

The latest news from the Languedoc –February '10

A mild winter so far (with one unusually cold week in early January when temperatures dropped to an average of 3°C).

The average high temperature during November, December and January in Montpellier was

12°C

with a recorded high of 24°C



Bienvenue !

Welcome to the next decade! We are all hoping the global economy will begin its recovery this year, but in the meantime, life goes on and we must remain optimistic.

Included in this month's newsletter we have an article on that classic French icon, the Plane Tree, and a survey reveals France is still the best place to live. As ever, I hope you find them interesting.

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There is nothing 'Plane' about these trees !



This iconic symbol of France, the tree-lined avenue, has a long and colourful past, but is the future still looking rosy?

A few facts

A brief history will show that there are fossil records of plane trees as early as 115 million years ago. The trees we see all around us here today in the South of France are a hybrid of the Asian and American sycamore trees that were created by accident in Oxford, England in the 16th century. This is why they are sometimes called London Plane trees.

The plane tree is a large, deciduous tree found in the most temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere growing 30-50 metres tall (100 feet or more). They are popular in cities due to their resistance to diseases and to air pollution. It has proved particularly tolerant of urban conditions, it grows quickly, provides excellent shade, looks beautiful, requires little water, and can be planted in poor soil.

They are characterized by scaling bark, which as the outer bark flakes off, the inner bark shows shades of white, gray, green, and yellow producing a mottled appearance.





Plane trees have both male and female flowers and after being pollinated, the female flowers become a densely packed hard, brown ball about 3cm in diameter that contains several hundred seeds that disperse in the wind rather like a dandelion.

If you are a lover of popping bubble-wrap, then hours of fun are to be had stepping on the fallen 'seeds' that give a rather satisfying crunch underfoot as they burst.

The largest plane tree in France (pictured left) is to be found in Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, a medieval village situated in the valley and gorge of the Gellone and Hérault rivers. It is one of the Plus Beaux Villages de France.

A bit of history

It is thought that Napoleon is responsible for the typical scenes we see today of tree lined roads. It is true that he ordered the extensive planting of plane trees along the roads in Southern France to shade his marching armies from the heat of the midday sun.

But prior to this, it was Pierre-Paul Riquet, a salt tax collector from Béziers, who used plane trees to great effect. He finally solved the problem of how to create a shortcut between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, avoiding a month long sea voyage, by building the famous Canal du Midi (now a UNESCO world heritage site) which opened to navigation in 1681. He planted more than 250,000 along its length to shade the canal and reduce water evaporation. The roots also serve to stabilise the banks.

However, the plane tree was already in use by Noblemen to create the fine and impressive tree-lined roads leading to their estates.



A deadly hazard?

Today there are perhaps two opposing views of the plane tree: those that love one of the iconic features of the French landscape – the tree-lined country road – and those who view them as a deadly hazard.

According to a survey, nearly one in 10 of the 8,000 road deaths in France each year involves collisions with trees (France has one of the worst road safety records in western Europe). Some departments have begun a systematic policy of felling trees along busy stretches of road. Others feel the real problem is with the drivers themselves and have pointed out that the trees - unlike many French motorists - do not drink too much alcohol, travel too fast or make sudden, unexpected movements.

Unfortunately, in those areas where the roadside trees have been removed, there has been no obvious reduction in the number of road deaths. Cars are still spinning off the road but crashing into other objects instead.

Whether a thing of beauty or a sinister threat, they are still very much a part of the classic French scene – vive les Plane Trees !

Quality of life

over half a million (known) Brits living in France can't be wrong

Every January, International Living magazine rank and rate 194 countries using various indices such as cost of living, economy, health, culture and leisure etc. to see which countries offer the best quality of life.

For the fifth year running, France comes first leaving Britain in a rather sad 25th place. It seems the frustrating bureaucracy is outweighed by so many other factors not withstanding the best health care in the world.



The next best place to live is Australia, followed by Switzerland, Germany, New Zealand, Luxembourg, United States, Belgium, Canada, and Italy in 10th place.



International Living says of France: "I always wish quality of life indicators could measure a country's heart and soul. But it's impossible to enumerate the joy of lingering for hours over dinner and a bottle of red wine [or] the Languedoc of the troubadours, bathed in Mediterranean sunlight."

