

Escape to northern France – wild beauty and historic charm

Brittany and Normandy had a rush of remote-working Parisians — but the tide may be turning

Zoe Dare Hall JUNE 16 2023



Dinard, opposite St Malo in Brittany, is a northern France hotspot © Getty Images/iStockphoto

In Cabourg on the Normandy coast, the tree-lined avenues of ornate 1880s villas that fan out from the seafront Grand Hôtel and casino have changed little since Marcel Proust found inspiration here for his most famous novel, *In Search of Lost Time*, more than a century ago. The film set-perfect resort, which attracts flocks of Parisians every summer, is like an open air museum of Belle Époque architecture.

For city dwellers, Normandy has long held an allure, says Blandine de Navacelle, a 35-year-old London- and Paris-based creative director who is “slowly taking over” a château in Flottemanville, Normandy, which her great-grandparents bought a century ago and where she spent her childhood.

“Driving to Normandy from Paris on a Friday evening is a challenge but with most companies now adopting a softer policy on working from home, a lot of people like me are now able to spend a lot more time in a second home,” she says.

At the height of post-lockdown 2021, one in 10 Parisians left the capital, at least for a time, for surrounding regions, according to mobile phone data analysed by SFR Geostatistics. While Paris’s apartment prices fell by 1.2 per cent in the third quarter of 2022, compared with the same period the previous year, those in Caen, the capital of Normandy’s Calvados department, and Rouen, the capital of Normandy, rose by 7.5 per cent and 8.2 per cent respectively, according to the Notaires de France.



Cabourg attracts flocks of Parisians every summer © Hemis/Alamy

Although de Navacelle acknowledges the influx of Parisians during lockdown, she insists there has always been an “old money” fashion for owning a second home in Normandy or Brittany. “Normandy is so beautiful with its deep green tones, beautiful stonework and masonry, and stunning beaches,” she says. “Culturally, there is a lot to do, too — many artists had houses in the area, so there are a lot of museums.”

The nostalgic quest for a quieter life here has also, over the past decade or two, driven many British buyers to relocate to the “Grand Ouest”, a large slice of northern France that takes in Normandy, Brittany and Pays de la Loire. Its landscapes of fields and woodland, the Cotswold-like charm of villages lined with stone houses and wild beauty of wide, sandy beaches can resemble a less populated equivalent of parts of rural England.



Fiona and Alan Elliott — she, 47, earns an income from UK rental properties, while he, 57, works remotely for an English company — have recently made the move across the Channel, swapping life in Buckinghamshire for a £100,000 farmhouse in the Normandy village of Champ-du-Boult.

“We live opposite the local bar, so we’ve met so many people as they are always popping in,” says Fiona, who has been able to relocate, post-Brexit, thanks to her Maltese passport. Alan — by virtue of being married to an EU citizen for more than five years — is applying for his. They have also minimised the expense of vets’ fees and paperwork when travelling from the UK with their dogs by getting them French pet passports.

However, some Britons who made the move before Brexit and the pandemic have found that the financial and geopolitical realities of the outside world have made life in their rural French idyll unsustainable.

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Vicky Elliott, 61, and her husband David, 71, have returned to Dorset, having sold their complex with four *gîtes* (holiday rental cottages) in rural Baud, in Brittany, earlier this year. They bought it for £380,000 in 2015 and sold it to a Parisian buyer for £560,000.

“We gradually built up the business and did very well for a few years, mainly with guests from the UK, many of whom came with their dogs,” says Vicky. “But Brexit hit and people were concerned about travelling with their pets, as it's so expensive and complicated. Then the Covid shutdown left us struggling to cover our £20,000-a-year running costs.”



The cobbled streets of Deauville, Normandy © Shutterstock/Telly

Gaynor Hickmore, a retired nurse, has also returned full-time from Brittany to the UK — to Lymm in Cheshire — after her husband Mark died aged 60 from Covid-19. She recalls the joys of the “lovely lifestyle away from the stresses of everyday life” and “stargazing with a glass of wine” from their traditional five-bedroom *longère* (a long, narrow house), set on half an acre in the hamlet of La Villeneuve.

The couple bought the house in 2015 for €110,000 and Hickmore sold last year for €175,000 (as a non-EU citizen, she had to pay 33 per cent capital gains tax). “We did the house up lovingly. We thought it would be great to retire here eventually. But I couldn't justify the costs of keeping it any longer,” she says.

Other British owners are moving back because of age, says Samantha Smith of Sextant Properties in Camors in Brittany. “They’re the type that bought 20 years ago when they were in their fifties or sixties. Brexit and Covid haven’t helped, however. They’ve missed seeing their grandchildren during travel lockdowns.”

