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WHERE TO LIVE

Tarn-et-Garonne: the rural hotspot that's still connected

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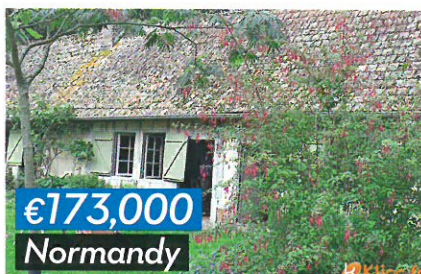
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South-western SPLENDOUR

Lucy Parford discovers picturesque villages
and a laid-back lifestyle in Tarn-et-Garonne

Montauban's majestic main square, with
its beautiful rosy brickwork and arcades



Crossed by the wide, meandering rivers which give it its name, Tarn-et-Garonne is a charming location in south-west France which is brimming with history and stunning landscapes.

The department was first created in 1808 by Napoleon when the capital, Montauban, became a prefecture to satisfy its rich and powerful inhabitants, the Montalbanians. The city remains a lovely place to visit or live in, with elaborate mansions and buildings made from pink stone thanks to the historically lucrative *pastel* trade. An official 'town of art and history', the focus is the beautiful 17th-century Place Nationale, where you will also find the St-Jacques Church, the oldest building in the city.

The French Neoclassical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres was born

here in 1780 and, almost a century later, the sculptor Antoine Bourdelle, who was a student of Auguste Rodin. The house where the prolific sculptor was born is located next to the Musée Ingres Bourdelle which hosts absorbing collections of both their works.

Heading west from Montauban brings you to Moissac, another charming *Ville d'Art et d'Histoire*, which is renowned for its impressive late 11th-century cloisters - some of the largest and best-preserved from the Romanesque period. L'Abbaye St-Pierre and its cloister are a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a stopping point on one of the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage routes. The popular Le Puy Route, which starts at Le Puy-en-Velay, passes through the centre of Moissac on its way to St-Jean-Pied-de-Port in Pyrénées-Atlantiques.

The city first developed around the abbey, surrounded by vineyards of what was the former province of Quercy. Its position on the banks of the Tarn river, near the confluence of the River Garonne, made it ideal for trading. During the 18th century, flour produced in Moissac was sold to the Caribbean with prosperous merchants' houses emerging along the riverside. In the old port area, you can still see some of these elegant facades which have spacious courtyards behind them.

The Canal des Deux Mers also passes through Moissac, where you can cycle beside it or even navigate your barge above the River Tarn via the impressive Pont-Canal du Cacor, a listed aqueduct which was built in the 19th century.

Another surprising discovery along the banks of the river in Moissac is the Art Deco influence in the Ste-Blanche district. ▶

“Criss-crossed by wide, meandering rivers, Tarn-et-Garonne is brimming with history and stunning landscapes”

In 1930 the river flooded, destroying part of the city centre and it was rebuilt by architects from Toulouse who were heavily influenced by the Art Deco style, creating gems such as Le Kiosque de l’Uvarium, which is now a restaurant.

BEAUTIFUL VILLAGES

As you leave the city and continue making your way west, make sure to stop at Auville which overlooks the River Garonne and has a breathtaking viewpoint. This picturesque village was famous in the 18th and 19th centuries for its pottery and has a spectacular circular market hall where a vibrant market still takes place every Sunday.

It is one of France’s most beautiful villages (*Plus Beaux Villages*) and a stop on the famous pilgrims’ Way of St James. Wander the cobbled streets, admiring the half-timbered houses and impressive 17th-century clock tower. Make sure to stop at L’Horloge restaurant which serves authentic dishes from Gascony, Quercy and Guyenne, using recipes passed down through the generations.

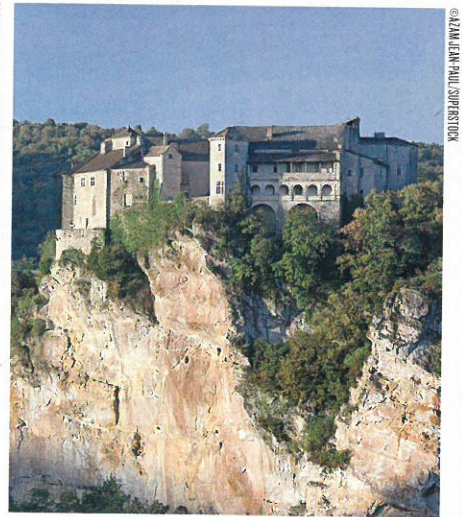
There are two other *Plus Beaux Villages de France* in Tarn-et-Garonne: Lauzerte to the north and Bruniquel to the east.

