

## French Property News

Janvier. 2009

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Tirage : 50 000ex. / CVP : A partir de £1750 La page

Location South of France The Cévennes

# Off the beaten track

The stunning Cévennes National Park is not all about flora and fauna, it is a living, working location, reports **Solange Hando**

**O**n the south-eastern edge of the Massif Central, the Cévennes rise from the low-lying Piémont to Mont Aigoual and Mont Lozère, culminating at 1,699 metres, all ridges and valleys stretching as far as you can see. To the south are holm oaks, lavender and thyme and streams called *gardons* meandering through deep valleys. Elsewhere, dark forests of conifer and beech climb above the chestnut groves towards limestone plateaux, high pastures and moors strewn with heather and broom. From summer rambling to winter skiing, tourism is carefully managed as befits the National Park covering most of this area.

Access to this mountainous region is surprisingly easy. Take the Eurostar in London St Pancras to Lille, then TGV to Nîmes and continue by road or rail. Alternatively, fly Ryanair to Nîmes from Luton, also Liverpool or East Midlands in season.

### The National Park

Covering over 3,200km<sup>2</sup>, the Cévennes National Park was created in 1970 to protect a unique natural and cultural heritage. Over 2,000 species of plants thrive in a diverse landscape, including rare orchids and lilies and the carnivorous *drosera*. The fauna has made a spectacular recovery in recent decades and you may well spot beavers and deer and some of the 208 bird species, most impressive being the birds of prey. The park was declared a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve in 1985 and claims three eco-museums covering Mont Lozère, the Causses plateaux and Vallée Française.

But this is also a park for the people. After the 1800-1900s exodus, many are returning to their ancestral homes and a traditional way of life, managing the forest, tilling the land and



**Above:** Walking in Stevenson's footsteps on Mont Lozère  
**Right:** Typical Cévenal house in the village of Finiels

herding cattle and sheep to summer pastures. Wander through villages and hamlets and you may pass an old wash-house, lovingly preserved, a communal bread oven, a wayside cross or a church with a *clocher de tourmente* whose bells would ring during a storm to help those who had lost their way. There are menhirs and dolmens and sometimes a Roman ruin, a medieval abbey or vestiges from the Maltese knights who once had a seat in the region.

### Scenic trails

Rambling is a delightful way to explore this pristine land, along myriad footpaths where you can walk for just a couple of hours or a week or more. Some seek out old irrigation channels or wander through villages to retrace their history, others



follow an ancient transhumance route or the pilgrims' way to St Gilles du Gard, or explore Mont Lozère for spectacular views across the windswept heath. Up there, you can join the southern section of Stevenson's trail, the Scottish writer who crossed the Cévennes with a donkey 130

years ago. Horseriding and mountain-biking are also on offer, alongside watersports on rivers and lakes, potholing and climbing, and skiing in winter in the modest resorts of Bleynard-Mont Lozère and Mas de la Barque.

More wonders greet you on

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the steam train puffing its way around Anduze and along the winding mountain roads lined with belvederes which send shivers down your spine. In clear weather, the Corniche des Cévennes is a must, a precipitous road unrolling its breathtaking panorama all the way to St Jean du Gard.

#### Traditional heartlands

Beyond Alès, the busy gateway to the Cévennes, any village over 1,000 inhabitants becomes a 'town'. This is rural France, beautiful and unspoilt, basking in the summer sun but bitterly cold in winter. Ancient castles keep watch over the valleys; Aujac, Altier, Portes, shaped like a prow, St Pierre perched on a rocky outcrop, Florac, headquarters of the National Park, all pools and waterfalls and pastel-coloured walls.

Visit the markets to discover the tasty local produce, pilardon goat's cheese, lamb, beef, charcuterie, wild mushrooms in autumn, sweet onions and apples, honey, chestnuts, which once fed a whole family, still used in soups, pâté, bread, jam, liqueur and more. You'll find olives and wines in the south and delicious strawberries and tomatoes. In summer, night markets take over the streets and there's a chance to browse the local crafts: textile, wool, pottery, stone or wood sculptures. The silk industry which flourished in the early 19th century has long gone, but memories linger in old mills and museums.

Lost in a time warp, often isolated, every village has a charm of its own, a maze of cobbled lanes, an ancient fountain, a Romanesque church, a farm festooned in flowers in idyllic surroundings. Among the favourites are St Hélène, Firiels at the foot of Mont Lozère, Pont

de Montvert nestling in a green hollow, once home to the rebellious Huguenots known as Camisards, Villefort and its glistening lake, St Germain de Calberte, with its fantastic views or to the north, and La Garde Guérin, one of the 'prettiest villages in France' looking across the Chassezac gorge towards the hills of Ardèche.

#### Househunting

Much of the Cévennes have been barely discovered by the holiday property market so this is a good time to buy. Be prepared for a fair amount of research to find your dream home though. The sparsely populated northern valleys have few properties for sale. Building plots, however, are available and although limestone, granite and schist remain traditional materials, wood may be considered a cheaper alternative. A notable exception in the market is Villefort where a smart four-bedroom flat costs €149,000 while houses range from €65,000 to €230,000 for a substantial granite house or €730,000 for a 100-room muleteers' inn, partly restored and ideal for gîtes or B&B.

South of the Tarn, the market has more to offer such as a traditional four-bedroom house, with its own bread oven and spring for €286,200 in Barre des Cévennes, or an old silk farm in St Germain de Calberte, perfect for conversion, for €340,000.

The most popular areas are on the southern border, including St Jean du Gard where prices range from €165,000 to €895,000 for a large villa with pool and five hectares of grounds, and St Etienne Vallée Française, with a large farmhouse in need of renovation costing €372,000, a mas with woodlands near the river €399,000 and an old rural house with mountain views for just €124,000. The pretty town of Anduze has properties below €200,000 and one of the rare new developments, Dornaine de la Grande Pallière, where prices start at €105,000.

The modern city of Alès claims one small development, Le Clos d'Avène, offering Provençal-style houses from €155,000, a limited range of town apartments and houses averaging at €200,000, mostly on the outskirts. □

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Top to bottom Altier castle, on the northern fringes of the Cévennes; Lac Villefort; St Hélène village; Pont de Montvert