

PAUL COOPER

By Jane Hughes

Ask fashion designer Carolyn Wight Freeman how she found her dream house on the border of Provence and the Languedoc and she'll smile conspiratorially. Serving tea from fine bone china in the cool shade of her elegant flagstone terrace, overlooking fields of grass and brilliant red poppies, the founding designer of the Episode womenswear label says she has always followed her instincts.

So when a year ago, at a restaurant in the South of France, she eavesdropped on an English couple telling their companions about a 'very special' place called Uzès, she finetuned her antennae. At the time Carolyn, a divorcee originally from near Edinburgh, had decided to downsize from her hectic Manhattan lifestyle. She was house-hunting in the pretty Provençal town of St Remy but had found it too expensive and commercialised.

Despite knowing nothing about Uzès, she drove there on impulse and was instantly seduced by the easy-going charm of this small but culturally cosmopolitan medieval hilltop town. What's more, she fell for a stunning 1870s farmhouse, several miles west of the town as soon as she set eyes on it. 'I loved the space and feel of the house,' says Carolyn. 'It was a place where I could live comfortably outside all summer and yet not feel claustrophobic in winter, when the wind is so fierce it blows you off your feet.'

Named after the crickets that can be heard singing all summer long, Mas Cantegril was once an independent vineyard. Its outbuildings, grouped around a courtyard, include a cavernous, open-ended barn and a separate apartment above the garage. At about £600,000, the house - with its stylish white interior of four generously proportioned bedrooms and a

Eurostar's new service to the legendary town helps tempt British visitors to buy into the Uzege region

suite of airy ground-floor rooms - was over Carolyn's original budget. But the sale of her New York apartment just about gave her enough to allow her to buy her dream house. She is now amassing a small library of books on living in France, Carolyn was finally doing it for real.

'I did wonder what I had let myself in for,' she admits. 'Buying a house is like having a relationship - you have to get to know its quirks and learn how to live with them.'

By mixing items bought from the previous owners with her own furniture from New York, Carolyn has created a look that is part pared-down Manhattan glamour and part traditional French.

Next year she plans to rent out the house during the high season and return to Scotland, where she has another home and is setting up an interiors business.

She also envisages using the house as a backdrop for fashion shoots, and it's easy to imagine models gliding across the decorative tile floors, sitting at the grand piano in the split-level lounge and wandering up the long avenue of irises in the garden.

Meanwhile, she enjoys growing camomile for tea, gathering pine cones to throw on her fire and perfume the



How we discovered our secret South of France sur le pont d'Avignon

house in winter, and collecting manure for her rose garden from two white horses she has befriended.

'I've even got three olive trees so I'm very excited about taking my crop to the local press - though I'll probably get only a cupful of oil,' she says.

The fact that Carolyn stumbled across the Uzege area almost by accident is not surprising. A loyal band of Brits-in-the-know have enjoyed its attractions for years. They, however, chose not to shout too loudly about their favourite hideaway. Besides, the area was not easy - or cheap - to reach.

The introduction of a weekly Eurostar service that transports you from Waterloo to the balmy heat of Avignon in a little more than six hours has changed all that - opening up the lush countryside west of the Rhone Valley. So, too, has the budget Ryanair service from Stansted to Nimes.

The region offers plenty to do and see: Avignon has the fortress-like Palais des Papes (Popes' Palace), art galleries, museums and a summer theatre festival.

Nimes and Arles (where Van Gogh produced 300 canvases) have splendid Roman remains, while the protected wetlands of the coastal Camargue are populated by white ponies, pink flamingos, eagles and kites.

As accessibility has increased, prop-

erty prices have risen. According to Philippe Roussel, of estate agents Century 21, houses in the Uzege region have doubled in value in the past two to three years, though they are still about 30 per cent cheaper than in the Luberon.

That's good news for Londoner Doug Stoddard, 33, who bought a rambling five-bedroom house with a games room and swimming pool for about £150,000 last June.

The software firm director had wanted a retreat that his family and friends could enjoy and that he could rent out until he could make it his full-time home.

But first there was work to be done: the garden was a jungle, the decor was appalling and the old plumbing, heating and electric systems were ugly and needed replacing.

Doug's mother Shireen, who joined him on flying visits from Derbyshire to help choose plants for the garden and advise on furnishings, watched the transformation with enthusiasm.

'Doug got a real kick out of working on the house with his friends - and playing petanque over glasses of pastis with the locals after a long day,' she says.

'Now that the house is finished, it's lovely to go down there and relax in comfort. The sun shines for 300 days a

year, the air is fantastic and you're surrounded by local vineyards.'

Living two minutes' walk from Waterloo, it made sense for Doug to travel by train. Even before the Eurostar extension, he was able to transfer to a high-speed TGV at Lille and be at his second home, 40 minutes' drive west of Avignon, in less than eight hours.

