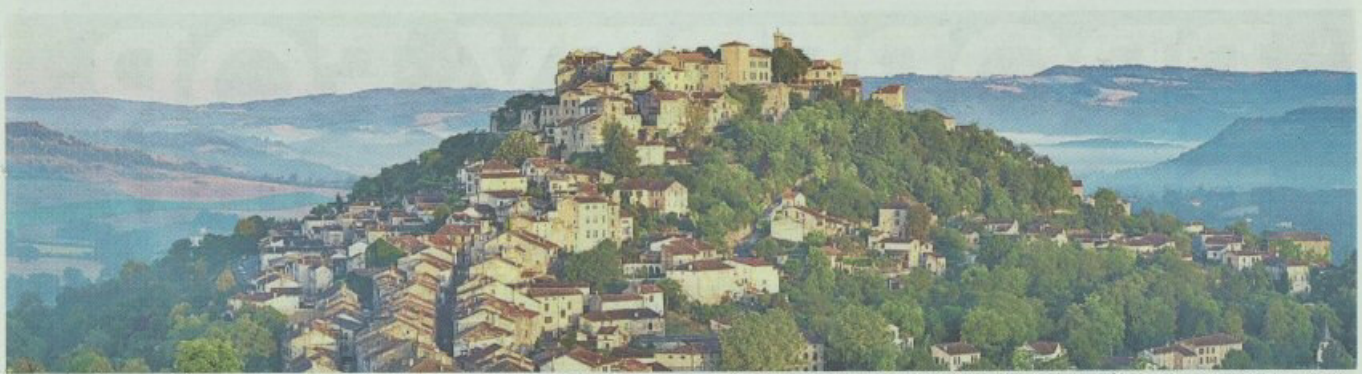


Bricks & Mortar

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OVERSEAS



The countryside around Cordes-sur-Ciel, a medieval 'bastide' town, in the Tarn, southwest France, is attracting international buyers who seek tranquility away from crowded beach resorts and cities

Tired of Tuscany? Look at Le Tarn

You will find hill towns and affordable homes in this area of southwest France, says Carol Lewis

Rolling countryside dotted with cypress trees and vineyards punctuated by medieval hilltop towns. It is little wonder that Le Tarn, in southwest France, is known as French Tuscany. Tuscany in the days before Frances Mayes bought her villa just outside Cortona and wrote *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

Christian Riviere, a spokesman for Le Tarn tourist board, explains that the nickname has historical roots. Albi, the prefecture of the department, was known as an Italian city in the 16th century, with immigrants arriving to paint the vast frescos in the Cathédrale Sainte-Cécile. The city, famous for textiles, was also a key point on the trade route from Italy to Spain — and it remains popular with the fashion pack, with Jean Paul Gaultier owning property close to the cathedral.

Street signs are in modern French and ancient Occitan — which resembles Italian or Spanish rather than French. "We don't think we are different from the rest of France, we know we are different," says Riviere.

The result is a laid-back approach, a diversity of cuisine that reflects not just French but Italian and Spanish influences, and a culture of welcoming newcomers. When Jeanne Boden, who emigrated from Britain 18 years ago, asked her local mayor, Paul Salva-Jor,



This five-bedroom villa, near St Antonin, is €495,000, with Agence L'Union



This restored five-bedroom château, with a three-bedroom guest house, near Cordes is €1.55 million with Savills



whether being British would be a problem, he opened the phone directory and pointed to all the non-French names in the region, including his own.

Charles Smallwood, owner of the estate agency Agence L'Union in St Antonin-Noble-Val, says: "The market hasn't been at its best for four years, properties have dropped in price where people want to sell, with prices coming down by 10-20 per cent. It has been a difficult time but I knew it would come back and it suddenly has. Since the beginning of the year we have had a regular run of sales, mainly because of the strong pound. It is a combination of the increasing strength of the pound,

prices decreasing and there being a wonderful choice [of homes to buy]."

Smallwood explains that traditionally holiday-home buyers would have hunted in the "golden triangle" between Albi, Cordes-sur-Ciel and Gaillac. However, the area around St Antonin, 25km northwest of Cordes, has been given a boost by the film *The Hundred-Foot Journey*, starring Helen Mirren, which was shot in the town. This has brought St Antonin and the surrounding area to an international audience.

St Antonin was also voted the third-most desirable village in France this year — after Ploumanac'h in Brittany and Montrésor in the Loire valley — by viewers of *Village préféré des Français* on channel France 2, which has boosted the town's prominence with French-speaking buyers.

Also hoping to lure those who enjoyed *The Hundred-Foot Journey* is Boden, who is sales director for *La Durantie*. This development of 57 homes — 17 of which have sold off plan — is in the grounds of the Château de la Durantie close to the medieval village of Castelnau-de-Montmiral (15km

Château de la Durantie, the focal point of *The Hundred-Foot Journey* and the new *La Durantie* development which has homes from €333,732 through Abercrombie & Kent International Estates

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northwest of Gaillac and about 20km southwest of Cordes).

The new-build homes — which range in price from €333,732 (£242,928), for a one-bedroom property with shared pool, to €777,530 for a five-bedroom house with private pool — will be built in the traditional rose brick found in the local villages and fortified towns of the area. The château, which was Le Saule Pleureur restaurant in the film, will be converted to a restaurant, bar, library, concierge and residents' club. The château's outbuildings will be extended, to create a gym, spa and events complex. There will also be communal indoor and outdoor pools, tennis courts, a children's play area and an amphitheatre — all surrounded by forest and countryside, and the development's own vineyards.

Building has just begun at the site, with show properties ready in February and the first properties ready for occupation next summer. *La Durantie* is offering a nine-year lease back scheme for those who wish to rent out their properties for a minimum of nine weeks a year, with the promise of a minimum 2.6 per cent net return.

For those who would prefer something older and stand-alone, Smallwood says there are some good-value villas in the Tarn countryside, including a three-bedroom, two-bathroom, restored farmhouse with a swimming pool and lovely views not far from Cordes for €250,000, or a four-bedroom house in 12 acres of grounds for €500,000 — far cheaper than you would find in the Italian countryside of Tuscany.

Julia Cruden and her daughter, Helen, own a house near the village of Itzac, 10km west of Cordes: "I just fell in love with the house — the lovely stone reminded me of Gloucestershire. The closeness of Toulouse [airport] was a big pull but also the accessibility of being just an eight-hour drive from Caen [ferry port]."

"The weather is better down here and summer carries on a bit longer, although it can be cold in the winter. But it is the very beauty of it, it is stunningly beautiful."

As Albert Camus, writer and philosopher, said of Cordes: "Tout y beau, même le regret" — everything is beautiful, even regrets.

