

# Bricks & Mortar

14 Bricks &amp; Mortar

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## OVERSEAS

### A vineyard for the price of a Chelsea flat

Terry Wogan once described the Gers department in Gascony, where he owned a house for 19 years, as “the quietest place in Europe. There is no industry, no major roads, very little tourist traffic and the food is excellent.

“Actually... it’s a rubbish place,” the broadcaster went on to tell Complete France, an information website: “If you ruin it for me I’ll have to come and find you.”

Being discovered by the jet-set crowd is said to be the number one fear of those who live in this part of southwest France, with its fields of wheat, vineyards, stone villages, quirky restaurants, weekend markets and the production of armagnac.

This remote and bucolic area, which embodies the idea of *la France profonde* (traditional, rural France), has another big plus — it’s affordable. The pound is at a six-month low to the euro, stretching the budgets of many Britons hoping to move abroad.

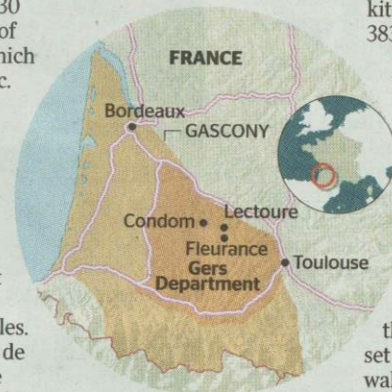
Gascony, where 30,000 Brits have properties and which was the home of d’Artagnan, the hero of Alexandre Dumas’s book *The Three Musketeers*, is unspoilt. It is one of the least dense in terms of population in Europe, with just 30 inhabitants per square kilometre,

compared with 252 in the French Riviera and 2,781 in Paris.

In the Gers you can buy a rambling estate with a pool, a guest house, a commercially successful vineyard and substantial forest for the price of a one-bedroom flat in Chelsea, southwest London. For example, near the village of Éauze, half an hour’s drive from the town of Condom, the estate agency Laffargue and Charles is selling an organic wine estate for €1.27 million (£1.14 million). The estate includes 30 hectares of woods and 14 hectares of white wine-producing grapes, of which a portion is used to make armagnac. The four-bedroom, four-bathroom house is rustic but well maintained and comes with a guesthouse and wine-making room with storage tanks. The most expensive property on the market, at €3 million, is also one of the region’s most historically important and is being sold by its aristocratic owner through Laffargue and Charles. It is the sprawling castle of Charles de Batz de Castelmoré d’Artagnan, the chief musketeer for Louis XIV and the man on which Dumas based the character in his novel. The 10th-century castle near the town of Lupiac, which retains its original medieval (and listed)



This seven-bedroom chateau in Condom, Gascony, is on sale for €2.25 million through Laffargue and Charles



kitchen, measures 700 sq m and has 383 acres of agricultural land and forest.

These properties are right at the top end of the market in Gers and a family home with a pool, garden or forest sells for about £500,000 or less. For example, near Condom, a renovated four-bedroom house, with a swimming pool and 8.5 acres of woodlands is on the market for €560,000 through Laffargue and Charles.

In Fources, the agency is selling a three-bedroom stone house, which is set within the village’s medieval fortified walls, has a garden and is on the market for €321,000.

The question many buyers have is how has the area remained so quiet and the area so unspoilt for so long? A key reason, says Beaux Villages, an estate

agency and specialist in expat sales in the area, is that it isn’t a coastal region, so it doesn’t attract the beach crowd. There is also a lack of transport links; there is no railway station and the nearest airport, Toulouse, is an hour’s drive away. Over the past decade, the average house price in Gers has risen by 1.6 per cent.

While price is what lures buyers in the first instance, it’s the lifestyle that convinces them to stay. Pretty provincial towns such as Condom, Lectoure and Fleurance are particularly popular. Weekend markets are held in many of the small villages and there are some excellent restaurants to discover, such as the historic Brocante in the village of Aignan, known throughout the area for its homemade cheesecake.

David Byers