

France's blue ribbon

Best admired from on the water or in the saddle, the western Lot valley has breathtaking beauty and property to match, as **Rachel Johnston** discovers

S naking voluptuously through precipitous gorges, serried ranks of vines and emerald fields stippled with *bastides*, the River Lot is a jewel in France's rural crown. Flowing for almost 500km, it is the longest river in the south-west and for centuries was the lifeblood of the valley's people. Nearly 600 towns and villages perch and sprawl at its edge, some straddling it, some neatly marshalled by cliffs, some obscured from the water by thick wooded groves. But with a permanent population of just 400,000 combined, they remain unspoilt and refreshingly 'French', contrasting with some parts of neighbouring Dordogne.

The river has endured fashion peaks and troughs; the late 19th-century recreational trend of boating parties fell away by World War II, before being reignited in the 1970s when Christian Bernad – chairman of the Association for the Development of the Lot Valley – realised the need to harness the area's tourism potential. Today's Lot Valley Entente was created to link together the five departments through which the river flows, and it has since processed millions of euros in grants to support agricultural, environmental and water projects.

Despite such investments, the valley is little more perceptibly urbanised today than it was a century ago. Its natural landscape and peaceful atmosphere have inspired myriad poems and paintings; novelist Edward Armand suggested its beauty was even beyond capture when he wrote in 1886 about a "succession of vistas that defy the eloquence of the poet and the patience of the artist". Certainly, the view from my hotel room (*above*) was more vivid and gleaming than my lowly camera or any amount of watercolour paper could fully interpret.

Two-wheeled adventures

So, if you can't do it justice on film, you have to just 'live' it, and there is no better way of doing that here than by bike or boat. The Lot valley's *véloroute* comprises 160km of smartly maintained, well-signposted paths that hug the riverbank, largely separate from noisy roads. Not being one to chase thigh-burning hills when in the saddle, I was content to potter along this gently undulating route and take in the views at my own pace, accompanied only by the birds and distant hum of a tractor. En route from Parnac to the town of Luzech, which sits in the neck of one of the river's sharpest meanders, the cycle path deviates into the very centre of the vineyards, punctuated here and there by a plum or cherry tree.

Art and history lovers are not short-changed by the Lot valley, and it's easy to make a pitstop at churches and galleries as you ride along. During another day's cycle, we stopped to admire 13th-century frescoes in the church at Ste-Livrade-sur-Lot, and their 21st-century counterparts in Bias. These villages surround the larger *bastide* town of Villeneuve-sur-Lot, marking the westernmost end of the valley.

A few villages are so steeply situated that it's worth swapping your tyres for sturdy walking shoes to enjoy them looking less scarlet-faced. Pujols and St-Cirq-Lapopie are obvious must-sees given their *Plus Beaux Villages* status, but for all their exquisiteness, the hordes of visitors – even out of season – and museum-like ambience make it a challenge to imagine actually living there.

I was more taken with the medieval outcrop of Penne d'Agenais, 12km south-east of Villeneuve, which somehow retains the

essence of real French life amid its manicured, history-laden streets. It is home to artisans from weavers to glassblowers selling their wares on the way up to the cathedral, from which the view is a treat, through cypresses and across rosy roofs to the valley beyond. A crêpe stop at the bustling Café des Arts facilitated a chat to one of the locals, who I watched backing a car away from a cottage in brick and stone with arched wooden door, against a backdrop of shimmering green fields and swooping swallows.

Messing about in boats

On the water, the pace of the Lot valley slows further. Thanks to ongoing developments, more and more of the river is now navigable, currently encompassing a 50km stretch from Villeneuve to Aiguillon in Lot-et-Garonne, and another stretch from Crégols to Luzech across the border in Lot. All manner of water-ready apparatus can be hired at various points along the way, from kayaks to motorboats to houseboats, at reasonable prices and with no licence required. Rental is typically seasonal to match the April-October opening of the waterway. If you're not put off by the manual locks, this is the one of the loveliest ways to explore, with some impressive bankside properties to swoon at – whether on the market or not – such as the Château de Caix, owned by the Danish royal family.

For the adrenaline hunters, white-water rafting and hydroplaning are available, and with the Lot river's 20 species of fish, it's also an ideal place for casting a line or two. But if you prefer to simply board a boat and let someone else take care of the navigation, a



cruise from Bouziès near St-Cirq takes in the sights of Lot's capital of Cahors, famed for its dark, juicy Malbec and imposing Pont Valentré. The presence of this larger town is a comfort for those who might be feeling severed from modern life after all this time on a boat or bike. Almost an island, it lies within another dramatic meander of the river and is fed by the Chartreux spring, a natural and drinkable resurgence of water with an average flow of 2,000 litres per second.

Unlike the Lot valley's smaller villages, Cahors is more a melting pot of old and modern, its eastern district a patchwork of medieval towers surrounding the Cathédral St-Étienne, contrasting the 20th-century white buildings and public gardens of the west, and the tower blocks and supermarkets beyond the northern city wall. The eclectic architecture and dramatic bend of the river are best appreciated from Mont St-Cyr, though you may need to leave your bike behind to make the hike up to a height of 264m.

