

INTERNATIONAL

# What to buy on the other French Riviera

Look west along the Mediterranean to find cheaper property. By Frances Marcellin

**Y**ou won't find the Cannes Film Festival or Club 55, but if owning a dreamy Mediterranean holiday home is your main desire, buying a property on the "other Riviera" can be half the price of the Côte d'Azur.

The seaside resorts scattered along the western side of the south coast in Aude and Pyrénées-Orientales are adored by those in the know for their authenticity, beguiling wildness and long sublime stretches of fine sandy beaches.

The commune of Leucate, which is the birthplace of Henry de Monfreid, French adventurer and author, and which was also frequented by artist Paul Gauguin, is home to Aude's first beach resort: La

Franqui. "One word for me is paradise, and I don't want to tell too many people," says Anne Stapleton of Private Property Sellers. "It could easily rival the jet-set location of Plage de la Paloma," in ritzy St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat near Nice.

The sandy beach at La Franqui has the lapping waves of the Mediterranean on one side and a lagoon on the other, leaving a thin strip of sand in the middle that leads to the five-mile-long Plage les Coussoules. These lagoons, or *étangs*, are typical of the area - part of the 173,000-acre Regional Natural Park - and here wild flamingos, pink salt lakes and hundreds of different types of birds make up the landscape. In La Franqui, property is around €240 (£210) per sq ft, compared with €1,245 per sq ft in Plage de la Paloma, says Stapleton.

Heading north to the next *étang* is a cluster of locations that offer the perfect cocktail of wild lagoon and Mediterranean holiday life: Gruissan, Narbonne and Bages. The latter is a charming fishing village with a hidden lagoon beach and Matisse des Arts that holds six art exhibitions a year.

"Bages is comparable to Saint-Paul de Vence on the Riviera, a charming hilltop village that attracts artists, gourmets and those in the know," says Nadia Jordan of property finder Foot-hills of France. Last year Jordan bought a three-bedroom stone village house with lagoon views in Bages. An idyllic property with cascading pink bougainvillea, it sits next door to the convivial



Les Beaux Arts restaurant. She bought it for €300,000 and now rents it out at languedoclocation.com; prices range from €800-€1,400 a week.

East of Bages on the Étang du Grazel is Gruissan, which has one of the most impressive stretches of golden beach on this side of the Mediterranean coast. On a peninsula, some people draw similarities to St-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, but the beach itself could compare to Pampebonne in St Tropez.

Gruissan has three distinctive areas - port, beach and old town - and is famous for its coral-pink salt flats and salt production. At restaurant La Cambuse du Saunier you can try fresh local seafood seasoned with fleur de sel de Gruissan while overlooking rippling pink waters.

With iconic beach huts made famous in the 1986 film *Betty Blue*, Gruissan's white sands are a blissful way to spend long summer days. Julie Reaney, a consultant at buying agents Home Hunts, says that more of these coveted stilted bungalows are being built, and some contemporary homes are also on the way. "You can buy a 35sq metre (377sq ft) studio for €85,000," she says, adding that a 75sq metre (807sq ft) chalet needing redecoration would cost about €200,000.

The area is in high demand. Karl O'Hanlon, the developer of Château Capitoul, a wine estate between Gruissan and Narbonne, put new-build properties up for sale in April last year

that sold out in four months. His next project is in Bages's neighbouring village Peyriac-de-Mer. Renowned for its boardwalks across the reedy lagoons and flocks of flamingos, properties are on sale with Sphere Estates starting at €325,000.

Once a Roman port, Narbonne's centre has transformed into a tourist hotspot with bustling restaurants and bars along the Canal de la Robine. Stapleton compares it to Antibes on the Riviera, at half the price.

"You'd be looking to spend an average of €148 per sq ft," she explains, adding that the average cost of an apartment in Antibes is €414 per sq ft.

"Narbonne is a fun, bourgeois French city with the Mediterranean coast right on its doorstep," says Chitra Pullen of Pullen Real Estate. Family-friendly Narbonne Plage has been a favourite with the French for years and offers a surprisingly wide three-mile stretch of soft sand. Pullen says that a studio in the city costs around €100,000 and a three-bedroom house is around €300,000.

"You can also find lovely high-end homes in surrounding villages, which are always popular as rental properties," she adds. Pullen Real Estate is selling a four-bedroom property in Salles-d'Aude at €452,000. It is 20 minutes from Narbonne and summer rentals bring in €2,200 a week.

If you need a strong rental performer then Collioure, a fishing village in the Pyrénées-Orientales studded with coves, is another good bet. Comparable in style to St Tropez or even Villefranche-sur-Mer, agents say you can expect to rent a centrally located loft or fisherman's cottage for more than 25 weeks a year.

Buying in this area, rather than on the eastern side of the Mediterranean "is better value for money in a genuinely authentic environment," says Neil Hitchen, an agent with Collioure Property. Although the town is better known than most of the resorts on the "other Riviera", bagging a bargain is still possible. You can buy a two-bedroom apartment with Collioure Property for €184,000.

"It's a hidden gem," says Hitchen. "Here you're about as far south as you can be on the same Med as the Riviera without the crowds."



**COAST WITH THE MOST**  
A house in Bages which is for rent on languedoclocation.com, above; a house in Narbonne, €452,000 with Pullen Real Estate, main

**LIFE'S A BEACH**  
Narbonne's white sandy shore