Did you know - 'vous longez la Via Domitia' ?

Ever noticed that very polite sign, as you sail down the A9, informing you that 'vous longez la Via Domitia' (you are following the Via Domitia) ?

Curious to know exactly what they were on about, some research revealed that the Via Domitia was the first Roman road built in Gaul (France) by the Romans. It runs from Italy, across Southern France to Spain, and is actually built over an even more ancient route, travelled in history by Heracles and Hannibal with his famous elephants in 218 BC.

Amazingly, even today, you can stand in those fantastically preserved ruins of Pompeii on the Via Domitia, travel to Narbonne and in the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville view the exposed road, and also at numerous points in the vineyards you can walk this ancient route – along the ruts of all those Roman chariots !

Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus came to France in 118 BC to build the road. It linked Rome in Italy to Cadiz in Spain, running from one end of the Languedoc-Roussillon to the other, through four of the five départements (Aude, Gard, Hérault and Pyrénées-Orientales). It crossed the Alps by the easiest passage, followed the valley of the Durance, crossed the Rhône at Beaucaire, passed through Nîmes and then followed the coastal plain along the Gulf of Lion. At Narbonne, it met the Via Aquitania (which led toward the Atlantic Ocean through Toulouse and Bordeaux). This strategic crossroads, coupled with an accessible, but well-defendable port made Narbonne one of the most important towns in southern Gaul.



After Perpignan the road separates in two: the Inland Route and the Coastal Route, which rejoin at La Jonquera where the Via Augusta begins. Today La Jonquera is a large shopping and commercial town in Spain, close to the French border. The area has always been an important pass through the Pyrénées.



The Via Domitia today – a section exposed in the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville of Narbonne

It is the oldest Roman road in Gaul, in fact, one of the oldest Roman roads anywhere, forming part of an immense road network of more than 70,000 miles, built by the Romans over eight centuries.

Along the Via Domitia the Romans built hostels called 'mansiones' at distances of a day's journey. These were maintained by the central government for the use of officials and those on official business where they could get food, shelter and fresh horses.

Domitius had to establish control, set up garrisons and protect the colonies. His military road rapidly became a major route for communications and commerce.

Today the A9 hides the original materials in many places, but whole sections of the foundations and engineering works (such as bridges and mile-posts) can still be seen and are well worth seeking out.

Are you looking for work ?

Good ! Because we are looking for new colleagues to join our friendly team.

As you probably know, we cover the whole of Languedoc-Roussillon from Nîmes to Carcassonne and Perpignan. Due to our expansion, we require people to represent the agency in the Gard, Aude, Hérault and Pyrénées-Orientales departments. We are looking for bilingual people with previous experience to take on properties for sale into our portfolio and to conduct sales visits with our international clientele. You will be self-employed either as an Agent Commercial or registered under the Auto-Entrepreneur scheme (see our article about this new scheme in the December issue).

We also need people for our dynamic new company, Liberté France, that provides a top quality service for all aspects of managing a property in a foreign country. We are looking for bilingual people throughout Languedoc-Roussillon to help develop our expanding business and to co-ordinate the tailor made services to our clients. Previous experience of property or project management is preferable, with good organisational skills and practical common sense. We do everything for our clients from setting up their utilities, to translation, holiday rental management, property maintenance all the way up to complete project management of a renovation.

If either of the above positions is of interest to you, or to someone you know, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us on **+33 (0) 467 363680** or at **ab@ab-real-estate.com** for an informal chat and to find out more about working with us as part of our professional team.

France is doing its best to be 'green'

France is somewhat behind the times in many things, part of which gives this country its charm, but when it comes to recycling and other green issues the country is making its best efforts to do its bit for global warming – albeit rather behind many other conscientious countries.

We have recently been given lovely new dustbins in our village – one for recycling items and the other for normal rubbish. This was the norm for a similar village in the UK ten years ago.



But the French have been very good for some time about recycling their glass and plastic and the 'déchèterie' or rubbish dump is normally monitored by eagle-eyed employees who make sure you put your unwanted items in the right containers.



