



ROYALTY | SOUTH-WEST FRANCE

With the Lot

‘We used to see the princes, Frederik and Joachim, running down these streets when they were little,’ a local resident tells me as we top up our glasses from a carafe of chilled rosé under the early evening sun. It’s late summer 2023 (five months before Queen Margrethe II’s shock abdication from the Danish throne) and there’s a holiday buzz in the air in Montcuq-en-Quercy-Blanc — a long name for a small village in the Lot, a department in south-west France where we are fortunate to have a holiday home.

Like my two young daughters do now, the young Danish princes probably giggled together at the meaning of the name Montcuq, which, pronounced with a silent “q” in French, is awkwardly close to *mon cul* (to put it as delicately as possible, a slang term meaning “my arse”). Home to just over 2000 people, the village enjoys nationwide renown thanks to a famous sketch from 1976 when actor Daniel Prevost paid it a visit to show the nation “Montcuq” for the first time on live TV.

Although the mayor has expressed his frustration at having to allocate a budget each year to replacing town signs all too frequently souvenired for their novelty value, *les Montcuquois*, as its residents are called, embrace the joke with good humour. An important stop on the Voie du Puy, one of three French Camino de Santiago routes, the warmer months bring a constant stream of hikers to local *gîtes d’étapes* or hiking refuges.



The region where the Danish Royals holiday also has bargain-priced holiday homes, writes Chrissie McClatchie.

Its Sunday farmers market is the weekly social event for miles as people catch up while browsing stalls selling seasonal produce and local wine. Towering over the scene is its 12th-century donjon, once a Cathar stronghold that was also passed like a hot potato between French and English hands during the Hundred Years’ War in the late Middle Ages.

Despite its compact size, there’s a Spanish tapas bar owned by an Irishman, Dave, and a French and English bookshop with a magical garden café. Everything municipal is named for Nino Ferrer — a name French music buffs will recognise for such classics as *Le Sud* — who made the Montcuq countryside home and sadly took his life on his farm in 1998.

We fell upon the Lot quite by accident; one of France’s least populated and least known administrative departments — named for the river that splits it in two — it’s a good seven-hour drive from our apartment just outside Nice, a city that has been home since I left Sydney in 2007.

Buttressing the better-known Dordogne

to the west, house prices are about a quarter of what they are on the Cote d’Azur, (and an absolute bargain when compared to Australia’s capital cities) and we had that post-pandemic hankering for a garden and a rural view. As I fed all our search criteria into seloger.com, the French equivalent of domain.com.au, the Lot came up time after time. We were sold, buying a small, two-bedroom bungalow with a barn ripe for renovation and a pool just outside the village.

Now, when I open up our lounge room doors to a gently sloped field of sunflowers huddled around a tiny church made from local “*Quercy*” stone, a buttercream-coloured limestone, I still pinch myself that, out of all of France, we stumbled upon this. There’s something calming about the gentle dove-cote-dotted countryside, which is far from the drama of the Cote d’Azur’s plunging alpine cliff faces and eagle’s nest villages.

Deer scurry between the tall oak trees in our garden and we have a truffle farmer for a neighbour. I can count the number of cars

that pass by our house in a day on one hand — and the number of tractors on the other. On clear nights, the ink-black sky lights up like a child’s bedroom ceiling crammed with glow-in-the-dark stickers. The stars shimmer with glee at the glorious lack of light pollution.

It turns out, however, that we’re in good company, for the Lot is also a part of the world so favoured by the Danish monarchy that they even own a castle here, Chateau de Cayx.

And in more recent years, it has been the children of (now) King Frederik and Queen Mary who locals spot running down cobbled streets on balmy summer days.

It seems many people in the Lot have their own royal story to share. A few years ago, a fellow travel writer stopped in at a butcher’s just off the main square in Cahors, the capital of the department.

As she and her brother waited to choose their cuts of meat, the lady in front of them paid for her purchases.

“To my astonishment, the butcher said ‘*merci beaucoup, votre Majeste*’ (thank you, your Majesty!)”. It was Queen Margrethe!” she recalled on a shared WhatsApp group.

