

Life's a breeze



In Provence, where the Mistral blows, solid stone houses are built to protect against the wind

France's world-famous winds have shaped the country's landscape, architecture, culture, lifestyle - and even fashion, says **Daniela Harris**

Bordered by four seas (North Sea, Channel, Atlantic and Mediterranean) and by three mountain ranges (Alps, Jura and Pyrénées), France is quite literally the perfect storm for a changeable climate, driven by its variable winds. Its reputation for being a windy country is well known and while its breezes can be formidable forces in winter, they provide welcome relief at the height of summer. The country's landscape has been shaped by its winds, as has the architecture, leisure, the arts and even fashion. These winds have their own unique personalities and histories. Here is our gust-by-gust guide.

WHERE THE WIND BLOWS

● **La Bise** (the kiss) is an intense but dry affair that blows both very hot and cold. La Bise hails from the landmass of central Europe, blowing across eastern France from the Alps. The only thing that stops the kiss's path is the Atlantic weather system and the mountainous Massif

Central. During summer, this wind is perfect for drying your laundry, prompting the local saying *avec la bise, lave ta chemise* (with the bise, wash your shirt).

● **Le Mistral**. By far the most famous of France's winds is Le Mistral, an extension of La Bise that runs south down the Rhone valley to central Provence, and can last for weeks. With speeds recorded of up to 90 miles an hour, Le Mistral, meaning 'masterly', certainly lives up to its powerful reputation. However, it is this very wind that blows across Provence, the Côte d'Azur and the easterly parts of Languedoc-Roussillon to create the region's extraordinary light, the freshest of air and uncommonly bright days that attract so many visitors.

● **Le Tramontane** means 'beyond the mountains' and is referenced as early as the 13th century by Marco Polo. More recently, the band Foreigner wrote a track *Tramontane*, referring to the wind's foreign credentials. This mischievous wind manifests as very

powerful, sudden gusts of wind that seemingly appear out of nowhere across the southwest of France. It is a northerly wind created by the bottleneck between the Alps and Mediterranean. Across Occitanie, many a street and square are named after this mischief-making wind.

● **Le Marin**. Not as powerful as its brother the Mistral, as the name suggests, the Marin also derives from the sea (the Gulf of Lion), and is a warm, wet wind that creates rain in central

France. It also helps to push back the Tramontane wind, which blows over the Pyrénées and together they create a cloudless airspace above the Aude and Pyrénées-Orientales.

BREEZE BLOQ ARCHITECTURE

Throughout the southwest of France, you can see large, solid stone country houses (known as *mas*), which were built orientated in a southerly direction. This was done not only so they faced the

OUR TOP 5 WEATHER IDIOMS

1. *Un vent à décorner les bœufs!* (a wind to dehorn cattle). Meaning a very strong wind, this is an old farming phrase relating to the fact that it is better to dehorn cattle in a strong wind to avoid parasites.
2. *Le fond de l'air est frais* (the back of the air is fresh). Meaning that there is still a bit of cold in the wind that blows in the spring, despite the heat.
3. *Une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps* (one swallow does not make spring). A warning not to think that spring is here yet just because the first signs have begun.
4. *Ça caille* (it curdles). Meaning it is freezing out there.
5. *Il fait un soleil de plomb* (it's a leaden sun). Meaning it is very hot and sunny outside.

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€375,000

PÉPIEUX, AUDE

Fantastic Mediterranean villa with three bedrooms, idyllic garden and pool. Located in a tranquil spot and yet within walking distance of a bustling little Minervoise village.



€441,500

MONSÉGUR, GIRONDE

Lovely 'maison de maître' located near Monségur. The property has five bedrooms, a large attic, several stone outbuildings and stands in over a hectare of land.



€469,000

PUY-L'ÉVÊQUE, LOT

Stone house surrounded by nearly three hectares of meadow and woodland. It comes with five bedrooms, terrace, saltwater pool and uninterrupted views over the surrounding vineyards.



€185,000

OLONZAC, HÉRAULT

Pretty three-bedroom stone cottage in a popular village. There's a small garden opposite the house, which the current owners have landscaped to accommodate a plunge pool and summer kitchen.

sun, but also to protect their inhabitants against the wind.

