

Money hotspots

ON A BUDGET AND KEEN TO INVEST WISELY? KAREN TAIT DISCOVERS THE FIVE SAFEST PLACES IN FRANCE TO PUT YOUR PROPERTY POUNDS AT THE MOMENT

When you buy a property in France, whether for holidays or a full-time move, you're investing in a way of life, in your personal happiness. It's not all about money. But having said that, it is good to know you're making a sound financial investment too.

Unlike the UK, where the property market is stuck in the doldrums, France is performing well. In the last year, falling prices have been reversed, and the Notaires de France, who record house prices across the country, report a national increase in average house prices of 7.9% in 2010-11.

Outside of the capital, 11 regions saw a higher-than-average increase: Languedoc-Roussillon (12.6%), Nord-Pas de Calais (10.1%), Rhône-Alpes (9.7%), Aquitaine (9.2%), Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (9.2%), Auvergne (9%), Picardy (8.9%), Franche-Comté (8.4%), Poitou-Charentes (8.3%), Champagne-Ardenne (8%) and Limousin (8%).

But some of the individual departments have seen even more striking rises and it is the top five of these high performers that I'm going to concentrate on here. Because if they continue the way they've been going, any money you invest in property there will be very safe indeed – and certainly better off than in a savings account in the UK.



The Cantal landscape is all mountain peaks, rivers and lakes, great for outdoor pursuits – shown here are the Truyère gorges

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1 CANTAL
The department with the highest price rise is Cantal (department number 15) in the Auvergne region, with an astounding 18% increase over the past year. The average house price in this mountainous and peaceful location is €121,000, considerably under the national average of €165,000, so a home here won't break the bank either.

Named after the Cantal mountain range, a group of extinct, eroded volcanic peaks, the department is sparsely populated and rural. Even its main towns – Aurillac, St-Flour, and Mauriac – are relatively small. It's the perfect place to get away from it all, in fact Aurillac is said to be the farthest removed departmental capital from a major motorway. There are airports not too far away though, at Rodez, Limoges and Lyon, and also TGV services to the latter two cities.

In summer, the peaks of the Parc Regional des Volcans d'Auvergne are perfect for a range of activities, including hiking, horse-riding, mountain biking and watersports on the many lakes, while in winter, the ski resorts of Le Lioran and

Super Lioran take over.

Panoramic views can be enjoyed from Puy Mary and the Plomb du Cantal, and the Truyère gorges are also popular. Manmade attractions include the Garabit viaduct (created by someone you may have heard of: Gustav Eiffel) and *Plus Beaux Villages* Salers and Tournemire.

"There are perhaps a variety of factors as to why property prices have risen in the Cantal," comments Jean-Stephane Vilain of Selection Habitat (www.selectionhabitat.com). "It is one of the last remaining departments where one can still find untouched, character properties in a preserved environment so this has increased demand, together with the fact that property prices were much lower to begin with compared with other departments.

"What may also have contributed towards the price rise is a recent article in the French newspaper *Le Monde* where it stated that by 2020, Cantal will become one of the departments with the highest population increase thanks to its quality of life and the reasons mentioned earlier. Most

of the new inhabitants to the Cantal are predicted to be Parisians and also from Provence, the Alps and Côte d'Azur.

"Another factor to be investigated is the change in climate – could it be that global warming is contributing towards an even warmer and more attractive Cantal?"

Jon Robinson of French Country Homes (www.frenchcountryhomes.com) comments that easier accessibility has also boosted the area's appeal: "With the introduction of the new low-cost flights from Southampton to Clermont Ferrand in 2011, the whole of the Auvergne has become more accessible. The airport has been working intently on increasing the number of destinations over the last couple of years.

"Cantal is one of the only departments of France where you can still pick up a bargain to renovate," he adds. "Plus the skiing area in the Auvergne is becoming more popular and the number of enquiries for second homes close to Le Mont Dore and Super Besse has grown steadily over the last couple of years."



The medieval citadel of Carcassonne was restored in the 19th century, and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site

2 AUDE

Languedoc-Roussillon has seen the highest regional price rises over the past year, so it's no surprise that two of its departments feature here. Aude (department number 11) comes in at second place, with an increase of 17.8% – good news for the many Brits who have already bought property here. The average house price currently sits at €141,000, less than the national average, so another area that represents value for money.

The administrative capital is Carcassonne, famous for its awe-inspiring medieval citadel, although Narbonne is bigger in terms of population; Narbonne has an impressive cathedral and the Canal de la Robine runs through the town centre.

