

OVERSEAS

## Why the French are taking back Eymet from the English expats

The fortified town of Eymet is a bastion for English expats — but the French are buying in again



Place Gambetta in Eymet  
ALAMY

Peter Conradi

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**E**ymet, a picturesque 13th-century bastide in the Dordogne, has long been a little piece of England deep in rural France. Stroll down Rue du Temple towards the main square and you pass a butcher's selling pork pies, Scotch eggs and pasties and a barber from Manchester. A few steps away is Roses Vintage Tea Room, renowned for its scones and cakes; there could soon be an antique shop run by an Englishman relocating from Bordeaux.

Quite how many British people live in Eymet is not entirely clear: a grumpy woman at the mairie claimed not to know,

though she said she had heard it might be 16 per cent of the population. But that is counting only those people who have formally taken up residence: add in those who spend part of the year at their holiday homes and it is many more. Sit in one of the bars and restaurants in the square and the chances are you will hear English spoken, though sometimes with an Australian or Canadian accent.

However, could Eymet gradually be turning Belgian, Dutch, German or even - God forbid - French? It certainly seems a little that way as I stand in the offices of Agence Eleonor, a few doors along from the butcher's, and look at the whiteboard on which the boss, Terrie Simpson, and her colleagues record their property sales.



If you want a house with some land you'll have to look slightly outside Eymet  
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“There are not that many English names here, but they are just starting to come back now,” says Simpson, who is herself originally from Manchester, as we work our way down the list and manage to spot a “Brown” and a “Harrison” among the majority of Continental surnames.

Blame Covid. Many of those who buy in Eymet tend to do so after coming first as tourists - among them Simpson herself, who acquired her first home here almost two decades ago while she was on her honeymoon. “I just fell in the love with the village the moment I saw the main square,” she says. “It reminded me of Beauty and the Beast - the old version, where they're throwing the shutters open and you have all those pretty little wattle-and-daub houses sitting over the archways.”

“We have a map of the world in our dining room and more than 140 people who have stayed with us have gone on to buy a house - and 80 per cent of them have been British,” says Maxine Shipley, from near Lincoln, who with her husband, Graham, runs the Maison d’Angle, a B&B in the centre of town. “But the only English we have had this summer have been married to French nationals.”

Not that the Shipleys have been complaining: they have done roaring business letting instead to holidaymakers from the Continent, who were free to travel earlier. After eight years the couple have decided to move on to their “next adventure” and sell their picturesque five-bedroom, 260 sq m (2,800 sq ft) house, which can be used either as a letting business or as a family home. It is on sale for €328,600 (about £281,500) through Agence Eleonor ([agence-eleonor.fr](http://agence-eleonor.fr)).



The food market in Eymet  
REGIS DUVIGNAU/REUTERS/ALAMY

Then, of course, there was Brexit, which has proved something of a mixed blessing: last autumn there was a surge in sales to British buyers who flocked to Eymet to lock in their right to live and work in France before the December 31 deadline - as they did elsewhere across the EU. Such was the scramble that many of those who were unable to find anything that took their fancy rented instead.

Since then any UK citizens wanting to spend more than 90 days within any 180 in France - or the other 25 countries in the Schengen free travel area - must obtain a visa, as well as take out private insurance and jump through other administrative hoops that can be both time-consuming and cost a few hundred pounds.

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Yet Julie Savill, marketing director of Beaux Villages Immobilier, which also has a branch in Eymet, says this does not appear to be dissuading British buyers, who are now back in town after what she says has been “a bit of a rollercoaster” of a market over the past 18 months.

“We still have a higher proportion of French buyers than we would normally expect at this time of year,” she says. “But that’s really because of elevated interest within France rather than a depressed level of interest from the UK.”

So what is the appeal of Eymet? And is there any point travelling all the way to rural France to live in what, at first sight, seems to be an expat bubble?





Despite it being rural, prices in Eymet aren't as cheap as elsewhere in the French countryside  
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While some buyers craving the authentic French experience may turn up their nose at the prospect of being surrounded by so many reminders of home, Savill believes it can have its advantages, especially for those whose command of the language is less than perfect.

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“You get some people who say, ‘I don’t want to be anywhere near any other English.’ But there is actually something really nice about having contact with some people who share your culture and your sense of humour,” she says.

Having other Brits around can also be useful when it comes to getting help with the inevitable problems people face when settling in a foreign country. “If you want to be somewhere where there are no other English, you’d better have pretty good French because it will be quite isolating and quite difficult,” she says.

Eymet is also extremely lively, not just in peak tourist season but also during the rest of the year when many similarly sized French towns are dead. This seems in large part thanks to all those Brits, who love to spend their evenings eating and drinking out - unlike the locals, who may start their evenings

with a quick apéro in the square but then tend to socialise at home with friends and family.

“You just can’t beat Eymet. We’ve got everything here,” says Sion Fitton, 43, the barber from Manchester, who moved to the village two years ago. “It’s almost like it’s a planet with its own gravitational force. People come here once and they want to come back.”

This being rural France, prices are considerably cheaper than they would be back home in Britain, though not quite as bargain basement as elsewhere in the countryside. For €200,000 or so you can find a medieval two or three-bedroom home within the bastide itself, which, with 130 or so square metres of living space, can be larger inside than it looks from the street.

For a house with a decent piece of land and a pool you will have to move out of Eymet, though not necessarily too far; you should be able to secure one that is just about ready to move into for €300,000-400,000. A proper château with turrets and all the trimmings will set you back €1-1.5 million.

And if one day you have a craving for a taste of home, then you could do worse than head for Roses Vintage Tea Room, where locals and foreigners mix. “The French absolutely love the scones,” says Dave White from Northamptonshire, who set up the café with his wife, Denise, just over four years ago. “Though I do have to show them how to eat them - how to cut them and what to do with the clotted cream and the jam. Otherwise they just put it all on top.”

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## Homes for sale in Eymet



**£278, 426**

This five-bedroom house in the heart of the medieval town can either be used solely as a family home or continue to generate income as a B&B. There is a roof terrace on the second floor, [frenchestateagents.com](http://frenchestateagents.com)



**£565, 834**

A recently renovated 19th-century maison de maître with six large bedrooms, outbuildings and swimming pool with nearly nine acres of grounds, [frenchestateagents.com](http://frenchestateagents.com)



**£427,262**

In addition to seven bedrooms, five bathrooms and a swimming pool, this 18th-century centrally located former presbytery has a vaulted cellar, tower and feature staircase, [kyero.com](http://kyero.com)



**£1.88 million**

Dating to the 13th century, this five-bedroom, five-bathroom property is set in nearly 100 acres. The manor is in the style of the renowned French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, [sextantproperties.com](http://sextantproperties.com)

