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By Rosie Millard

Ok, summer is officially here and with it, the usual yearning of us poor benighted islanders to all go and buy property south of Dover. Why bother buying to let in Putney when you can buy to let in Provence? Think again, please. "I see these holiday programmes and realise people have no idea about the problems buying in France," says Joan Taylor, who has lived in Taradeu in the Var Valley for the last eight years. "There are snags with French inheritance tax, particularly if you are bringing two families together, and there are problems with voids. This year, everyone's jittery about forest fires, and the Americans haven't come back. In fact due to the popularity of the Croatian coast there is a distinctly empty feeling around here. Lots of my friends are saying their houses aren't booked up."

Ms Taylor is selling her house. A seriously ill parent has made it necessary for her to be nearer to an airport (Taradeu is 50 minutes from Nice), and her 3- bedroomed villa is on for E 425,000; there are panoramic views, but no pool. It has a separate 1-bedroomed apartment which she rents out for £290/ week in the high season. "This year I have rented it out for nine weeks, but then I don't have high rates. People asking more have got big gaps. This place is far too over-subscribed with British people who have bought and now can't rent."

Her house is on the market with Pat Toohey. "I've got about 30 English people looking to buy rental properties down here," says Pat. "The coast is saturated. Inland is better. Away from the coast you could get a very nice villa for about E500,000, and rent it for E1300 a week in high season. I think the best thing is to have a theme." Toohey sells a lot of villas on local golf courses, but she has other ideas. "Painting holidays, music holidays, even massage or cooking weekends could be arranged." Quite apart from getting to grips with hiring easels, pianos and masseuses, she suggests potential landlords must know the location and speak proper French.

Whereas in the city of Olympic dreams, holiday lets are doing very nicely. Not London, Paris. Alright, I have my own little flat there, but how better to judge the market than via one's own performance? My one-bedder in the Ninth is rented out to tourists via PerfectlyParis.com, an agency appealing to people wanting to stay in "real" locations around Montmartre.

"I have been here for 3 years, and real estate has gone nothing but up," says Gail Boisclair, who runs the site. According to her, a small one-bedroomed flat in Montmartre will cost around E160,000. Think about paying E5000 per square meter, or E5600 per square meter if in the Ninth, which is slightly more central. "For that reason, you might make a better investment in the outlying arrondissements, but make sure you are close to a Metro and in a touristy area."

Rentals are around E130 a day, or E750 for a week, and you should expect 50% annual occupancy. I'm a recent client, but I already have a lot of bookings. Ms Boisclair urges potential landlords to a) refurbish their flats to hotel standard, and b) buy on sight. "If you see something today it will be gone by the afternoon. That's the way the Parisian market works."

In Spain, the Costa Brava is looking good. Willem Boerhof from My House in Spain says a finished 4-bed apartment by the sea in the Pals/Begur region would cost E 225,000, and could be rented out for around E1000 a week, high season. An 6-bed inland villa with a decent plot would cost E400,000-E500,000. The season is shorter than in the hotter Costa del Sol, however, and Boerhof warns investors they might only have 25% annual occupancy.

Pete Cobbold has spent around E800,000 buying and renovating a vast Masia, or traditional farmhouse in the Sitges area of the Costa Dorada. When I spoke to him he was awaiting his first guests of the year, a family of ten. “We charge just over E3000 a week in the high season, and are booked throughout July and August,” he says. A 17th century building, it is not the sort of thing for an absentee landlord, and Cobbold has another income stream from his wife, so he doesn’t depend solely on rent. “There are modern flats in Sitges which you could do from London, rent out immediately, and have a few week’s holiday in yourself. Make sure it looks good, though, or you won’t get repeats, and without repeats, it’s very hard work.”

How about Switzerland? Switzerland has always seemed a bit scary to me, with its cantons and air of tax-haven privilege. I’m not alone, according to Simon Malster, who runs investorsinproperty.com, marketing French and Swiss Alpine properties. France is familiar, hence prices are higher. Come to the land of the cuckoo clock, says Malster. “If you open up a brochure, its France, France, France. Switzerland is undervalued. The price per square meter is usually the same in Swiss Francs as it is in Euros, and the exchange rate is 1.5 Swiss Francs to a Euro. The downside is that you can’t gear up as much. Swiss banks will only lend up to 65% of purchase price, although the interest rates are keen; 3% fix, 3.5% variable.”

One of the other issues is that the running costs vary between cantons. “Your return will be better in a cheaper canton such as Valais, where the annual yield on an apartment in a dual season resort will be about 4-5%.” Malster recommends a resort such as Faas Fee, has just been opened up to foreign buyers. “It’s very high and the national teams train there in the summer, so there is a very long season. You could rent it for at least 16 weeks a year.” Malster doesn’t do rentals, but there are two local agencies. He says for investors, capital values go up “slow and sure”, but that buyers can’t sell for 10 years.

“An apartment must have; a) the ability to ski in and ski out, b) amenities within walking distance, and c) a knockout view. We have a chalet with 18 2-bed apartments, on at £250,000, with all of those.” Of course, as Malster says, it all depends whether you intend to use the property during the key ski holiday weeks. Since I regard skiing with a surprising venom, I would probably make a huge amount from such an investment, since I would never be there. Yes, but I might then begrudge every single moment in such a deal. I think an antique farmhouse in Catalonia is more my style.

South of France: www.golfandvillas.com Paris: www.perfectlyparis.com

Spain: www.myhouseinspain.com / www.masiarentals.com

Switzerland: www.investorsinproperty.com