In the Charente department and throughout the old Poitou-Charentes region you will find large stone houses with a south-facing aspect and very few windows in the north-facing wall. Called *Charentaise*, these were also designed to keep out the wind. They tend to be less grand than a *maison de maître*, but are rectangular in shape and have very satisfying symmetrical layouts.

The shutters of French properties (*volets* from the word *vol*, to fly) are there to protect and insulate homes from the sun, but also to provide protection from the wind.

This quintessentially French feature, which adds character to many a French property, may not have existed were it not for the breeze.

Bell towers in France are typically built with an opening to allow the wind to pass through and add to the distinctively French look of villages and towns throughout the country, while the old stone tower windmills that abound in France also add to that pastoral idyll.

No mention of French windmills can be made, however, without talking about the most famous windmill of all: the Moulin Rouge. Do you know its origins? In 1809,

two windmills owned by two brothers sat on the site of Montmartre, which at the time was farmland and vineyards outside Paris's city walls. One mill produced flour, the other ground spices and crushed onions. During the French Revolution, one of the brothers ended up meeting a gruesome end involving the sails of the windmill. This prompted the other brother into a career change and he turned his mill into a popular watering hole called a *guingette* - a term used today to describe an open-air venue serving drinks. *Guingette* refers to the white wine produced there from the local grapes, which was cheap as it

wasn't taxed, being outside the city walls.

As its popularity grew, it became a space for dancing known as the Moulin de la Galette (named after a popular bread made from the flour of the mill) - depicted famously by Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec and Picasso. By the end of the 19th century, it had become the place we know and love today.

LIVING THE HIGH LIFE

With this natural raw energy, it is unsurprising that there are plenty of leisure activities that harness the wind. In April/May you can come and enjoy Le Mondial du Vent - a thrilling annual competition

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€650,000

BOURNAZEL, TARN

This beautiful old stone farmhouse and its outbuildings have been converted into a fabulous home with a guest wing. It's located in a rural setting with open views and a large saltwater swimming pool, just minutes from one of France's most beautiful villages.



€339,200

LA SAUVETAT-DU-DROPT, LOT-ET-GARONNE

A stone farmhouse located in a superb elevated position just a stone's throw from a lively village. The property comes with 1.5 hectares of land, which includes 30 fruit trees and 100m² of vines, several outbuildings with lots of potential and a well.



€349,000

LÉOVILLE, CHARENTE-MARITIME

Tastefully renovated country house located on the edge of a small hamlet. It comes with three bedrooms, a large swimming pool and pretty views over the surrounding countryside.



€365,000

LAVERGNE, LOT-ET-GARONNE

Stunning views and a quiet setting benefit this 17th-century property. Habitable following recent structural renovation, it's now ready for that personal quality finish. Airport and town life nearby.

between the international stars of windfoil, windsurfing and kite surfing. With an average of over 300 windy days a year, the beaches of Leucate and La Franqui in the Aude are ideally positioned to host the event. Throughout the year, even when the wide sandy beaches are empty, you'll see windsurfers practising their craft along that stretch of Mediterranean coastline.

About 750 official sites offer paragliding in France and over 150 paragliding schools (look out for FFVL certification - Fédération Française de Vol

Libre - and check out your local tourist board for information on where to go). They are concentrated over the Alps, Pyrénées and Provence. All these locations offer stunning and dramatic landscapes, châteaux and turquoise lakes to paraglide over.

In 1783, the Montgolfier brothers famously launched the first unmanned hot-air balloon flight. A few weeks later, Louis XVI decreed that convicts be forced into being the first pilots but a couple of French daredevils, the Marquis François Laurent d'Arlandes

and Pilâtre de Rozier petitioned successfully for the 'honour'. Today, the Grand Est Mondial Air Ballon is the biggest hot-air ballooning festival in Europe, held biannually in Lorraine. A huge event lasting more than 10 days, it is well worth a visit.

The winds of France have shaped the way of life here, but we also have them to thank for the prolonged days of sunshine in the south. While central Europe bakes during the summer, in France people can enjoy the weather with a natural breeze to cool

them down. However, the wind doesn't just lower the temperature, it also blows away pollution and dust in its wake. Without it, that distinctive clear light that has inspired generations of French painters and draws tourists back to France year after year would not exist. ■

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