Doug had wanted to buy quickly when sterling was high against the euro, but with little time to househunt himself, he employed the specialist French Property Finder to draw up a shortlist.

However, despite all Doug's planning, the move didn't go entirely without a hitch.

On the day of completion, a misunderstanding over timings saw him tearing off to a deserted airfield in the middle of nowhere and crawling through a fence to pick up his solicitor who had decided to make up time by flying in on his private plane.

Fortunately, Doug had better luck with furniture. 'I wanted to avoid Ikea, but local antiques seemed to cost a fortune,' he says.

'Eventually I tried a famous antiques village in the Luberon. It turned out to

be a national holiday, but I caught one lady shutting up shop. She had the usual array of pricey furniture, but suggested I try her friend 'in the hills'. 'With the help of a map on the back of an envelope I tracked him down and was amazed to find that he had some beautiful stuff at reasonable prices.'

The next morning he arrived at my door with most of the furniture that is now in my house. Doug and his friends have made the most of local attractions - hiring a minibus to take them wine-tasting at Chateaufort-du-Pape and kayaking through the wooded gorges of the River Gardon and under the magnificent Roman aqueduct of Pont du Gard. And there have also been some hidden perks.

The renaissance of Uzès, designated a ville d'art in 1962, has breathed new life into villages such as pretty St Quentin la Poterie, where Doug chose to buy. As well as 15 potteries, three artisan bakeries and a butcher, St Quentin now has a primary school and a Michelin-starred restaurant.

Former mortgage broker Mark Butterworth, his French girlfriend, Laurence Nugues, and their two-year-old son, Alexandre, are among the newcomers to the area. They bought a traditional five-storey St Quentin village house for £118,000

last September and have been doing it up ever since. 'It's a full-time job,' says Mark, 35, 'but after ten years of working 12 hours a day in the City, this is a joy.'

'We've found we can live quite happily on a budget of £13,000 a year that I get from ongoing investments and it makes sense for me to work on the renovations rather than employ builders.'

The house can be reached via a lane and a walled yard, where animals were once kept. In summer, the family spend most evenings on the expansive terrace above, where they can pick the

grapes off their vines and look out over the pine trees beyond.

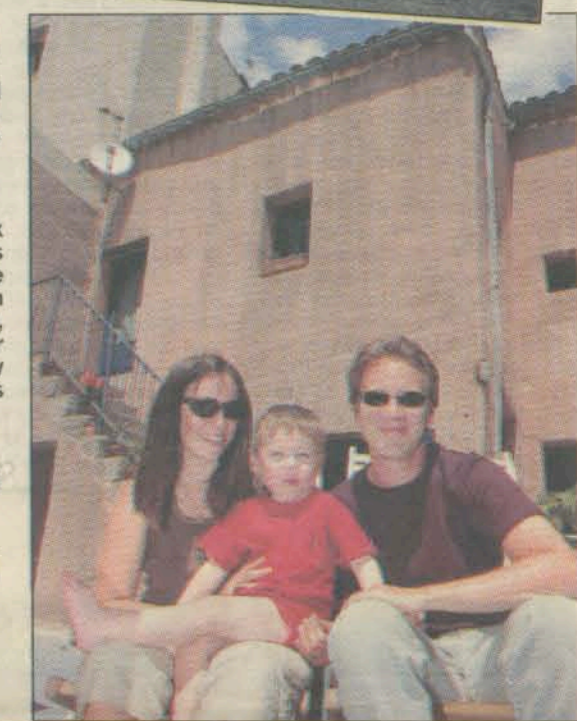
'Everyone seemed to shut themselves away through the winter, but recently we've made some good friends,' says Mark.

'The quality of life here is unbeatable. I can't imagine ever wanting to go back to London.'

French Property Finder, telephone 020 8994 8557, or visit the website at www.frenchpropertyfinder.com. Doug Stoddard's house can be rented through www.luxuryfrenchvilla.com



TREASURED: Carolyn Wight Freeman, above, says she fell in love with the space and feel of her dream house on the border of Provence and Languedoc



UNBEATABLE: Mark Butterworth and his girlfriend Laurence Nugues with their son Alexandre, right, can't imagine a better lifestyle than they have found in Uzès

ENTHUSIASTIC: Doug Stoddard worked hard to renovate his rambling home with the help of his mother Shireen, pictured with him below. Doug and his friends have made the most of the local attractions around Avignon, left, and Arles, far left



Eurostar travel

Eurostar has a direct Saturday service from London Waterloo and Ashford International to Avignon. A standard-class return costs just £99 for travel this month. Tickets can be purchased from the Eurostar Contact Centre on 08705 186186. Tickets are also available from Eurostar's website, www.eurostar.com, and at the Waterloo and Ashford terminals. The 715-mile journey from London to Avignon takes six hours 15 minutes.