Being a very windy region, there are many wind-farms scattered along the hilltops producing electricity. These elegant turbines are called 'éoliennes' and turn silently during the day and flash their lights in unison by night. You either love them or hate them, but they are a better alternative to nuclear power and produce more than enough power for EDF (Électricité de France) that they are able to sell electricity to the UK.

Also, being the sunniest region in France after Corsica, this is a great place for solar energy and more and more solar panels are appearing. The French government gives grants to people living in remote places for the installation of solar panels and it is also possible to sell your excess power to the national grid.

France, like many countries, wants to encourage us to be 'green' and to run our homes more energy efficiently. Assistance is offered by the French government to help you do this in the form of subsidies and interest-free loans.

The eco loan (interest free) is offered to everyone, regardless of income, of up to 30,000€ (over a ten to fifteen year period) to increase the use of thermal renewable energy sources and therefore benefit from energy savings. They are available from high street banks and will be a good long-term investment due to savings on energy bills and added value to homes.

If you want one of these loans you have to choose two or three options among the following:

- Insulation of the roof
- Insulation of the walls
- Replacement of doors and windows
- Installation of a more efficient heating system
- Installation of a water heating or housing heating system with renewables

In addition, the Agence Nationale de l'Habitat (Anah) will give a grant of up to 4,550€ if you are eligible (ie your household revenue is less than 45,000€) for a range of renovation work. However, you must own your own home and live in it, it must be more than 15 years old and you must plan to live there for a further 6 years after the renovation. The work must be carried out by professionals. To get the best return on your investment, it is advised to do things like insulate your roof and walls and replace an old boiler. There are other conditions, so for more information go to www.anah.fr.

The above two loans are intended as a funding support to make people act - which is ideal if you have just bought that idyllic ruin for renovation at that bargain price the market is offering at the moment. It is certainly not an unattractive offer, particularly if you plan to do those things anyway to make your ideal holiday or permanent home in the sun.



Restaurant review

LE CHALUT

Quai, Port Vendre - Tel: 04 68 82 00 91

The 3-course menu of the day is excellent value at 14,50 €, generous portions and innovative cuisine. The service is very friendly and professional and attention to detail is not overlooked. Booking is highly recommended. It has many good reviews on www.linternaute.com, an excellent website for finding restaurants (in French).

A selection of Featured Properties



Outstanding property with spacious renovated character farmhouse, sep. apartment & a large attached house, idyllic setting in 50ha of woodland and pasture, ideal for horses, spectacular views across the Pyrenees, Limoux area

795 000€ AFI **Ref 1046**



Beautiful villa of 250m², swimming pool situated on grounds of 784m² in a quiet neighbourhood in Montpellier area near the sea

583 000€ AFI **Ref 1042**



Unique 17th Catalan Mas with several buildings, total surface 1000m², 2 Gîtes, partly renovated, huge business potential, 5ha of land, isolated with stunning views, possibility to buy more land, Perpignan area

1 145 000€ AFI **Ref 1012**



Detached stone house with independent studio, large mature garden and pool, quiet location, near Narbonne

350 000€ AFI **Ref 82**



Contemporary villa with stunning views, 140m² living space on 2 levels, 3 bedrooms, 4000m² of grounds (some is constructible), total privacy, pool possible, Prades area

424 000€ AFI **Ref 1029**



Character house 194m², 5 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, on 710m² grounds, quiet neighbourhood. Situated in the Beziers area

371 000€ AFI **Ref 84**



Chateau style Manor house with 4 independent apartments + detached house, large convertible outbuildings, pool, set in 3.7 ha of park near to the Canal du Midi, first class business potential, area of Carcassonne

1 370 000€ AFI **Ref 1043**



Former 19th C wine cave converted into a stunning house with 4 bedrooms, beautiful grounds, courtyard with arches and stone fountain, walking distance to shops, UNUSUAL property for lovers of stone!

838 000€ AFI **Ref 1017**

À Bientôt

As usual, I really do hope you have enjoyed our newsletter and found it useful. Please do let me know if you have any ideas for articles of interest for future editions, or anything you've often wondered about and would like to know the answer to.

Don't forget that **we are looking for people to join our friendly team**, in either the estate agency side of the business or in property management – so please let us know if you, or a friend, would like to know more. **Contact us** on any of the media below, and we would be very pleased to have an informal chat with you.

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With best wishes

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