

OVERSEAS

How to buy a house in Normandy, France

Artists from Monet to Hockney have been flocking to the region for centuries — and now Brits are following suit. Is it a surprise when the average property purchase is £114,000?

By Hugh Graham



The Entrance from David Hockney and Martin Gayford's book *Spring Cannot Be Cancelled* (Thames & Hudson, £25)

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If you are looking for a beautiful place to buy a holiday home, don't listen to the estate agents: follow the artists. To judge from the evidence in art galleries, there is no place more picturesque than Normandy, the birthplace of Impressionism. Its evocative landscapes and light gave us Monet's *The Cliffs at Etretat*, *The Beach at Trouville*, *Sailing Boats at Honfleur* and *Haystacks* (at Giverny), as well as masterpieces by Manet, Renoir, Pissarro and Degas.

Now David Hockney, the world's greatest living artist, has followed in the footsteps of his forebears. After living in London, Paris, Los Angeles and East Yorkshire, Hockney, 83, has decided to spend his sunset years in a 17th-century cottage in the Calvados department. He spends his days painting blossoms, the results of which are on show in a new book, *Spring Cannot be Cancelled*, and an exhibition at the Royal Academy in London starting on May 23.

“It is gorgeous everywhere I look,” Hockney told a reporter this year, talking about his four-acre property, La Grande Cour (“the big yard”), which he bought in 2018. He fell in love with what he calls the “Seven Dwarfs, Hansel and Gretel house”, where he watches the sunrise, then spends the day painting apple, pear, plum and cherry trees or the stream at the bottom of his garden.

Waldemar Januszczak, the *Sunday Times* art critic who interviewed Hockney for his podcast, describes Normandy's distinctive colomage architecture as “stripy houses; they look a bit like Tudor buildings in the middle of Chester. Normandy feels more English than some bits of France.”

Indeed, Normandy has often been called the Devon of France (wilder Brittany being its Cornwall). It is certainly a landscape that feels familiar: hedgerows, windy lanes and farms — mostly apple orchards and dairy cows — and a coastline that ranges from white cliffs to sand dunes. And more buyers from the UK are starting to call Normandy home.

Joanna Leggett, a director of [Leggett Immobilier](#) estate agency, says that sales to UK buyers rose 25 per cent in 2020 owing to two factors: the desire to buy a foreign holiday home that does not require air travel in the era of the pandemic (Normandy is

within easy driving distance of the UK) and a rush to establish residency before the Brexit deadline.



Robin Horsham moved into a 15th-century mill in the Orne department of Normandy on December 30 last year: it is deep in the interior, about an hour and 20 minutes south of the D-Day beaches. Horsham, 62, had been living in Kent with his wife, Nicki, 42, and their five-year-old daughter, Evie, but they wanted to escape the rat race for a better life. “North Kent at one time was very countrified but it is getting more aggressive with its housing,” Horsham says. “We looked at the West Country but I love France.

“We had sold our house in September and then lockdown came and we almost lost our buyer, so we had to make a decision fast. So we put everything in storage and got in the car and drove to France. We looked at the Mayenne in the Pays de Loire, as we were inspired by Dick and Angel Strawbridge’s *Escape to the Chateau*. We looked south, west and east, and then came back to Normandy. The landscape has more hills and dales and

greenery, and it is just so peaceful and quiet. We fell in love with it.”

Horsham bought the four-bedroom mill for €150,000 through Leggett Immobilier. “This same property would have cost £800,000 to £1.5 million in Kent,” he says. “We are in Tinchebray, in a tiny hamlet of four houses in a dip in the valley. It is idyllic. Rush hour is about five cars going down the road. I am looking out the window now and I can see fields and streams and a massive great big oak tree. We are in two acres and surrounded by rolling green hills. You can’t hear anything.”

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Horsham, who works in procurement in the telecoms industry, is able to do his UK-based job remotely — he says that the broadband is good — and has enrolled Evie in a local school. “France is much more family-orientated,” he says. “Everything closes on Sunday. You take two hours for lunch. And Evie has been welcomed with open arms. The French kids give her cuddles. This idea that the French are arrogant and don’t like the English is not true. We have been treated with nothing but respect and kindness.”

The Horsham family are off the beaten track, on the fringes of an area called Swiss Normandy, so-called because of its craggy, hilly landscape, dramatic gorges and chocolate-box cottages; it is based around Clécy, in the south of Normandy. Most Brits tend to buy further north by the coast, near the tourist action, not least so they can earn rental income when they are not using their home or from an outbuilding.





