

Climate change leads homebuyers to seek a place not in the sun

As temperatures in southern Europe become too uncomfortable, many are looking north



The green pastures and farmland of Brittany, France © encrier/Getty Images/iStockphoto

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Digital entrepreneur Denys Chalumeau and his wife have just made a permanent move from Aix-en-Provence in southern France to northern Brittany because they could no longer stand the intense heat.

In Aix — where summer temperatures regularly reach 35C — life started to become “uncomfortable, unless you lived locked in with air conditioning”, says Chalumeau. He sold his house there for €2mn and has spent €500,000 on the new Breton property, “which we are making as self-sufficient as possible, with wood heating, a vegetable garden, chicken coop and a lifestyle that, as far as possible, is local and carbon-free.”

The couple have also bought an abandoned 9-hectare farm in central Brittany for €200,000, which he is turning into an “eco-collective” for three to four families to experiment living sustainably, producing their own food and energy. Since selling the property portal he co-founded, SeLogger, in 2010 for €633mn, Chalumeau has become involved in numerous ecological projects.



Ed Bailey at home in Cercoux, near Bordeaux, which he is leaving for cooler Normandy © Constant Formé-Bécherat

The move to a cooler climate was, in part, prompted by his wife developing an autoimmune disease that is made worse by intense sunlight. But Chalumeau says they also have what he calls a “collapsing” perception of the future. “Southern France is becoming more and more unbearable and subject to climatic disasters and fire,” he says. “So we looked for a region less exposed to risks, with a milder climate and a beautiful region near the sea.”

Chalumeau is in a far more secure financial position than most, but he is not alone in thinking that climate change is making traditionally popular sunbelt locations increasingly unsustainable as places to live. This summer was the hottest on record in Europe and July had temperatures never experienced before on earth. Wildfires sent thousands fleeing the heat and smoke in Greece, Italy and Spain. Most of Portugal was declared to be in a state of severe drought after the hottest May on record. Reservoirs in southern Spain have run dry after months of no rain. In the Alps you need to climb ever higher to get anywhere near snowfall.

Concern for the future is affecting homebuyers across Europe. “Wells will become a precious commodity in the future and I’ve made sure my new home has one,” says Ed Bailey, an English teacher in the French state school system who is moving from a farmhouse in Cercoux, near Bordeaux, to Berjou, in a part of Normandy known as la Suisse Normande for its resemblance to the Swiss Alps.



He has bought a three-bedroom cottage set in a large woodland garden with two unrestored barns for €132,000 — and after summers in the south, “where I had to keep my shutters closed all day to keep out the heat, so I was living in the dark”, he is delighted that his new home has no shutters in sight.

“I’ve been in France for more than 30 years and I’m used to the heat, but not 40-plus degree days for [what feels like] two solid months in summer,” says Bailey, originally from Worcestershire. “I can’t stand the heat any longer. I think that’s increasingly going to become a factor for people. I even like the horizontal rain in Normandy.”

Lesley Okey, a sales agent for Leggett Immobilier in the Suisse Normande region, claims their office is receiving more inquiries than ever before from people living in southerly regions (and “not just the far south, but even just south of the Loire”, she says). “They have had enough of the heat and restrictions on water usage, and they’re concerned it’s only going to get worse.”



Denys Chalumeau and his wife have moved to this house in Brittany because they were finding Aix-en-Provence too hot in summer © Courtesy of Denys Chalumeau



Aix-en-Provence © Getty Images

One of her buyers is looking for an equestrian estate of up to 100 hectares in Normandy because his current home in the Aude is too hot for his horses. British homeowners, meanwhile, are tiring of “long, hot drives north to catch the ferry back to the UK”, she adds.

“Normandy isn’t immune,” she adds. “Our summers are getting hotter and we haven’t seen a really cold winter for years.”

