

European prime property

Provence property dreams hit by a lack of homes – and builders

A surge in domestic buyers has intensified the competition for houses and the workers to renovate them



The terrace of a 16-bedroom home in Oppède, for sale for €5.4m

For Frankfurt-based couple Amy and Oliver, buying their dream Provençal farmhouse has been far from simple. First, travel restrictions nearly scuppered Amy’s trip to view potential homes; when she arrived, at least one was totally unsuitable. Then it turned out that half of their preferred home had been built without planning permission.

“There were real technical, legal, cultural and language hurdles,” says Amy, who has declined to give the couple’s surnames. On the point of pulling out several times, they eventually bought the four-bedroom farmhouse near Aix-en-Provence in June.

Never easy at the best of times, buying a rural home in Provence has become even harder since the pandemic struck. Growing demand for rural homes — from both French and foreign buyers — means that many of the suitable ones are now sold, that agents complain of a shortage of supply, and that many buyers must complete renovation jobs to bring a period stone farmhouse up to date before they can move in. Covid and — for UK buyers — Brexit are adding to the time and costs associated with such projects.

Increasing demand for second homes is driving up prices too. In the popular Var region, home to many of Provence’s most popular villages, average prices have increased 8.3 per cent in the year to September, compared with a national average of 4.9 per cent, and with a fall of 1.5 per cent in central Paris, according to [Meilleurs Agents](#), a French property website.



Foreign buyers find themselves competing with French city dwellers seeking roomy

second homes for remote working or a permanent move from city — a trend helped by low domestic interest rates and freely available mortgages, says Thomas Lefebvre, head of research at Meilleurs Agents in Paris. “The main difference from previous years is the strong local demand.”

Beate Fadini of the Provence office of Home Hunts, a local agent specialising in selling luxury properties to overseas buyers, says her customers typically have a budget of between €1.5m-€2m and want a period but renovated stone house with four or five bedrooms, a view and swimming pool, within walking distance to a local village. Popular spots include Lorgues and Cotignac in Var and Goult, Bonnieux and Gordes in the adjacent Vaucluse department.

With many renovated homes already sold, buyers are having to compromise. “We are certainly selling more unrenovated homes,” says Fadini.



The village of Gordes, one of the more popular places for buying property © Getty Images

Renovation jobs can add up to long delays. With existing owners spending longer in their Provence homes since the pandemic, thanks largely to homeworking, many are seeking improvements — with kitchens and open-plan conversions most popular — increasing the wait for builders, according to Isabel Pasquier of Ma Maison Provençale, a local concierge service. Her clients, she says, typically wait three to four months to start their projects rather than the usual one or two months before the pandemic. “Buildings with a lot of history and character are still

before the pandemic. “Builders, architects and local interior designers are really overloaded with work,” she adds. Increasingly, she is putting together and managing clients’ building projects herself.

Surveyor John Snell says many clients underestimate how complicated French building jobs can be

Covid-related supply shortages mean that jobs are taking longer to complete. Local architect David Price is renovating a large house designed by English architect Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944) near Mougins, in the hills inland of Cannes. Price says supplier delays are creating delays for electrical appliances such as dishwashers. “Typically, we would have delivery due before the summer. Now they are talking about after

Christmas,” he says. Delays for raw materials such as plywood have doubled the wait from five to 10 weeks.

John Snell, a surveyor based in France, and with clients from the UK, the US, Australia and Switzerland, says that many underestimate how complicated French building jobs can be. France’s building disciplines are strictly codified and controlled, meaning multiple professionals, additional time and money, he says. “Try installing a septic tank: you’ll need a man with a digger for the groundworks, then a certified contractor to install the tank. The groundworks company may wire up a pump, but they won’t warrant the work, so you’ll need an electrician. Then to get an electricity feed from the house you’ll probably need a mason.”

