



Country house in Tarn-et-Garonne, on the market for €1.2m (see listing opposite)

FPN

# Long dog lingo



If you buy a home in the south-west region of Occitanie be prepared to learn two languages, says **Daniela Harris**

When my husband came back from his first trip to the local supermarket, he asked me: “What does ‘avoir’ mean?” The lady who had served him had said it as she waved goodbye to him, and it was at this point I realised our school-level Parisian French was not going to cut the *moutarde* down here in the south-west of France.

## LANGUEDOC LIFE

“What’s that you say? You live in the long dog!?” A good example of the importance of pronunciation. Of course, I live in the ‘Languedoc’, which derives from the language (*langue*) of Occitan (*d’Oc*), which is more than

just a dialect. As the romance languages took a foothold in France a thousand years ago, two distinct languages emerged: in the north the *Langue d’Oil* (the word for ‘yes’ in the north) and in the south the *Langue d’Oc* (the word for ‘yes’ in the south).

Now officially renamed as Occitanie, the region reflects where that language is still most widely spoken, or more accurately, the group of languages and dialects that form Occitan (known as the *lenga d’oc* in its native tongue).

## SPEAKING IN TONGUES

Occitan takes many forms and its dialects are nuanced across an area that stretches south into Spain (where it becomes a

blend of Catalan) all the way up to the Périgord (Dordogne) and across to Marseille and beyond to where it all originated – Rome. Although it is classified as one language, some argue 22 languages have been identified, of which the main ones are Languedocian, Provençal, Auvergnat, Limousin, Gascon and Vivaro-Alpine. Someone speaking Provençal will have trouble understanding Gascon and so the debate rages on.

The first king of France (Philip II) who unified the country in the 1200s tried to kill off the language and its people, as did subsequent monarchies and governments, but languages are hard to kill and it flourished underground. Although UNESCO classifies

## QUICK OCCITAN

English > Maybe  
 French > Peut-être  
 Occitan > Sifaut

English > Good grief!  
 French > Zut alors!  
 Occitan > Macarell!

English > Darling  
 French > Cheri  
 Occitan > Ninou

Occitan as an endangered language, estimates seem to suggest between 600,000 and three million people still speak it in France. It continues in folktales, in fields at harvest time, in the changing of the





€1.2M

**ROQUECOR, TARN-ET-GARONNE**

*A magnificent four-bedroom country house with a two-bedroom gîte. Beautifully renovated with a stunning tower, courtyard, 8.6ha of land and a swimming pool (see also main image).*



€380,000

**MONTAIGU-DE-QUERCY, TARN-ET-GARONNE**

*A four-bedroom stone farmhouse with fabulous valley views and a swimming pool. Close to a pretty town with shops, bars, restaurants and a popular leisure lake.*



€450,000

**GAILLAC, TARN**

*A unique property formed of two mills with three bedrooms and character throughout. It has a delightful outdoor terrace, swimming pool and two-car garage.*



€300,000

**ROQUECOR, TARN-ET-GARONNE**

*A beautiful recently built farmhouse set in the peaceful countryside, complete with five bedrooms, a swimming pool and a large covered terrace.*

seasons and transhumance (the moving of cattle between winter and summer grazing), in the naming of nature, and most vividly in music and poetry. Like mother nature itself, Occitan has a distinctly feminine aspect; it is the language of change, nuanced and verbal, non-prescriptive, non-confrontational, rich with phonetic meanings and hard to pin down, shape-shifting into myriad variants throughout the south-west of France.

**WAR OF WORDS**

In Dante's *Inferno* there are eight verses of Occitan; it is the only language represented other than Latin. Scholars now suggest it was Dante himself who gave the name to the

Occitan language. But why did Dante champion a language that would have got him killed for speaking it? For the same reason the Catholic church and subsequent rulers wanted it dead. Occitan wasn't just a language but an identity. It reflected the values of the Christian Cathars, which were deeply different to those of Catholic Christians.

Back in the 12th century the conquest of the south was not just a land grab but a crusade that bloodied the south for centuries to come.

The Cathars were primarily nobles, and a significant number were noblewomen. Between 30-50% of the south practised Catharism. Cathars shunned all Catholic practices

except the giving of the sacrament through the laying of hands and transmitting the spirit of God through those hands. Whoever received it could also pass it on - man or woman. A woman could transmit the holy spirit. No other religion granted women this equality.

The battle raged, and it would be the winners who imposed their language and religion. Dante was living in those years and hinted at which culture he preferred by including those eight verses in Occitan. Catharism was tolerant, joyous and peaceful, which ultimately led to the Cathars' demise, most famously at the Château de Montségur.

**POETRY GETS MOTION**

In the same period, these Cathar castles hosted troubadours - composers and performers of lyric Occitan poetry. They were often aristocrats, with William IX, Duke of Aquitaine, credited as being the first. Troubadour poetry is the first example of European poetry written in the language of the common people, and scholars now acknowledge that European poetry was born in the 11th century in the *langue d'Oc*. All other poets came after, and it is fitting that Dante pays tribute to this in his work.

And what a language it is, with phrases such as '*se la barba donava de sen, totas las cabras serian doctors*' (if a beard ►



## LOCATION



€203,000

### CAJARC, LOT

An imposing house in a historic bastide town, with great views, a sunny terrace garden and three bedrooms. There is also a lovely vaulted ceiling in the living room.



€599,000

### FRAYSSINET-LE-GÉLAT, LOT

A charming farmhouse with three gîtes and a beautiful pigeonnier (totalling 10 bedrooms). Set in peaceful countryside with a pool, close to tourist hotspots.



€350,000

### CORDES-SUR-CIEL, TARN

In an historic village, a charming home with three bedrooms (two independent from the main house, perfect for guests), beautiful garden and stunning views.



€475,000

### BOURNAZEL, TARN

An old stone house with three or four bedrooms and a guest studio. It has a wonderful double-height kitchen with mezzanine, and a terrace with far-reaching views.

were the sign of wisdom, all goats would be doctors).

One thing is clear. Having survived a thousand years, and authoritarian efforts to suppress it, Occitan is firmly rooted in the south of France. ■

**Daniela Harris is a property consultant at Beaux Villages estate agency in Aude**  
Tel: 0800 270 0101  
(Freephone from the UK)  
0033 (0)8 05 69 23 23  
[beauxvillages.com](http://beauxvillages.com)

## BE MORE OCCITAN

### ■ Learn to play the lyre:

Like the troubadours of old, why not wander the streets and woo the damsels with your intricate playing?

■ **Learn to juggle:** Jugglers formed a traditional part of Occitan entertainment and there are plenty of workshops across the region where you can learn this skill.

### ■ Write poetry about

**mother nature:** Surrounded by beautiful landscapes, from the vineyards of Bordeaux, the foothills of the Pyrénées and picturesque *bastide* villages, you have lots of inspiration.

■ **Join a society,** such as Café Oc or La Topina in Toulouse where you can take a lesson in Occitan cuisine as well as conversational Occitan.

### ■ Visit the Cathar castles

and drink in the incredible regional history.

■ **Go to the theatres:** Since the 1970s, a revival of Occitan theatre has seen a host of troupes across the region performing through the year.

■ Finally, make sure you order a **chocolatine** in the **boulangerie**, not a *pain au chocolat*.