

# No frills, but plenty of thrills and spills

The low-cost airline revolution opened up swathes of Europe to holiday-home owners — but recent route closures have left some in the lurch, so it pays to have a back-up plan, says **Zoe Dare Hall**

**F**ew forget their first Ryanair flight. Indeed, many vow never to take a second, once they've experienced the long queues and limited legroom. However, for Jeremy Sturgess, a property developer from London who was on the no-frills airline's first service from London Stansted to Carcassonne in 1996, it was the moment of transformation for the corner of southern France that he had made his occasional home.

He remembers that day vividly. "Ryanair's commercial director was on the flight, and I thanked him profusely for opening the route," says Sturgess, 46, who lives part-time in the village of Fabrezan. In 1997, he had bought a run-down farmhouse with 22 hectares of vines there for £150,000 — the price he had just accepted for his one-bedroom flat in Chelsea.



"Before Ryanair, people went to the Dordogne," Sturgess says. "Then they came to visit me, and couldn't believe how cheaply and easily they could get here. Five friends bought properties here as a result." He has since made another home in Egypt, where he is developing the Ancient Sands Golf Resort.

So confident was he of growth potential in the Languedoc, he bought four more properties in Fabrezan, including a small townhouse for £20,000. It is now valued at about £150,000, down from £170,000 at its peak two years ago. He also snapped up a successful B&B, whose business he admits he destroyed within months (he didn't like answering the telephone), but on which he still made a sizeable profit by renovating and selling it a few years later.

in El Gouta, one of the farthest-flung destinations to benefit from low-cost flights from Britain, thanks to new EasyJet services.

It is just over a decade since Ryanair launched online booking, a revolution that introduced to us the joys of e-browsing each other out

of the way in fractions opens and flying to previously inaccessible pockets of the Continent for us — even if we end up paying through the nose for every little extra.

A 45-minute drive east of Fabrezan is Béziers airport, which saw 100,000 British passengers last year (60,000 took off from Bristol airport, 40,000 from Luton). That figure is up from 70,000 the previous year and 45,000 in 2008, when Ryanair started using this tiny private airport.

Even in August, 50% of passengers are visiting friends or family with holiday homes in the area," says Pascal Pérez, director of the syndicate that owns the airport and pays CLM a year to the low-cost carrier. "The French are happy with this new phenomenon that is bringing in tourists. There are 6,000 foreign owners of property in Béziers, a quarter of whom are British. Tourism brought £25m to the area last year."

That is another way in which Ryanair has been a trailblazer — changing for the privilege of allowing its planes to land. It's the reverse of conventional commercial logic, but the secondary airports that Ryanair specialises in reap the benefit of the increased tourism the airline brings to the area, as well as the revenue from spin-offs such as car-hire companies and estate agents, whose promotional handbags wallpaper every arrivals hall.

The Languedoc was traditionally a blue-collar French holiday destination now it is awash with a white-collar British clientele. The signs of expat influence are subtle: Marmite and Bunnings pickle on supermarket shelves, posters advertising "English DVDs for hire" as you drive through rural villages and yearly parking spaces now available at Carcassonne airport, to cater to foreign holiday-homers who want to avoid costly car hire each time they visit.

Go to the beautiful town of Pizama, a 30-minute drive east of Béziers, on market day and you'll hear no end of English-speaking shoppers. Thanks to

resident Robin Hicks, who runs the expat site [shutehenswhatsom.info](http://shutehenswhatsom.info), you can also attend events such as coffee concerts. Hicks says the mayor of Coix, a village in the Aude department, has given his bin bag to British holiday-home buyers. "He told me, 'We love you. You gave us old 11casses we don't care for and restore the em with love and care. And you bring us your pensions.'"

Everyone here generally talks of just pragmatism and acceptance, but surely the French can't have been pleased at seeing this influx of Britons double their property prices in a few years? "Well, no," says Marie Hines Walters, who lives in Fabrezan and runs Cotière Property Consultants. "From about the year 2000, we didn't get any French clients, as they wouldn't pay those highly inflated prices. This a British would buy everything, so it up to and sell it for a ridiculous profit. That's not just as they started to get mad, they've been out and tried to sell every-thing they had."