Queen Margrethe and her French-born husband, Prince Henrik, or Henri de Laborde de Montpezat by birth, purchased the tumbling 15th-century chateau overlooking the river in 1974, when their two princes were still aged in single digits.

The family set about bringing it back to its former glory, keeping with the south-west



style of exposed stone walls and terracotta roof tiles.

They soon slipped into an easy rhythm of summers at the sprawling property.

It’s a tradition Margrethe has continued, even after her husband died in 2018. According to local chat, she arrives with little fanfare, flying into Toulouse’s Blagnac airport where her late husband’s former secretary waits to collect her by car for the two-hour drive north.

The chateau overlooks the family’s impressive wine estate that stretches as far as the riverbank. The Danes have earned quite a reputation for their fine malbecs, the main grape in these parts — although here it goes by the name Cahors, in the French way of naming wines by place rather than variety.

One of the country’s great red wines — even if it’s often referred to as the “black wine” because of its depth of colour — the appellation fans far wider than the town of Cahors itself, which sits all snug in the horseshoe-shaped bend of the river and charms with its 14th century stone arched bridge, Pont Valentre.

In summer, there’s a chance you’ll cross paths with a royal at Cahors’ lively market that takes over Place Chapou on Wednesday and Saturday mornings. Queen Mary, in her usual sartorial style, has been papped blending in with a relaxed crowd who fill wicker baskets to the brim with local specialities, including something inevitably made from duck.

From Cahors, it’s an easy 20-minute drive back to Chateau de Cayx along a road that barely lets the meandering Lot from its sights. The nearest village, Luzech, has pretty river views, although King Frederik can trace his family on his father’s side to Albas, one bend further west along the river (or a pleasant two-hour walk along a peaceful towpath).



same sort of revered international recognition as Gordes and Saint Paul de Vence in Provence, but you get the feeling the French are happy to keep it under wraps: they have, after all, voted it as one of their favourite villages in the country.

I haven’t spotted any Scandinavian monarchy there, or anywhere in the Lot — yet — but I have met more Australians than

Clockwise from main: The Lot River, taking a turn below the village of Albas; bridge known as Pont Valentre in Cahors; the village of Montcuq; then Princess (now Queen) Mary with her daughter Josephine photographed at Chateau de Cayx in 2014; Queen Margrethe II in Cahors in 2008; the Danish Royals’ Chateau de Cayx and its vineyards. Photos: Getty Images, Lot Tourism

THE DETAILS

FLY

Qatar Airways flies daily between Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and Doha and three times a week from Doha to Toulouse. See qatarairways.com

STAY

Surrounded by Malbec vineyards on the banks of the river Lot, Chateau de Mercuers is a fit-for-a-royal-family 13th century castle with a Michelin star restaurant, Le Dueze. It’s also a Relais & Chateaux property; rooms from €295 (\$478). See chateaudemercuers.com

VISIT

You can buy wine and other royal souvenirs at the small shop onsite at Chateau de Cayx, open Monday to Saturday year round. See chateau-de-cayx.com

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Also known as Albas la Jolie (Albas the Pretty), the village lives up to its name, a photogenic explosion of iguana-green foliage jostling against worn stone houses along the riverbank. Surveying the scene is an old bishop’s palace, newly planted with a tranquil Tuscan garden, an Italian region this part of the country has been likened to.

My pick of the villages clinging to the river bank, however, is Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, a medieval village so idyllic it could be a Disney set. Peeping out over the river from its lofty perch, its narrow alleyways brim with artisan shops, cosy restaurants and bright flower boxes.

Labelled one of *Les Plus Beaux Villages en France*, it’s a name that doesn’t attract the

I could have ever imagined. There’s a group of friends from Melbourne who pitched in to buy a couple of apartments in Montcuq a couple of decades ago and continue to visit regularly on a time-share basis. For Bastille Day celebrations last summer, we were among at least a dozen Aussies watching fireworks burst from the top of the donjon into the rural night sky to the opening chords of *Thunderstruck*. It all felt so familiar, in a corner of the world least expected. Maybe this year we’ll have to extend an invitation to our Aussie neighbour, Queen Mary. 1

The writer travelled at her own expense. See tourisme-lot.com