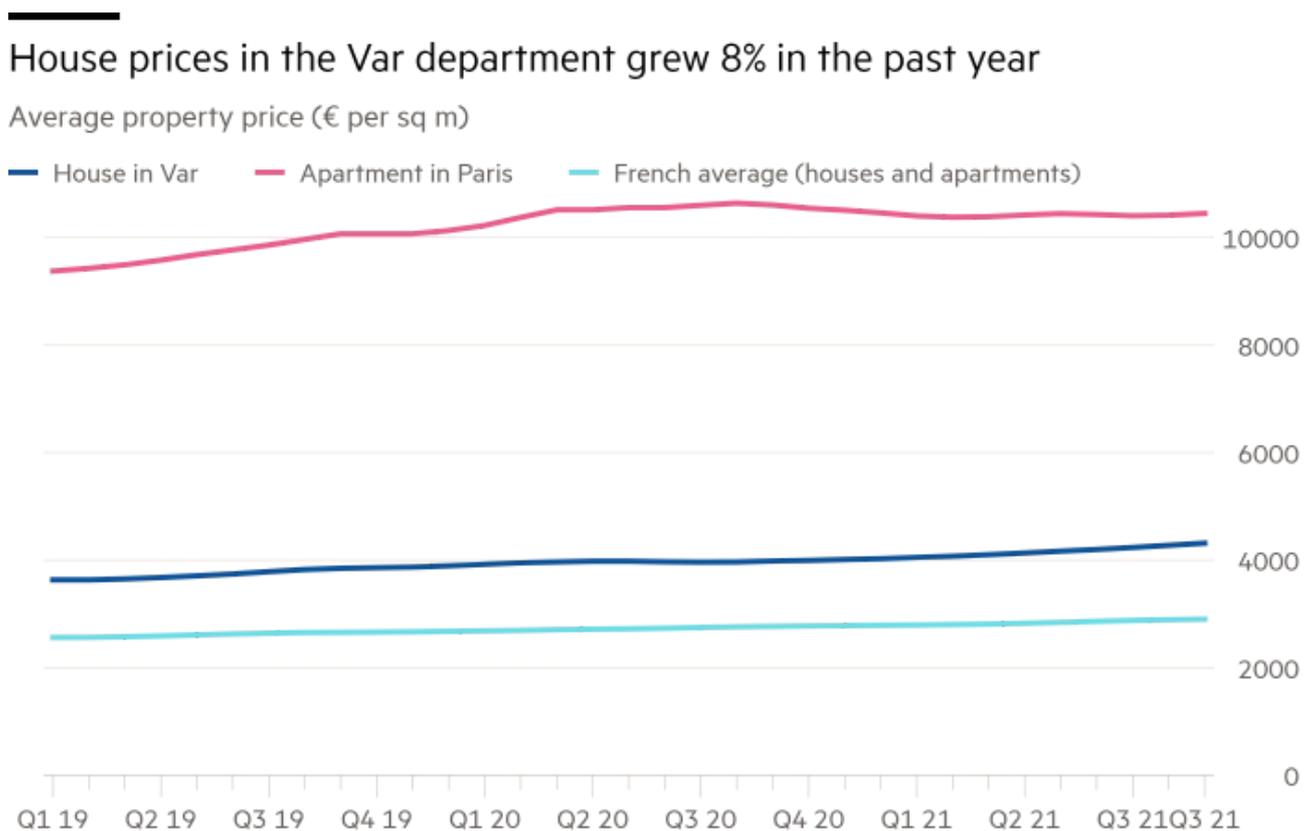




A street in the Provençal town of Mougins, nestled in the hills inland from Cannes © Robert Palomba/Onlyfrance

Brexit has created further problems. Because of new import duties on British-made goods, Price is no longer sourcing the taps, basins and tiles popular with British clients from the UK. “Rather than have an argument with the client about the extra costs, we are just ordering them locally,” he says.

British buyers looking to ship furniture to new Provençal second homes must now pay French VAT. At the end of the Brexit transition period on December 31 2020, a shortage of customs agents to process the required paperwork resulted in long delays on furniture moves, says Ben Franklins, who runs a home removals business in the UK for those relocating to France. “Typically, the tax is 20 per cent of the imported goods and 20 per cent of the transport costs,” he says, adding that similar charges are levied on moving furniture back to the UK unless original receipts showing items were purchased in the UK can be provided.



