



[BRICKS & MORTAR]

CASTLES WITH FRENCH POLISH

Children play at being king of the castle – but those who are serious about making it a reality should look to France where good supply means reasonable prices, says Eugene Costello

THE OLD SAYING might have it that an Englishman's home is his castle, but a Frenchman — or anyone else, for that matter — can lay claim to a chateau for surprisingly affordable prices.

It is mainly down to geography and, of course, supply and demand. Mark Harvey, Partner, Knight Frank International Team says: “Land has always commanded a premium in the UK and one of the benefits of looking in a country as vast as France is that there exists a wonderful selection of countryside chateau and significant properties which come with both a certified historical past as well as that all elusive cordon of privacy that a landed estate gives.”

Harvey points out that the regions of Aquitaine and the Midi-Pyrénées alone cover nearly 100,000sq km and with more than 1,000 years of history having flowed back and forth from the Spanish border to the River Dordogne, nowhere else on earth, he says, has such a wide range of historical properties.

“From Merovingian castles and bastide villages to post-revolutionary countryside chateaux hardly anywhere else offers the opportunity to find these properties on the market at such attractive prices.”

Merovingian castles were built between the 5th and 8th centuries, and are often solid houses, rather than the turreted baroque affairs one associates with French chateaux — think the Disney palace — Frankish society being surprisingly harmonious, meaning their castles were displays of wealth rather than heavily fortified redoubts.

And bastides were walled medieval villages, often of the perched variety, largely built in Aquitaine and Gascony during the 12th and 13th centuries, with wealthy palaces built alongside. This felicitous marriage of history and geography, says Harvey, has led to a plethora of highly sought-after stock that comes with a reasonable price tag.

He has three on his books that he feels are especially attractive. On the book is a historic, attractive Gascon

[CAPTION]

chateau near the département capital of Auch, all cobbled streets and cafes and with a magnificent cathedral. With good transport links for air and rail at Toulouse and Bordeaux, this comes in at €1.495m. For that you get an imposing medieval castle with original keep that has been modified in an Italianate style in the 17th and 18th centuries to great effect.

Set in its own private valley of a hefty 7.7ha with parkland, mature woods and some organic pasture as well as a large pond, the owner really will be the lord of the manor as envisaged by the very first architects. At a glimpse, the main residence offers four reception rooms, four bedrooms and two bathrooms. Two additional units could be let separately, the one-bedroom l'Atelier and the three-bedroom La Ferme. With a mass of pillars and wrought-iron balustrades and gates, plus a swimming pool and separate barn that houses the utility room and boiler room, this is a prime piece of real estate that is a fraction of what a similar property on, say, the Côte d'Azur, were such a property available.

At a similar price, €1.465m, is an imposing Gascon chateau that would make a superb family home, and comes with cutting-edge low-impact environmental features. This is a stunning house, with metre-thick coloured walls and marble fireplaces in the main bedrooms. A tower was added to the northern end in the 19th century to lend balance to the earlier one at the southern end. The property comes with its own soundproofed recording studio and private five-seat cinema, and numerous out buildings mean that this would lend itself to being a high-prestige corporate head office.

The third that Harvey picks out is the jewel in the crown of the three, and conforms perfectly to the classic notion of a baroque chateau that sits a perch its own hill. At €3.25m, Chateau de Combecave is found in the Southwest, in Tarn-et-Garonne. The main building offers six bedrooms, with further accommodation afforded by the three-bedroom cottage and a further one-bed apartment. Formal gardens and courtyards galore will give the purchaser their own slice of the medieval chateau experience. ■

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opposite: a majestic hilltop chateau for sale in the Tarn-et-Garonne region of the Midi-Pyrénées is a blissful retreat yet still easily accessible from Agen and Toulouse.