was a lovely, old presbytery in a remote village in the Lauregais, a region renowned for its spectacular sunflower fields east of Carcassonne. Nearby Castelnaudry, situated on the Canal du Midi, is home to the infamous cassoulet: a rich, slow-cooked casserole containing Toulouse pork sausages, duck, pork skin (couennes) and white beans (haricots blancs).



**Traditional Cassoulet**

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The house was very old and quite dark but with the gorgeous swimming pool at the back and wonderful views, we initially thought we could make a go of it. Fortunately for us, we had a survey performed on the house before making any decisions. When the surveyor's report came back, we couldn't believe what he had discovered: the king post in the attic was completely free from its anchor at the centre of the roof! The surveyor told us it was one for his nightmare picture gallery, his personal record of the very worst structural defaults he had encountered in his long career. The house would have required a brand new roof and we were simply not after such a big project. It would have been less costly for us had the vendor informed us of this "minor issue" when we were viewing the property.

The next house that we almost bought was actually located in the same village we are in now. As I have already stated, this particular village appealed to us for many reasons. It ticked all the boxes: river swimming literally on site, proximity to the beaches of the Mediterranean, its 8<sup>th</sup> century abbey, medieval streets and houses; the fact that it had a plethora of restaurants plus a café, boulangerie, tabac, poste, etc. I hopped on a plane and spent a weekend on a recce to make sure it was the right place for us.

When I was shown a traditional stone house by an estate agent, I was intrigued. We always referred to this property from then on as "the corner house" as it was wedged in the corner of an L-shaped street. It boasted many large rooms which would have been perfect for our big family and, of course, the obligatory illegal terrace on the roof, albeit of postage-stamp size. After much deliberation (and without really knowing if we could actually afford it), we made an offer to the German owners and thought an acceptance was imminent. However it was not to be. We were gazumped at the last minute by the Frenchman next-door!

I returned to England disheartened - all those years hunting for the right house only to fall at the last hurdle. Back in my study at home I switched on the computer and tried one more search on the internet and, as luck would have it, up popped a site offering a house in the same village for private sale. The house looked perfect

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from what I could tell from the photographs and was on offer at a reasonable price. I contacted the English owner who explained that after ten happy years in the house he now wanted the money to restore his boat in Chichester. I jumped on a plane and headed back within days and met the owner, a well-respected architect, and was given a tour of the property. He explained that he had restored the house entirely by himself and it was certainly evident that a skilled hand had been at work on the place. The interior was finished to a very high spec and the layout of the rooms suited us nicely. After the tour I told him straight out that I would like to offer the asking price, not even bothering to haggle. He was delighted and we shook hands there and then on the deal. It was only until I was on the plane back home, sipping a self-congratulatory glass of red wine, that I realised I had just bought a house in France without my wife ever having stepped foot in it! Fortunately, when they visited the place for the first time, my wife and children all loved the house as much as I did. So we eventually ended up buying a place in France without the aid of an estate agent, saving thousands of Euros in fees (estate agents can take up to a whopping 10% of the value of the house as opposed to England's 1 %). Having said that, if you would like help in finding a house to buy in our area, the best agent is our friend Anna Stoloff whose website is [www.homehuntersfrance.com](http://www.homehuntersfrance.com). Anna has helped hundreds of people find the perfect house in this neck of the woods.

Something we did want to ensure was that we were able to avoid the confusing (and potentially disastrous) antiquated French law that states that a property must be divided equally amongst the surviving children upon the demise of the owner. Surely an abject lesson in how to create chaos although I have recently been informed that this outdated ruling will be rescinded in 2015. At the time, it was clear this stipulation could not only cause rows amongst family members but also be very difficult to administrate. What if you had four children like us and they were all scattered around the globe? Worse still what if the children disagreed as to whether to keep or sell the property? We could see no positives in allowing the possibility of this happening and so on our next visit to the house -

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once we had legally taken ownership – my wife and I took a trip to a local notaire’s offices and signed a special document called a “communauté universelle”, by far the simplest method of ensuring that the house would be bequeathed only to the surviving spouse. The notaire’s offices in the neighbouring village of Fabrezan were located in a beautiful old house with a huge courtyard built many years ago from the proceeds of the highly successful wine trade in the village. Finally we had done it - our own little slice of France!