Pablo Martín-Pinto, a professor of forest fires and silviculture at Valladolid University in northwestern Spain, has described the country as entering an era of “mega forest fires”. Last year had the most devastating wildfires in a decade and this year’s blazes began as early as March. While Madrid recently experienced its worst flooding in 50 years, tourists and locals alike have been battling unusually high levels of humidity this summer.

For Hans Van kasteren, a retired energy company director from Antwerp, the changing climate has fuelled his decision to sell his €3.5mn home in Marbella and buy instead in San Sebastián on Spain’s north coast, where this summer’s temperatures have rarely strayed above 25C (in one week in early August, the rainfall was heavier than anywhere else in Spain).

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Ed Bailey

Idealista.com.

“Heat is the big factor,” he says. “I usually spend two weeks a month in Marbella, but when I visited San Sebastián recently, it felt so comfortable, cooler, and I can drive there far more easily from my home in Belgium.”

But the Basque city is the most expensive city in Spain for property, with a current average house price of €5,191 per sq metre, according to

Melina Ruiz, Lucas Fox’s director in San Sebastián, says she has dealt with eight buyers recently who have said their intention to buy locally is due to concerns related to environmental factors. She also points out that this traditionally Spanish market is now seeing far more northern European buyers, including from the UK, Germany and Russia.

Among them are Americans Kim Ball, who works as the press officer for ad agency Ogilvy in Paris, and her husband TJ Wilscam, managing director of the NGO Serve the City Paris, who bought a bolt-hole overlooking Ondarreta beach, which the couple visit by train once a month and throughout the summer. “The weather in San Sebastián is perfect for me. When it’s 30 degrees in San Sebastián, it feels like 27. It’s enjoyable. When it’s 30 degrees in Paris, it feels far hotter,” says Ball.



Wildfires in Cascais, Portugal © Patricia de Melo Moreira/AFP via Getty Images

London-based couple James and Anna Richards, both City lawyers, have ruled out southern Europe altogether as a holiday-home destination and chosen the Swiss Alps instead, where they own a three-bedroom apartment in Andermatt. “We are both very active and now that the temperatures in much of the Mediterranean are regularly hitting 40 degrees in summer, it doesn’t appeal as it’s far too hot for exercise,” says James.

Where the wealthy chose to relocate or buy holiday homes is, of course, the least of Europe’s worries when it comes to climate change. “For a fast-growing portion of the global population, physical risks from climate change will directly impact property prices and insurability, and perhaps spark destruction and displacement,” says Oliver Carpenter, director of environmental risk analytics at Risilience, a climate analytics company.

Even areas that will not be directly affected by the most severe impacts of climate change, such as in northern Europe, will not remain unscathed. “The immigration of people, and climate-related shocks to society and economy, will disrupt the lives of every individual,” he says. “Events brought about by climate change have the potential to drive the movement of people seeking greener pastures on an unprecedented scale.”

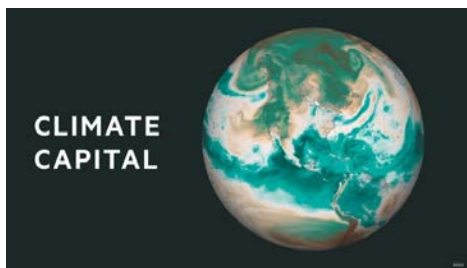
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Per Espen Stoknes, director of the Centre for Green Growth at BI Norwegian Business School

Per Espen Stoknes, associate professor and director of the Centre for Green Growth at BI Norwegian Business School, also sees a possible negative impact of housebuyers migrating to cooler locations. While seeing neighbours and friends take action may bring home the impact of climate change, making it seem “more personal, nearer and more urgent”, he says, “buying real estate far north may have the opposite effect, signalling escapism and [an] everyone-for-themselves [mentality].” He likens it to creating an “apocalypse bunker.”

As the effects of climate change become ever harder to ignore, homebuyers may start questioning just how far they will go in their quest for cooling comfort.

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