The Clécy countryside
ALAMY

The average spend for Brits is €131,000, according to Leggett. But this is not enough to buy directly on the coast, where three-bedroom homes might be closer to €500,000, particularly in the big-name towns such as Deauville, with its fancy boutiques and seafood restaurants — it is a favourite holiday home spot for Parisians (it is nicknamed the 21st arrondissement). Monet's beloved Honfleur, with its narrow brightly coloured townhouses, is similarly genteel.

Brits tend to buy about 30 minutes inland from here — Hockney country, as it may soon become known — where you will find the gingerbread houses and apple orchards. Local delicacies include tripe à la mode de Caen (tripe cooked in cider and Calvados) and andouillette (a tripe sausage), which Hockney eats regularly at four-course lunches in local cafés (€13). Hockney country is the Pays d'Auge region of Calvados — look for property near places such as Pont l'Évêque, Lisieux, Orbec and Vimoutier, says Lisa Greene, the regional co-ordinator of Leggett Immobilier — a three-bedroom house around here might cost €170,000 to €190,000.



The medieval island monastery of Mont St Michel
ALAMY

To make their money go further, many Brits buy further west in Normandy, in the department of Manche, which is still within driving distance of the D-Day beaches and the old-world romance of Bayeux but also closer to Mont St Michel, the medieval island monastery that is possibly Normandy's biggest attraction. "There is a very affordable heartland around Saint James, St Hilaire du Harcouët, St Georges de Reintembault," Greene says. "You would pay €100,000 to €120,000 for a three-bedroom home."

Suzanne Jenkins-Pearce lives in this affordable Manche heartland, in Sourdeval, a town with a population of 3,000. She moved here 18 years ago from a semi in the New Forest. "We wanted a better quality of life, more outside space and a safe place to bring up our children," she says.



Half-timbered buildings are typical of the region
ALAMY

Jenkins-Pearce, the founder of [Suzanne in France](#), an estate agency, says that the average spend on property for Brits last year in the area was €109,000 and says that she commonly hears English accents in the supermarket. She describes her area as "very rural, small towns, very friendly, like Devon was 40 years ago. We have four bakeries, two supermarkets, public gardens, a tennis court and a horse-riding track. People have their own vegetable gardens. There are a lot of small farms; people have two cows, a few sheep, a pig and chickens."

It is only an hour's drive to the sea, in two directions. To the west is Granville, a walled town on the Cotentin peninsula where Christian Dior grew up and which has a ferry service to Jersey in 85 minutes (suspended at present because of Covid). "Granville is a smart fishing town," Jenkins-Pearce says. "People call it the 'Monaco of the North'. Between Granville and Genêts there are miles and miles of unspoilt beaches and empty coves.

From Genets you can see Mont St Michel and even take a guided walk to it.”

Jenkins-Pearce’s other coastal option is to drive northeast for an hour and ten minutes, to Caen, from where she catches the ferry to the UK from the port of Ouistreham. “Portsmouth to Caen takes five hours. If you are coming from the UK, the routine is to arrive at the ferry on the Friday night, wake up in Normandy on Saturday morning and be at your place in time for breakfast.”

Another route is the Chunnel. It takes 35 minutes to cross from Kent, plus a 90-minute drive to Upper Normandy, but most Brits don’t buy around there, instead making a beeline for the more bucolic scenes of Lower Normandy, according to Alistair Lockhart, a director of the property company [French Entrée](#). “Some people buy around Rouen, for some it is a draw. But most buyers go to Calvados or Manche. My in-laws lived in Lisieux, near where David Hockney is, and it really is like going back in time to the England of the 1960s and 1970s in terms of the way you live.

“If you want to get back to nature and a much simpler way of life but still want the convenience of getting back to the UK in a couple hours, I think that is why a lot of people are choosing Normandy right now.”

[@HughGrahamST](#)

In the frame: homes for sale in Normandy



Calvados, €278,500

In Hockney country near Lisieux, a three-bedroom house with an outbuilding.

frenchestateagents.com



Manche, €475,000

A fortified château with four bedrooms, gatehouse and seven acres near Périers.

suzanneinfrance.com



Manche, €578,000

In four acres, this eight-bedroom château is near Sainte-Mère-Église.

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Calvados, €620,000

This six-bedroom home has four rental cottages. Near Sainte-Honorine-Fay. frenchestateagents.com



Orne, €129,000

Built in 1700, a four-bedroom home with beamed ceilings in Lonlay l'Abbaye.

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