Relocating British sellers “gave us a glut of property to sell after lockdown but many of the vendors struck lucky by selling to French buyers”, says Trevor Leggett, founder of estate agency Leggett Immobilier. His Brittany-based colleague Lisa Greene describes a “sense of frenzy in what is usually a gentle and slow market”, which she says continued well into 2022.



Conches-en-Ouche in Normandy © Andrew Wilson/Alamy

That post-lockdown frenzy has calmed down now, as mortgage rates rise — fixed rates currently start at 2.95 per cent. While 2021 saw an increase in Parisian buyers in more than 70 per cent of French departments, data for 2022 shows a decrease in many areas near the capital, including every department in Normandy, according to Notaires de France.

Now, the tide is turning again, says Leggett, who has watched this continual ebb and flow between French and English buyers for 20 years. “Many of the properties that were snapped up by French buyers in 2020-21 have come back on the market again as their French owners are either moving back to cities such as Paris, Rennes or Nantes because they’ve realised the rural life isn’t for them — or they were able to *télétravail* [work remotely] during the lockdowns and are needed back in the office again.” In terms of these recent sales prices, he says, “they’re happy just to get their money back”.

Anecdotally, Leggett and other local agents have noted a new wave of buyers in Normandy and Brittany who are seeking to escape the extreme heat and wildfires in the south for the greener and more temperate north.

“Many parts of the south have become too hot in August, so many Parisians, myself included, go to Normandy,” says Yves Romestan, head of YRSA Progedim estate agency in Paris, who is renovating his recently acquired holiday home in Bernay, an unusually hilly area of Normandy, just over two hours’ drive from Paris.



Tents line the beach at Dinard © Hemis/Alamy

For some of today’s buyers, as beautiful as Norman and Breton towns are, the biggest pull is the possibility of absolute isolation, says Samantha Smith.

Wealthy Parisian buyers have pushed up prices in coastal towns such as Deauville, where the average house costs €8,071 per sq m, up by 12.6 per cent in the past year. The Grand Ouest's other highest-priced hotspots — away from the main cities — are all coastal, too, including Carnac Plage in southern Brittany, with an average house price of €5,575 per sq m and the ferry ports of St Malo and Dinard. Overall, house prices in Brittany have risen by 42 per cent over the five years up to June 2023 and by 26.9 per cent in Normandy in the same period, according to Notaires and Insee data.

But, at the lower end of the market, even as low as €50,000 buyers can find a “nice, habitable house”, according to Greene, who adds that a renovation project could still cost as little as €30,000. “People like the archetypal stone-built *longères*,” she says, picking out Mayenne in Lower Normandy, where the average house costs €1,696 per sq m, and Saint-Hilaire-des-Landes, 40 minutes north of Rennes in Brittany, with an average price of €1,898 per sq m.

For the British buyers pursuing this rural dream in northern France, the challenges are very much those of a post-Brexit and post-pandemic world. But, as Proust knew well, once there the landscapes and lifestyle inspire a cathartic sense of stepping back in time.

At a glance

- Buying costs in France amount to about 13 per cent of the sales price, including 5 per cent stamp duty.
- Vendors pay a social levy charge, which is 7.5 per cent for EU residents and 17.2 per cent for non-EU residents. As non-EU residents, British sellers may face a capital gains tax bill of up to 36 per cent, depending on their financial circumstances.
- In 2021, 70 per cent of French departments saw an increase in *Francilien* (people from Paris and surrounding Île-de-France) buyers. In 2022, many departments — including every department in Normandy — saw a decrease in *Francilien* buyers (Notaires de France).

What you can buy ...



House, Rohan, Brittany, €349,000

A six-bedroom, three-bathroom former schoolhouse built around a courtyard garden in Rohan, about 1 hour 20 minutes' drive west of Rennes in Brittany. In addition to the main detached house, there is a separate guest house or *gîte*. Available through [Leggett Immobilier](#).



House, Biéville-Beuville, Normandy, €936,000

This manor house is about 8km north of Caen, and is built from local stone. There are seven bedrooms, two bathrooms and many original features have been kept, including fireplaces and wood panelling. For sale with [Leggett Immobilier](#).



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Equestrian estate, Deauville, Normandy, €9.5mn

A few minutes' drive from Deauville on the Normandy coast, this 41ha estate has a total of 10 bedrooms between its main house, guest house and caretaker's house, as well a heated pool, stables and paddocks. Listed with [Engel & Völkers](#).

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