Homes near the water

When it comes to property, there is no single distinctive type of building in the Lot valley, though the materials are often determined by geology – river pebbles and sand are common, as is timber framing. According to Alice Loftie of Charles Loftie Immobilier, the area's most popular properties are traditional stone-built farmhouses, especially those with a *pigeonnier*, an ample garden and a swimming pool.

"Buyers often rent them out when away themselves, as the area offers so much for the tourist," Alice explains. "Many buyers seek peace and tranquillity in their immediate

surroundings too, so a rural location with views and space is ideal, as long as it's not too far from the *boulangerie!*"

House prices vary enormously, depending not so much on precise location but rather on whether you want a 'do-er up-er' or a turnkey retreat. A modest three-bedroom property in Casseneuil with a 300m² garden costs as little as €132,500, while a full-blown *maison de maître* near Penne d'Agenais with pool, outbuildings and fabulous views will set you back €770,000 – with everything in between, of course. Pleasingly, the average house prices in both Lot and Lot-et-Garonne are well below the €160,000 national average, at €125,000 and €125,800 respectively.

Julie Savill of Beaux Villages Immobilier describes the Lot valley as a promising area in which to earn an income, again due to the activities on offer. "Popular with tourists and locals alike, this is prime territory for anyone hoping to set up a leisure-related business. It's an area with easy access but off the major routes – a sheltered corner of France with a sunny climate and situated less than two hours from ski slopes and the coast."

Current or budding hoteliers might be tempted by a luxury camping, hotel and gîte business right at the water's edge in Villeneuve-sur-Lot, on the market for €895,000 but with terrific earning potential. A more modest €400,000 will buy a well-established restaurant nestled among the limestone cliffs near St-Cirq-Lapopie.

Facing page: *The view from the balcony at Hotel Bellevue, Puy l'Evêque*
This page, clockwise from top left: *Early evening light on the valley's lush landscape near Villeneuve; a street meandering uphill in Penne d'Agenais; a glassblower demonstrates his craft in Penne; the Danish royal family's stunning Château de Caix near Luzech; cycling along the 'véloroute' from Bias to Ste-Livrade*

There are numerous buying options to make this blue ribbon of France a permanent part of your life, and so many ways to enjoy it once you're there. It seems fitting to mention the words of Émile Dacier and Julien Knecht, as published in the Tour de France magazine in 1907 after a canoeing expedition: "The Lot valley needs to be launched; its day will come, you may be sure of it, but get in quickly." That was over 100 years ago, but the advice is truer now than ever. What are you waiting for? ■

www.valleedulot.com
www.tourisme-lot.com
www.tourismelotetgaronne.com



On the market



Villeneuve-sur-Lot: This substantial 'maison de maître' has five guest bedrooms and is part of an established business including luxury camping and gîtes. €895,000 (www.guyenneimmobilier.co.uk)



Puy l'Evêque: Situated on high ground on the outskirts of the town, it's hard to believe this fine property was built only 40 years ago by a local stonemason. It has five bedrooms and four bathrooms, a pool, wine cellar and two separate gîtes. €499,000 (www.charles-loftie-immo.com)



Cajarc: This handsome house was a former presbytery and has part-medieval and part-18th-century origins. Set in grounds of almost an acre on the edge of the village, it has been fully restored to offer seven bedrooms, an impressive vaulted salon and a courtyard with barn. €349,000 (www.agencelunion.com)



Casseneuil: This charming three-bedroom stone and tiled cottage is situated a stone's throw from the shops and has a private garden. There is plenty of original wood flooring and exposed stone, and a convertible loft space of 80m². €132,500 (www.jbfrenchhouses.co.uk)



Penne d'Agenais: A five-minute drive from the village and river, this 19th-century 'maison de maître' boasts superb views of the Lot valley, and a saltwater pool and two terraces from which to enjoy them. There are six bedrooms and a wine cellar waiting to be filled. €770,000 (www.lafitescholfield.com)



St-Cirq-Lapopie: This 36-cover restaurant is set up and ready with a beautiful riverside dining garden and fitted commercial kitchen. In addition to owners' accommodation, there are three one-bedroom apartments. €400,000 (www.beauxvillages.com)

Boat and bike hire

Lot Navigation, Bouziès

0033 (0)5 53 84 72 50, www.lot-navigation.com

Camping Floiras Base Nautique, Anglars-Juillac

0033 (0)5 65 36 27 39, www.campingfloiras.com

Cycles Lamiche, Villeneuve-sur-Lot

0033 (0)5 53 70 42 65

Getting to the Lot valley

By car: A75 (St Flour), A20 (Cahors), A62 (Aiguillon)

By train: TGV Paris-Toulouse; Cahors or Agen stations

By plane: Bergerac-Dordogne-Périgord airport (55km from Villeneuve-sur-Lot), Rodez-Marcillac airport (70km from Cajarc), Toulouse-Blagnac airport (115km from Cahors)