Now, thanks to falling property prices across the globe, vendors have been forced to get real again. Yet, to the amazement of Hines Walters, there is still British demand for bargains, or cheap deals, in the middle of nowhere. They're a pile of rocks and are expensive as hell. "Would you believe it?" She describes the typical buyer as someone who wants to

escape the rat race and live half an hour from the coast, but without being able to see any other property. One such pile of rocks with 1,000 sq metres of land recently sold for £200,000.

Also in demand are properties with the potential to be converted into apartment flats — "There's good money in it if you run it properly and have a great website," Hines Walters says — or holistic yoga retreats. Popular, and pricey, locations are Gruissan, close to Narbonne, and nearby Bages, a trendy fishing village now full of art galleries.

British buyers have also left their mark on the classic *maisons de village*. "French residences, who typically worked outdoors all day, never wanted roof terraces, but British owners do, as they remove the tiles and build one," Hines Walters says. "Word gets around if the local mayor is okay about people doing that, but in some villages it's forbidden."

Rural Britons saw a significant rise in the number of British buyers after

Ryanair launched its direct route in 2005. Agricultural jobs had been dwindling, so farmers have been happy to sell off their redundant workers' cottages to Britons looking for quaint country homes, according to Mary Jack, who runs La Grande Maison, a site business in the village of Kergist (agrandemaillon.co.uk). "The British population is not as concentrated here as it is further south, but second-homeowner numbers are high, with just as many Parisians," she says. "The Britons far prefer the influx of Britons."

Although France has seen the greatest number of tiny regional airports welcome low-cost carriers — and, with them, hordes of British property buyers — the whole of Europe and parts of North Africa have been opened up by cheap flights.

In Spain, the Costa de la Luz has reaped the benefits of the low-cost boom since the introduction of cheap flights to Jerez airport. In hilltop Vejer de la frontera, property prices doubled in the early- to mid-2000s, with foreigners buying up cheap old whitewashed townhouses to renovate. Now prices have accelerated again, and CasaCas (casa-cas.com) has a discredited four-bedroom traditional townhouse in Vejer for sale.

Chiclana also has a sizeable English population, most of whom live in detached new-build villas with pools —

though, sadly, not always with planning permission. At present, three bedrooms the Costa del Sol, but now anyone can afford it," says Lesley McEwan, director of CasaCas. "When the low-cost airlines started bringing over planeloads of British people, the Spanish were concerned. They asked me if buyers would want British bars, like on the Costa del Sol. But buyers here tend to want to fit in and have a genuine love of all things Spanish. In fact, a local bar that advertised full English breakfasts and English spoken here failed completely and closed down."

In Italy, property buyers have discovered that there is life beyond Tuscany as a result of cheap flights to areas such as Le Marche, Umbria and — heavily reliant on Ryanair and EasyJet — Calabria in the south. Lost in the hills behind the Italian Riviera is Collietta di Castellibianca, a previously deserted hamlet of 60 stone houses that has attracted a wealthy cast of international buyers, a West Coast success and a new English community that has grown up here would almost certainly not exist were it not for the fact that owners can visit

frequently, using low-cost flights to Genoa or Nice for every key event in the village, from the annual olive festival to the AGM.

"When Collietta was restored 17 years ago, it was intended as a community of professionals who could connect to anywhere in the world and live there almost full time," says Jason Hill, who owns the village's bar, L'Aquila. "Actually, it has become a holiday village for foreign owners who fly down for long weekends."

There may be euphoria locally when a new budget flight route is announced, but the flipside is the ever-present possibility of the airline closing down the service. This could be because it is simply not pulling in the passenger numbers, or because the airline and the local airport cannot negotiate favourable terms.

Ryanair pulled out of Valencia in 2008 when the airport allegedly offered Air Naurum, part of Iberia, a better deal. Puzosventura, in the Canaries, saw passenger numbers increase from 2,000 in 2006 to 200,000 in 2009, according to Ryanair, but the airline drastically reduced its service when it felt that the agreement with them to promote the region. And a court battle is raging in Marseilles, where a new terminal was

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Locals in the Languedoc love the British for restoring their historic buildings — and for bringing in their pensions

