

Sharing Gers



Who better to recommend an area than someone who's made it their home? **Karen Webb** explains why she swapped Paris for Gascony- and why it might suit you too

Before Gascony there was Paris. Sixteen years in which I'd made a life working as an English teacher, learnt French, passed my driving test (around the Arc de Triomphe no less!), married and had two children. I was as embedded in my Parisian life as any other commuter inching her way through the interminable queues of traffic to the city centre each morning. And then came the idea of throwing everything up into the air; of leaving our jobs and taking our daughter out of the safety of the International School in St-

Germain-en Laye, in the western suburbs of Paris, and heading off to into the great unknown.

Destination Le Gers!

The spontaneous reaction of a Parisian colleague to this decision pretty much summed up the thoughts of everyone in my entourage: "C'est où ça?" Where's that? This was quickly followed by: "Et pourquoi?"

3 REASONS TO LIVE HERE

1

Peaceful bucolic countryside

2

Lively market towns

3

Attractive architecture



On the market



€750,000: Vast eight-bed property on the edge of a village, with gardens, pool and views of the Pyrénées

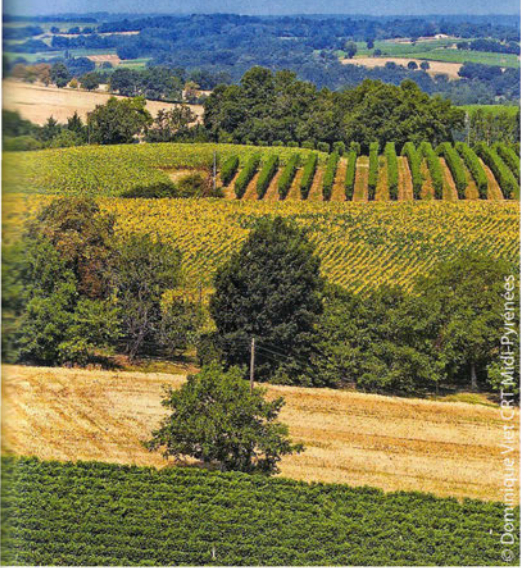


€1.25m: 16th-century castle set within 4ha of parkland with impressive drive and courtyard



€459,800: Traditional five-bed 'maison de maître' with pool on the edge of Lectoure

PropertyShop



© Dominique Viet CRT Midi-Pyrénées

Why indeed?

What was it that one of the British mums had said to me outside the Lycée Internationale? "Most parents would kill for a place at this school. Why would you even consider doing this to your children?"

In 2005 most Parisians I knew would be hard pushed to point out Gascony on a map of France, let alone want to live there. Gers, tucked away almost as far as you can delve into south-west France without falling into Spain, was not yet as well known on the international stage as Provence, or its popular northern neighbour Dordogne. Flights from the UK dropped passengers off at Bergerac, or Toulouse airport, but Gascony was the forgotten bit beyond. As far as my French family and colleagues were concerned, it was uncharted territory, and one of the few places in France to which "there (still) isn't even a motorway".

The reputation of France's 32nd department was mainly gastronomical: the place where duck livers were fattened up for Maison Fauchon in Paris, and where sunflowers were grown for their oil. It was, I had read, France's answer to Tuscany with its undulating valleys. Not that I'd ever been to Italy.

And Dad came too

But we were set for an adventure! So, with few expectations, and even fewer plans as to how we would survive, we sold our house on the river in La Frette-sur-Seine, and in September 2004 loaded up a three-car convoy, containing two children, a tabby cat, a Bedlington-cross, a parrot, and my father (along with his Cornish Rex) who had decided to throw his lot in with ours and join us for a new life.

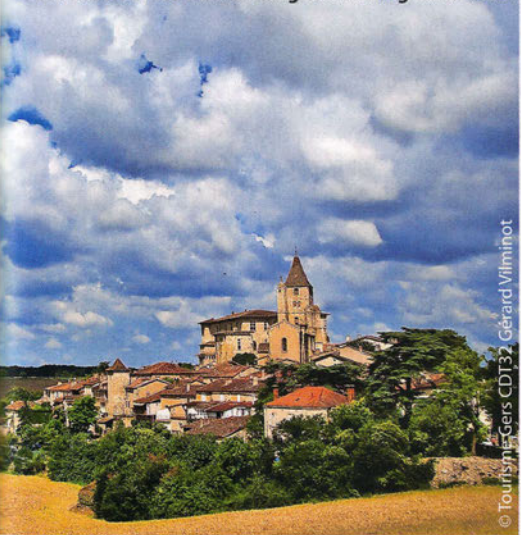
If anything, the idea of Dad joining us was the driving factor behind my plan. After 16 years of living apart, I wanted my children to know their English grandfather, and to share time with him again. Having served for many years on the Arc Royal, Dad was adventurous enough to say yes - and as Gascony was a place in which large sprawling family homes could be bought at a fraction of the cost of Paris, so our adventure began.

We planned to leave at 9am on the dot, but with delays to the sale, and endless goodbyes to friends, we finally set off at 6pm, the traffic jams of Paris falling behind us, the children clamouring for dinner long before we had passed Orly airport.