Lauzerte is a quaint *bastide* town, founded by the Count of Toulouse, with an attractive main square home to many medieval houses along with a quirky modern sculpture resembling an upturned corner, created by a local ceramic artist. Perched on top of a hill surrounded by rolling countryside, Lauzerte also has a unique pilgrims’ garden located at the foot of the old ramparts where you can pause and take in the view.

Bruniquel meanwhile was an important crossroads in the Middle Ages and boasts two castles, the *château vieux* built between the 12th and 13th centuries and the *château jeune* which dates to the 15th century. They are classified as historic monuments and were the setting for the 1970s film *Le Vieux Fusil* (The Old Gun). Take in the dramatic view from the top of the castle walls of the valley of Aveyron, as well as visiting the permanent exhibition dedicated to items recovered from the Paleolithic period from a cave nearby.



Historic Gramont Castle



Plus Beaux Village Bruniquel

Below the castles are a maze of side streets dotted with boutiques and cafés among the ancient archways.

From Bruniquel you can follow the stunning Gorges de l’Aveyron to the medieval town of St-Antonin-Noble-Val, the setting of another film, *The Hundred-Foot Journey* starring Helen Mirren which follows a chef and his family who leave India to open a restaurant in south-west France. You can join a guided tour following in the footsteps of the film’s talented chef which takes in the market and the riverbank.

On Sunday mornings one of the region’s most popular markets is held here and there are plenty of restaurants to while away a few hours in, including Le Festin de Babette on the banks of the Aveyron river which has a view of the bridge and the town’s old stone houses reflected in the water.

Surrounded by majestic limestone cliffs, St-Antonin-Noble-Val is also a hub for sports including climbing, hiking, mountain biking and canoeing. The



Pretty narrow lane in Gramont leading to a wonderful view



A busy street and market stalls in Moissac

company St Antonin Noble Velo, which was set up by a couple from the UK, offers cycling holidays from a 16th-century *auberge* in the heart of town.

PROPERTY MARKET

“If views are your thing, Tarn-et-Garonne simply cannot fail to please,” says Julie Savill, of Beaux Villages Immobilier. “Rolling hillsides, steep stony valleys, *bastide* towns perched atop hills - it really is a treat for the eyes and the soul.”

If you’re looking to buy in this area, she comments, the local stone is white and you’ll find beautiful big farmhouses with terracotta roofs, some with the distinctive local square *pigeonniers* attached or in the garden, and pretty country cottages as well as characterful medieval village properties. The villages tend to have year-round communities so, while you’ll be able to find space and traffic-free roads, you will never feel isolated.

Julie adds: “Demand for the area, and neighbouring Lot-et-Garonne and Tarn, is high. It’s popular with French, British,

Dutch and Belgian buyers which keeps a real international flavour going.

“Outside the major towns, the economy centres around fruit and nuts, which leads to a stable French community living and working locally. This isn’t among the cheapest departments in France, but we are seeing properties that come on the market priced sensibly and appropriately for the area.”

With its microclimate and rich soil, Tarn-et-Garonne produces 80% of the fruit in the Occitanie region. Chasselas de Moissac AOC (*Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée*) is one of the bestselling grapes, Reine-Claude Label Rouge is a unique variety of plum and the department also produces Quercy melons, Moissac cherries, Laguépie chestnuts and garlic from Lomagne. Quercy lavender is also grown organically at Lacontal Farm in Touffailles; visit the blooming fields from mid-June to July.

Specialities to try include Gâteau d’Oc, from Moissac (made with almond paste and Chasselas grapes), Montalbane from Montauban (a sweet cake made with

8 REASONS TO LIVE IN TARN-ET-GARONNE

- 1: Breathtaking scenery in the Gorges de l’Aveyron with far-reaching countryside views
- 2: Easy access to Toulouse-Bagnac Airport which has regular flights to the UK
- 3: Plentiful markets, particularly in Moissac, selling local grapes, melons, nuts and honey
- 4: Steeped in history with castles, abbeys and churches to explore
- 5: Beautiful rivers to walk alongside or canoe down in the summer months
- 6: Some of France’s *Plus Beaux Villages* to visit or move to including Auvillar and Bruniquel
- 7: Beautiful farmhouses and cottages for sale with plenty of land and potential
- 8: Established British expat community and plenty of tourist traffic to tap into

candied fruits and brioche) and macarons from Lauzerte, a favourite of Raymond IV, former Count of Toulouse. The Boulets of Montauban are delicious chocolate-covered hazelnuts named after a famous battle against the king of France.

There are also six wine appellations to sample in Tarn-et-Garonne including PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) Côteaux du Quercy, which covers 18 towns surrounding Montpezat-de-Quercy, and PDO Fronton, cultivated on the terraces of the left bank of the Tarn.

Plenty of events attract visitors throughout the year, including a hat festival in July in Caussade, home to the famous straw hats, the Festival des Châteaux de Bruniquel in summer and a chestnut fair in Laguëpie in October.

