



# Château Heaven

With Sarah Francis from Sifex



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On a glorious sunny day in April, I visited one of the most beautiful Châteaux in the Gers. This sublime property is ideally situated, only 10 minutes from a pretty market town with a beautiful Gothic Cathedral, shops and restaurants. This included a chic Michelin starred gastronomic temple set in a XIIIth century converted convent, where I was fortunate enough to be taken for a delicious lunch that day. The town was once the main port for distributing Armagnac to Bordeaux.

Spanning the XIII/XVI and XVIIIth centuries, the Château has been sympathetically restored, retaining its authenticity and original period features. Towering above the long private driveway, this architectural gem is first glimpsed through a feathered veil of poplar trees, revealing a building of imposing stature.

It has three towers and a terrace retained by a stone wall set atop a steep bank. Its position was doubtless chosen to deter even the most determined would-be assailants, and to provide a commanding look-out post.

On turning the corner at the summit of the hill, an amazing transformation met my eyes. Beyond a row of railings and rose covered stone pillars, where only the buzz of bees and birdsong disturbed the peace – in stark contrast to its defensive side - the Château showed its elegant 'L' shaped façade. It was almost Italianesque in character, with creamy white exposed stone walls and towers, with windows and doors painted in a welcoming shade of russet. Framed by four statuesque Cypress trees, a formal 'jardin à la française', a patchwork of lawns and paths, filled the courtyard in front of the castle. A beautiful ancient well with wrought

iron overthrow stood beside an archway which led through to the garden behind, separating the outbuildings from the main house.

Welcomed by the delightful Parisian owners whose secondary residence it has been for the past 13 years, I gratefully gulped down iced Perrier on the beautiful shaded flagstone terrace at 'tree-top level'. Its shutters are painted in an attractive subtle shade from Farrow and Ball blending perfectly with the stonework.

Forced to abandon their previous holiday retreat outside Uzès by the modern properties encroaching on their space, they found and fell in love with this Gersois beauty. They have enjoyed there an unbroken tranquillity over the years, protected by their own land in their rural idyll. Only as the younger generation have grown and now have holiday homes of their own, have they reluctantly decided to consider

relinquishing their beautiful Château, to allow another family to enjoy all that it has to offer.

A well-stocked library with beautiful wood panelling and a fireplace, leads off the terrace and back into the corridor complete with exposed beamed ceiling and beautiful period tommette tiled floor. To the right is a charming drawing room with a beautiful parquet floor and a pretty fireplace. Beyond that, 'enfilade', is that essential of Château life - a billiard room. The style is a mixture of traditional mingled with abstract modern art and colonial – the fusion of periods and beauty combining successfully in the well-proportioned spacious and light rooms. The spiral stone staircase leading to the upper floors is in perfect condition. From time to time, there are musket holes – a testament to a more violent past – but overall the atmosphere is one of harmony and peace. The rooms on the

upper floors overlook the grounds and beautiful orchards. Seven hectares of plum orchards form part of the 15 hectares of ground and yield fruit to produce the fabulous 'Pruneaux d'Agen' (yet another regional speciality but not exclusive to Agen). Floors are original, whether wooden or tiled, and there are beautiful ceilings with exposed beams, period fireplaces, plaster mouldings and a variety of bath and shower rooms. This includes one featuring three musket holes - an amusing addition to bath time for children! Returning to the ground floor, beyond the library I arrived at a convivial dining room leading to a bright and spacious family kitchen. Outside, the beautiful cedars of Lebanon shaded the back terrace where my hosts were to have lunch, next to the 'home cinema' which had surely been the scene of many happy family gathering. I could hear the call of the cuckoo,

carried on the soft breezes through the rustling trees. I made my way through the beautiful wisteria tunnel, in full bloom, which led to the covered pool with its charming pigeonnier in one corner. Opposite, on the other side of the tunnel, was a splendid 'potager' or vegetable garden – an essential element of the culinary armament of any French Château. At the end of the tunnel was an all-weather tennis court.

The dreamy sunny vision of this rare property has remained with me ever since and it seemed to me to encapsulate everything one could ever wish for, if your quest is to buy a beautiful French Château.

Sarah Francis