The drive from Paris is a lengthy one, and by the time we pulled off the exit at Valence d'Agen, it was 1am in the morning. The sky was black. Pitch black, with few if any street lights. The car wound its way along a sinuous route to Lectoure, where three months before I had impulsively chosen a large *maison de maitre* that needed work. Dad hadn't even seen it, and I could barely remember what it looked like, or where it was. I remembered more about the owner of the house, a children's author from Paris who used an old red fire engine to transport his donkeys from the woods to the field. Yes, we were about to buy a house not with a garden but woods and fields!

In daylight the next morning, everything would look different, yet though I've now grown accustomed to the inky blackness of the countryside, on that first night, as our convoy crawled along the road, it felt as if we were heading into the unknown. The darkness was

Gers has five Plus Beaux Villages including Lavardens



© Tourisme Gers CDT32 Gérard Vilminot



The beautiful timber-framed tourist office in departmental capital Auch

On the market



€397,100: Four-bed stone house with extensive 6,000m² gardens and pool in St-Clar



€975,000: Former farm estate with stone house, converted barn, ruin, large outbuilding and 29,600m² land



€367,750: Four-bed village presbytery dating from the 8th century, with L-shaped garden around the tower

LOCATION

© Patrice Thebault CRT Midi Pyrénées



FACTFILE

- **Region:** Occitanie
- **Department:** Gers
- **Department number:** 32
- **Prefecture:** Auch
- **Sub-prefectures:** Condom, Mirande
- **Area:** 6,257km²
- **Population:** 190,644
- **Population density:** 30/km²
- **Average house price:** €143,300

other-worldly in its intensity, the large oaks by the side of the road assuming pre-possessing proportions. Feeling certain we had lost our way, my eyes burning with fatigue, I was startled by the sudden swoop of a white owl - *une dame blanche* - the tips of her wings brushing the windscreen of the car, startling me awake with her ghostly white face for the last leg of our journey. We had abandoned a world of Parisian pigeons for a life in which the sighting of wild boar on our driveway, or deer in the back field, and peregrine falcons on the telegraph poles, would soon become familiar.

Lectoure living

Lectoure was not as well known in 2004 as it is today. Eric Cantona had made a recent foray into the department in the rustic comedy film *Le Bonheur est dans le pré* but other than a few scenes shot in Condom (a town name guaranteed to raise a smile) and Lectoure there had been little media attention in the area.

Perched high on a hilltop, on the St-Jacques de Compostelle pilgrimage route, with its grand cathedral dominating the landscape for miles around, Lectoure was but a single street; a *bastide* town with a popular Friday morning market, and a thermal spa centre.

In 2019 it has developed into what the Parisians in Le Marais now lovingly call 'Bo Bo Land'. A cultural centre for art and photography, with tea rooms and antique stores lining the street, the town attracts visitors from all around the world. The Café des Sports (voted by the *New York Times* as the 'best café in France') is run by a Belgian couple with a fine selection of beers on offer. There is a cinema, a theatre with French and international shows, a chocolate shop, and a library tea room, as well as a wealth of other cafés and restaurants.

While Lectoure has changed beyond recognition in the 14 years I have known it, the countryside around, with its hilltop villages, has remained much the same. The architecture is classical; white stone houses and square-shaped *maisons de maîtres*, with their grand central bisecting hallways. Properties sit high on hilltops, often with acres of land around, and far-reaching views to the Pyrénées.

Here it is possible to experience solitude in the truest sense of the word, or to descend the long white chalk lanes which trace a pathway through fields of wheat and corn and take a quick drive to any number of bustling French market towns, such as Lectoure, St-Clar or Fleurance.

The area is hugely popular with visitors from all four corners of l'Hexagone, as well as Belgian, Flemish, Dutch and British buyers, all seeking the rural idyll. This is a department which offers utter peace and quiet, unspoilt views, and one of the lowest levels of pollution in France. Hardly surprisingly, it also offers one of the highest levels of life expectancy. Visitors double the size of the town in the summer, enjoying the local lakes, melon and garlic festivals, the night markets and the fine weather.

Beyond the summer season there is a beauty and tranquillity bestowed upon Gascony's year-round residents; from the beauty of its early spring, the blossoms of its almond trees in May, to its long Indian summers. Winter can, depending on the year, be wet for a short time or crisp and cold. Whether it's wet or dry, the inhabitants of Gascony are never far removed from an expanse of blue sky, throughout four distinctive seasons. Indeed, it is these grand majestic sky lines, and the beauty of the light which illuminates the white stone walls of the properties here, attracting artists from all over the world.

And now?

Sorne 14 years later, my daughter has left home, and my son is about to join her in London. My father is sadly no longer with us. A lifetime has passed since that first nocturnal journey, and in it we have made a new life. We no longer live in a house in the countryside, but a crazy house in the heart of Lectoure, with a 12th-century watch-tower that will take a lifetime to restore. Its appeal? The light, the 18th-century architecture, and the far-reaching views across the rooftops of Lectoure.

No longer a teacher, I created Bliss Immobilier, an agency in the heart of Lectoure, which specialises in properties of character, from ruins to châteaux, in outstanding locations. Other adventures include running creative writing retreats in Gascony with authors and literary agents from the UK, and not least the recent publication of my book *A Stranger in Paris* - a memoir of that first year in Paris, many moons ago.

Karen's book *A Stranger in Paris* is available at amazon.co.uk/Stranger-Paris-French-Life/dp/1911293311

Turn to p80 for a review
blissimmo.com

Karen has made the lovely market town of Lectoure her home