The department has mountains (Pyrénées and Montagne Noir) and coast (Gruissan and Port-la-Nouvelle resorts), as well as Cathar castles and important winemaking areas such as Minervois, Corbières and Fitou. Then there's the UNESCO World Heritage listed Canal du Midi and *Plus Beaux Village* Lagrasse with its abbey.

The area is easy to reach by air, with Aude having its own international airport at Carcassonne as well as others close by (Toulouse, Montpellier, Perpignan,

Nîmes and Béziers), and TGV stations at all these main towns too.

"Rising prices in the Aude could be due to the fact that it is generally cheaper there than in other Mediterranean departments and you get more 'bang for your buck'," comments Annelise Bosshard of AB Real Estate (www.ab-real-estate.com). "The more people cotton onto this, the more prices will be gradually driven up.

Freddy Rueda of Real Estate Languedoc (www.realestatelanguedoc.com) adds: "People from northern France and outside France are still coming to the south, even if there is an international crisis. The Aude is the perfect place – properties are not too highly priced, there's a good climate, nice landscapes, old villages, good food and wine, and low-cost airlines.

"Clients who are coming less, for example, from the UK, are being replaced by buyers from northern countries (Swedish, Norwegians) and by Americans and Australians. So there is still demand and it is unlikely that prices will decrease in the future. Prices fell after the subprime crisis and are now near or at bottom so it's a good time to buy. Once debt problems in the eurozone are sorted out, prices will rise again as they are still low compared with Provence."

3 TERRITOIRE DE BELFORT

Hands up who's never heard of Territoire de Belfort? Well you won't be alone, as this Franche-Comté department (number 90) is little known by Brits either holidaying in France or buying property there. But with a house price hike of 13.6% over the past year, perhaps it's time househunters paid it a little attention. It's not the cheapest area though, with an average house price of €165,400.

Territoire de Belfort is the smallest department in France outside of the Paris/Ile de France area. Bordering Switzerland, more than a third of its population live in the departmental capital, Belfort, which is known for its Vauban citadel and sandstone lion statue by Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi, who also designed the Statue of Liberty in New York. Every July, the town attracts thousands of rock fans for the Eurockéennes festival.

Belfort is divided by the Savoureuse river, with the old town and château on the

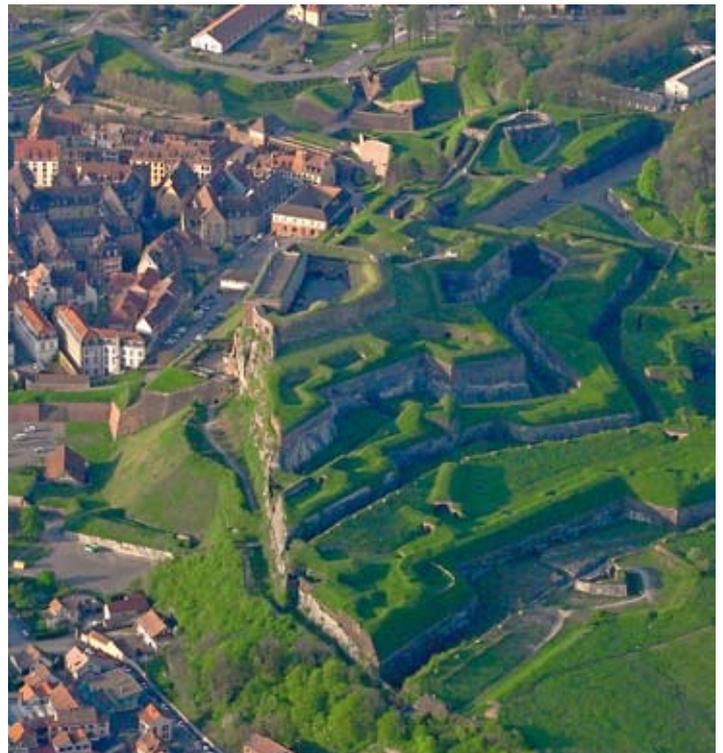
eastern bank and the commercial new town to the west. Elsewhere, the department is made up of countryside and villages.

Basel/Mulhouse is the department's closest airport, with Strasbourg and Geneva also within reach. However, it is the new Burgundy-Alsace TGV rail line that has really put Belfort on the map as the high-speed trains will now stop in the city. This will reduce travelling times from Belfort to the capital from around three and a half hours to two and a quarter hours.