Source: Meilleurs Agents
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Veronica Shilton, who runs Yew Tree Horse Transport, a company that transports animals and furniture between the UK and France, hasn't done a single move from the UK to France this year. “At the end of last year, [before the rules changed], it

the UK to France this year. At the end of last year, [before the rules changed], it was manic as people rushed to move to France. This year the only moves are coming the other way,” she says. One of her last jobs originating in the UK was transporting an exotic zoo — including a tarantula, snake, iguana, llamas, alpaca and three emus — to the south of France in time for the end of the transition period.

Since January 1 this year, UK passport holders can spend only 90 days in any 180-day period in the Schengen area unless they have a visa. And travel restrictions have limited visits from prospective buyers, says Tim Swannie, director of Home Hunts.

“For the first time ever, we have had more German buyers than Brits,” he says. “And the number of people from the UK who are looking to relocate full-time has dropped substantially; the majority are currently looking for holiday homes.”



Other popular spots include Lorgues and Cotignac in Var and, above, Bonnieux in the Vaucluse department © Carlos S. Pereyra / Alamy

Other challenges relate to Provence’s rugged landscape. Earlier this year, Brian Harpur from the UK abandoned the purchase of a rural Provençal home when he discovered that planning permission for a wind farm had been denied on a nearby site a few years before. “There was a risk that it would be granted in the future,” he says. When he and his wife then shifted their sights to a five-bedroom villa in the hills overlooking Port de la Figueirette, near Cannes, he discovered the area was in

a high risk zone for radon, a radioactive gas that can seep out of underlying rock. He instructed the local agent to test levels inside, found them satisfactory, and bought the home in May — but, because of travel restrictions, without ever having visited it.

Fire risk is also an increasing concern. In August, forest fires in Var forced thousands to evacuate as Provence became the latest victim of record temperatures and high winds that have caused wildfires across southern Europe. Price says he is doing more work to protect properties from fire, such as by removing trees near homes situated in forests: “Most communes have strict [fire] regulations preventing new building.”

One remote home rejected by Amy and Oliver had thick forest brush growing close to the house and dead leaves everywhere. “It was a total fire hazard,” says Amy.

The forest abutting the home they did buy is greener; and there are more homes nearby, with stretches of tarmac road that can help stop fires spreading. “The proximity to nature was essential. We both love outdoor sports, and it is so easy for running, walking and cycling,” Amy says.

The fact that it is close to Aix-en-Provence, with its excellent restaurants and galleries, is also part of the appeal. For the couple, their new home provides the optimal blend of countryside living and access to metropolitan life — and was well worth the nerve-racking purchase process.

Buying guide

- Total purchase costs, including sales taxes and notaries’ fees, on a €1m home in Aix-en-Provence add up to 7 per cent.
- In France, property owners with a combined value of more than €1.3m are liable to an annual real estate wealth tax called the IFI (*impôt sur la fortune immobilière*). The tax is levied on the amount above €800,000 and progresses from 0.5 per cent to 1.5 per cent, as the total value increases.
- TGV high-speed trains connect Paris to Aix-en-Provence in 3hrs 15mins. Direct flights connect Marseille to London in 2hrs and Frankfurt in 1hr 30mins.

Properties for sale

Renovation project, Luberon, Vaucluse, €158,000



© Elske Koelstra

An 18th-century stone-built house in a remote hilltop hamlet in the Luberon countryside. The property, which is in need of renovation, measures 100 sq m. Available through local estate agency [Leggett Immobilier](#).

Château, L'Isle sur la Sorgue, €3.8m



© Sylvain Humbert

A grand 18th-century house with eight bedrooms and eight bathrooms. The property, which measures 1700 sq m in total, comes with 24 hectares of land. The

property, which measures 1,700 sq m in total, comes with 24 hectares of land. The main house has several outbuildings and a swimming pool. Available through estate agency [Knight Frank](#).

Château, Oppède, Vaucluse, €5.4m



© damienboschi.com

A 16-bedroom estate with 810 sq m of living space. The property comes with about five hectares of grounds, including vineyards, ornamental gardens, swimming pool and tennis court. The home has wonderful views of the surrounding Luberon countryside. Available through [Home Hunts](#).

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