

Towering superiority complex

You'll always be able to look down on the neighbours if you own a chateau in France. But take a hard look at the running costs, advises **GINETTA VEDRICKAS**

Think French property and most peoples' thoughts turn to a villa, a ferme, maison de ville or even a pigeonier. But some buyers set their sights much higher, and for them nothing less than a chateau will do. Colin Ferrett works with Select Homes in France and deals exclusively in chateaux for a mainly American market.

He has seen numerous chateaux over the years but can spot instantly the ones that are likely to appeal. "Show them three chateaux and they will go for the one with the fancy roof line every time." He explains the buyers' motivation: "Plain ones just aren't enough. They want to be able to impress their friends and make a statement with the photos."

Wealthy Americans may form the mainstay of buyers but Ferrett also sees interest from people who want to own their own vineyard or use the chateau as a business base. "They often want a return and plan to run their own gites, but you have to remember that chateaux rarely have gites nearby. Often much of the land or any out-buildings have been sold off years before,

but many will have been used as youth hostels at some point."

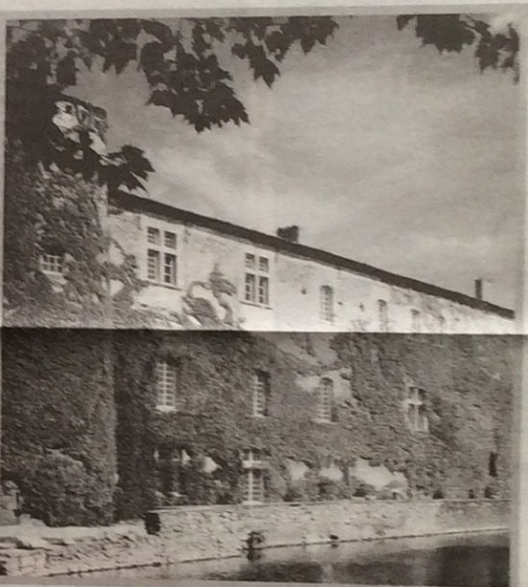
Ferrett's cheapest ever chateau cost its buyer £130,000 – fortunately, the rumble of the nearby TGV trains didn't bother him – but a "decent one without a nuisance" is more likely to be in the region of £500,000.

John Brookes also sources chateaux for Select Homes in France and currently has a military chateau on his books. "It really is the most wonderful example that I think I've ever seen." Priced at €3,200,000, the chateau dates from 1320 and sits in grounds of one hectare about 45 minutes from Toulouse airport. The portals and draw-bridge are long gone but its owner, an artist who bought it in 1962, has lovingly restored the property. He has sourced many original materials, even making paint himself, but one original feature stands out. "There is a working 13th-century toilet, which is little more than a plank of wood, but it works – I've used it," says Brookes.

Not all owners are so diligent. Brookes has even seen chateaux complete with plastic double glazing, but this one seems to have captured his heart – although there is one original feature he could not live with. "It's got 1,500sqm of habitable surface



Châteaux for sale (clockwise from far left): 18th-century with 22-bedrooms in Oise, on the market for €5,100,000; the Templers' 'dream home' - a 'shabby but full of charm' maison de maitre in Narbonne; Renaissance era, Allier, €1,166,000; 12th-and-13th-century, Gard, €3,201,429; 18th-century, in Lot, €1,791,276. All for sale properties through Sifex



area spread over 30 rooms, including four dining rooms, eight bedrooms and five bathrooms, but it has no central heating."

Sarah Francis of Sifex, which specialises in châteaux, manoirs and vineyards in southern France, finds that potential heating costs deter even the wealthiest of buyers. Searching in warmer climes may help but Francis warns, "There are very few in Provence, lots around Toulouse and the foothills of the Pyrenees, but many tend to be in the Loire, where you find more classical architecture." Francis has recently noticed an increase in buyers. "We sold more last year than ever before, but they are becoming increasingly difficult to find."

Sifex currently has a range of châteaux on offer including a 12-bedroomed property in Gard, 20km from Avignon, which comes with its own moat. Priced at €3,201,429, the property dates back to the 12th and 13th centuries and contains many original features, including a tower with arrow slits. It also has French Renaissance aspects and a 16th-century tower with *bouche à feu* places for gunfire. In Gers, near Bordeaux, a 15th-century chateau with 60ha of land, including 26ha of vineyard, is for sale at €3,200,000. Winemaking and

bottling takes place on the property for buyers wanting a business interest.

Knight Frank has examples of châteaux with business potential including the 17th-century Château de Sanse, in Saint Emilion, Gironde, a boutique hotel with 14 ensuite bedrooms, which has a guide price of €2.1 million. Knight Frank's Susie Skinner adds: "This property would just as easily make an extremely comfortable family house with excellent entertaining facilities."

Some buyers go to France in search of relatively modest holiday homes but find that châteaux can be irresistible. Property renovator Andrew Templer and his wife Rhona, who has just sold her PR agency, started scouring France for a holiday home but, after finding themselves attracted to larger properties, decided to leave London permanently. "We were getting fed up with London so we've decided to move there permanently, lock, stock and barrel."

The Templers saw many châteaux before finding their dream home, says Rhona. "I started having romantic ideas but the maintenance would have been horrific and also there always seemed to be something wrong with them." One chateau that particularly appealed was very near to the

house that they eventually decided to buy in Narbonne. "It had the typical pointy towers and land that was set up as a vineyard, but it was right on the main road. I took a friend to see it but, as we had to shout above the traffic noise in the garden, we realised it wasn't for us."

Eventually, Rhona and Andrew found their maison de maitre, which they describe as "shabby but full of charm". It cost €300,000 and they will move into it in January. The house has six hectares of land and several outbuildings, and the couple intend to plant vines in their three fields and renovate the property. They estimate restoration costs at around £25,000 and hope to have a couple of gites up and running by next summer. "It's a 10-year project," says Rhona, "but we plan to renovate other peoples' property, because so many Brits are moving to France and doing the same thing as us."

Select Homes in France: 00 33 4 6891 2617; Sifex: 020-7384 1200 or www.sifex.co.uk; Knight Frank: 020-7629 8171; The French Property Exhibition runs from 8-10 November at Taunton Racecourse, Taunton, Somerset