PLEASANTLY SURPRISED

American Catherine Rie and Jean-Claude Heidmann, who is French, previously lived in Paris but moved close to the village of Monclar-de-Quercy 12 years ago, drawn by the area's mild weather and excellent food.

They fell in love with the tranquility of their new home Daramousque (daramousque.com), which has two holiday properties including a villa and a cottage and is set in landscaped grounds with wonderful views.

Catherine says: "We were attracted to the Tarn-et-Garonne region for the proximity to Toulouse airport, and excellent highway access to the Pyrénées mountains and the Paris region.

"Also, the weather is mild but with four real seasons and we love the good food - farm fresh and locally sourced. It is an authentic region with many farms and no pollution with magnificent *bastide* villages and kind and welcoming people."

Their self-catering properties attract UK holidaymakers, as well as those from Belgium and France. They recommend visiting the Sunday outdoor market at St-Antonin-Noble-Val, a 25-minute drive away, and also dining out at Les Boissières in Nègrepelisse and Le Château de Salettes in Cahuzac-sur-Vère.

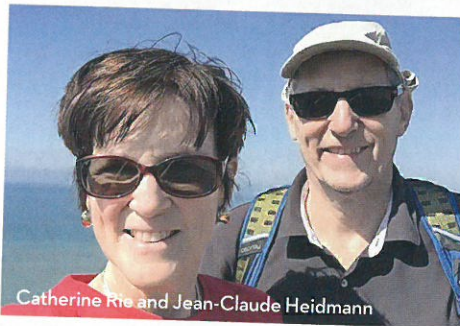
"We didn't know the area at all when we decided to live here, but have created a solid network of friends," Catherine says. "We wanted to be five minutes from a village with shops and other amenities. We found our small village, with several restaurants, a pub, bank, supermarket, and even a movie theatre in the local town hall auditorium showing three different recent movies per week - we were very pleasantly surprised!" ■

TURN OVER ▶

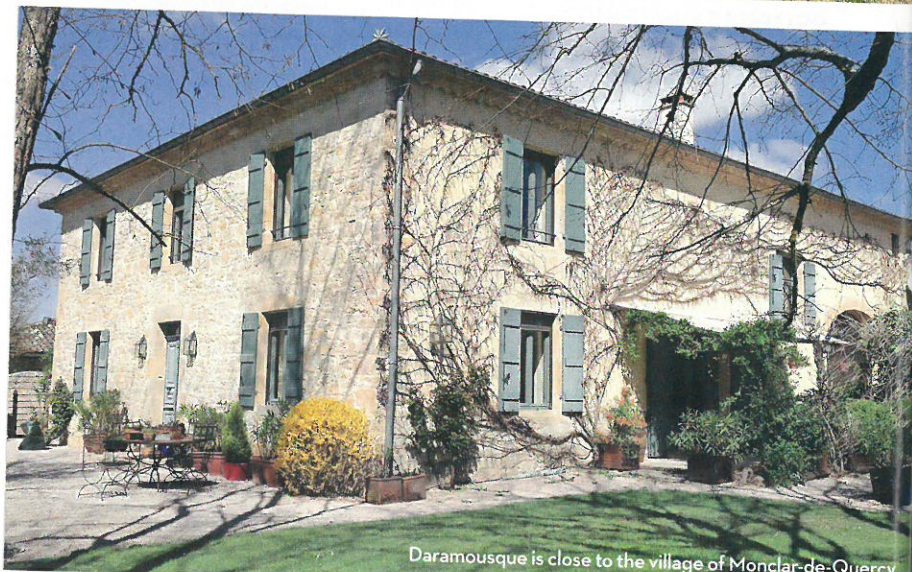
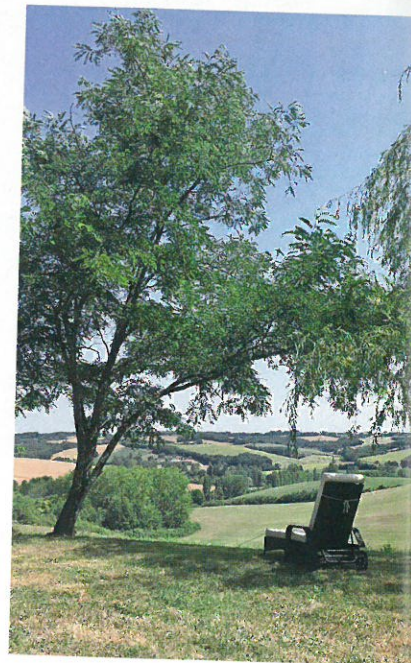
For our property picks in Tarn-et-Garonne, plus essential factfile and a local's view



Striking facades in Lauzerte



Catherine Rie and Jean-Claude Heidmann



Daramousque is close to the village of Monclar-de-Quercy