The 'TGV effect' is well documented in France, with mini property booms almost always accompanying the opening of a new line or station. Indeed, the whole area experiences a boost.

With over 2.4 million passengers a year expected to arrive at the two new stations of Belfort-Montbéliard and Besançon, the Franche-Comté region is gearing itself up for increased economic and tourist activity. No wonder then that property prices have already started to rise.

LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON HAS THE HIGHEST REGIONAL PRICE RISES FROM THE PAST YEAR, SO IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT SOME OF ITS DEPARTMENTS FEATURE HERE



On the border of Burgundy and Alsace, Belfort occupied a strategic position – its citadel is the best preserved of the many fortifications built by Vauban

Note the distinctive Comté-style bell tower on the church in Chancey, a typical village in rural Haute-Saône

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4 HAUTE-SAÔNE

It appears that the new TGV line is already working its magic on Haute-Saône (70), also in Franche-Comté, as the department saw a house price increase of 13.6% in 2010-11. The average price in this rural, sparsely populated department is just €124,900, so it would be a good place for anyone seeking a peaceful country home on a limited budget.

Named after the Saône river,

the department is made up of agricultural land and forests, with many lakes. The main town, Vesoul, enjoys a lovely valley setting and has an old town with attractive Gothic buildings. Haute-Saône's wine industry centres on the pretty town of Champlitte, while Pesmes is one of France's *Plus Beaux Villages*.

Although quiet now, in the 19th century Haute-Saône was one of France's most industrial areas; lace-making and glass-

blowing can still be seen there today.

The closest airports are at Strasbourg and Geneva, or you could, of course, catch the TGV to Belfort-Montbéliard, Besançon or Dijon.

"In the 20th century many young people moved from Haute-Saône, a mostly rural area, to the cities," comments Dick Goosen of Franimo (www.franimo.com). "There wasn't a lot of work in the region because of the lack of

modern industry. With young people moving away and old people staying behind, properties started to be abandoned. And there you have it: beautiful, big, cheap properties in hilly countryside with lots of woods and pastures. An excellent situation for buyers looking for value for money. A big farmhouse here will cost 10 times less than in the UK. And there are plenty for sale.

"You can compare the area to the Ardèche and Dordogne in the 1960s and 1970s. This is one reason why I think prices are rising: buyers from Britain, Holland and Germany, searching for stability and a slow pace of life, are starting to discover the area and properties that can't easily be found in their native countries and if so would cost a fortune.

"Prices are really low in comparison with other regions, and they may now be catching up with other areas. The financial crisis might also be a reason for the price rises; people are searching for bargains – and they can find them here."

5 GARD

Back to the sunny south, and Gard (department number 30) in Languedoc-Roussillon, where house prices have risen by 13.5% over the past year. At €200,000, the average price reflects the popularity of this southern, Mediterranean location.

Long popular with overseas property buyers, the Romans were some of the first foreign househunters to arrive in the area! You can see evidence of this in the arena at Nîmes (the departmental capital) and the spectacular Pont du Gard aqueduct.

Gard divides into three fairly distinct geographical areas: the mountainous north-west, part of the Cevennes National Park; the garrigues through the centre, with olive groves and vineyards; and the coastal portion to the south. On the border with the Provence-Côte d'Azur region, parts have a distinctly Provençal feel, and there are attractive towns such as Uzès, Alès, Remoulins, Aigues-Mortes and Bagnols-sur-Cèze, as well as *Plus Beaux Villages* La Roque-sur-Cèze and Aiguèze.

Nîmes has an international



Ramparts of the fortified town of Aigues-Mortes in Gard – it was built in the 13th century on the orders of Louis IX

airport and TGV stations, plus easy access to the other airports and rail links listed in the Aude section.

"Both Aude and Gard are historically the cheapest along the French Mediterranean coast and therefore house prices may be gradually aligning themselves with the other departments," comments Annelise Bosshard of AB Real Estate.

"The region remains one of the most desirable, by French and expats alike, due to its warmer climate, easy accessibility, sandy beaches, beautiful countryside and relaxed pace of life. It is a popular location for buying property for these reasons and also because prices are competitive compared with other areas in the south of France. More and

more people are getting wise to that, and there is a ripple effect of rising house prices running down the coast from Italy toward Spain.

"The population in Languedoc-Roussillon increases about 10% each year as is evidenced by the expanding villages and *lotissements*. There are projections that the population will double over the next 20 years."

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