

Nestled between Dordogne and Charente-Maritime, this quiet corner of France is bursting with bucolic scenes and is steeped in history. Charente is one of the four departments of the former Poitou-Charentes region that now make up Nouvelle-Aquitaine (along with Aquitaine and Limousin), an area that boasts a mild climate and more sunshine than any region outside of the Mediterranean. It's also one of the most affordable areas in France, making it increasingly popular with British buyers who want something off the beaten track but with good travel links to the UK.

The department takes its name from the River Charente, which flows through it en route to the sea at Rochefort in neighbouring Charente-Maritime. Henry IV supposedly declared it the most beautiful river in his kingdom and it was certainly one of the most important. Historically, Charente provided a vital trading route that fuelled the area's main industries (salt and cognac) and later powered the paper mills that sprang up around Angoulême in the 18th and 19th century.

Set on a plateau above the river valley, Angoulême is the departmental capital and the historic seat of the ancient province of Angoumois (an area that changed hands between the French and the English during the Hundred Years' War). Local highlights include the medieval ramparts and

Romanesque cathedral, which dates from the 12th century. The picturesque *Vieille Ville* is known for its charming façades and sloping streets, which recently played a starring role in Wes Anderson's *The French Dispatch*.

But Angoulême's biggest claim to fame is undoubtedly its annual Comic Book festival, an event that welcomes thousands of fans from around the world every January. It's also home to La Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée, a museum dedicated to what the French have deemed the 9th Art (comic strips). The theme continues all over town with incredible murals and street art based on comic book references.

Another highlight is the annual Circuit des Remparts held in September, when classic cars race around the ramparts.

### EAU DE VIE

Beyond the bustling suburbs of Angoulême, Charente remains largely agricultural with the majority of the landscape dedicated to viticulture. This is cognac country and a large part of the department is devoted to the creation of the legendary local brandy. The official production area covers some 75,000 hectares with six different growing areas, or *crus*, that extend into Charente-Maritime and some parts of Dordogne and Deux-Sèvres.

The term 'cognac' applies only to brandy produced here, and made from specific white wine grapes (primarily Ugni Blanc, but also Folle Blanche and Colombard). The region is also famed for its Pineau des Charentes, a sweet *vin de liqueur* that is often served as an aperitif or dessert wine. Pineau is made from unfermented grape juice (white or red), or 'must', which is fortified with young cognac (less than a year old) and aged in oak barrels for five to 10 years.

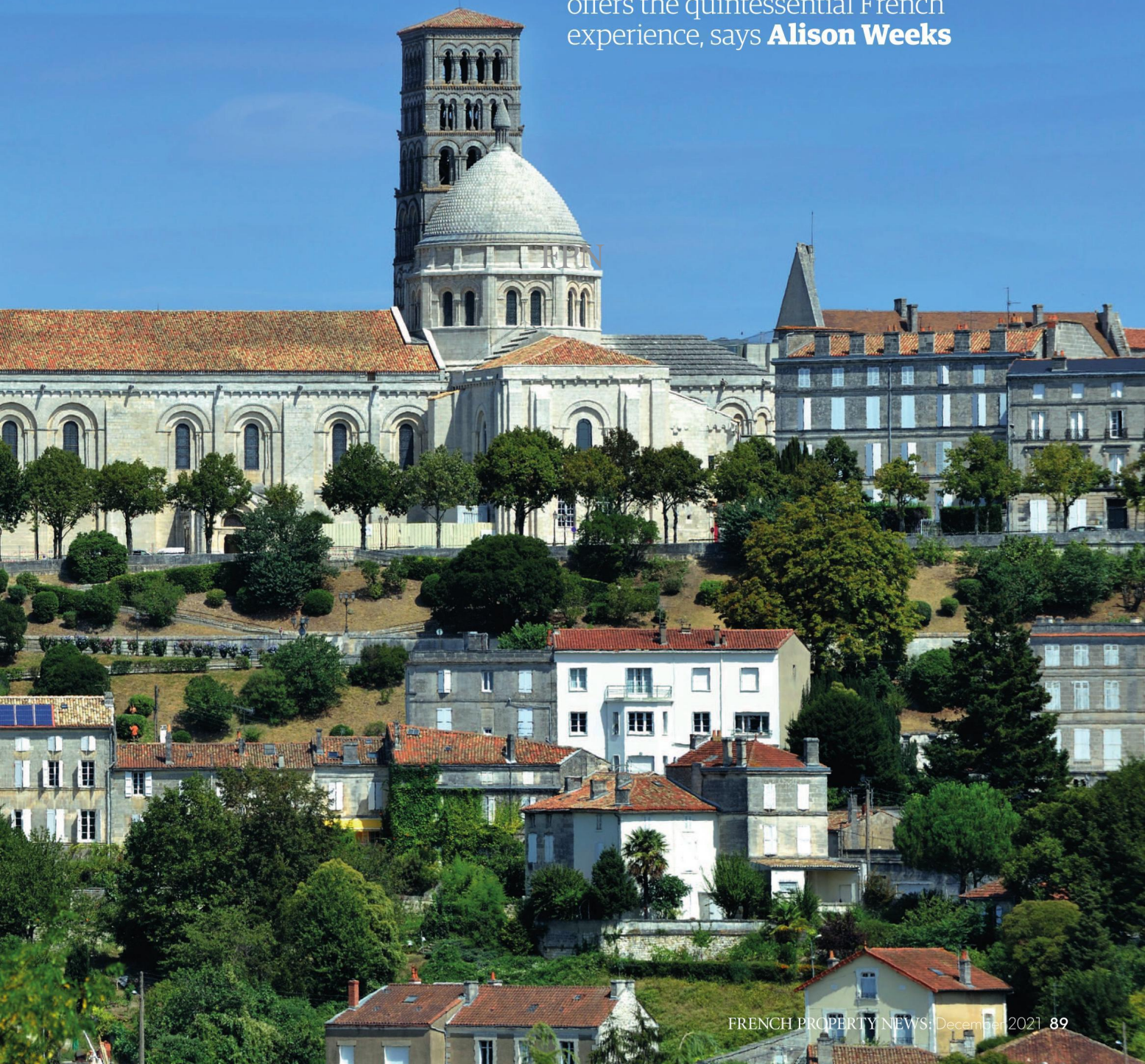
The heart of the region is the eponymous town of Cognac and although this place is now synonymous with brandy, it was actually the salt trade that put it on the map. In the Middle Ages, the left bank of the River Charente became a busy port for *seuliers*, or salt traders, who made their fortunes selling 'white gold' from the sea. Today, Cognac still centres around the river and on the left bank you'll find the old town, or Vieux Cognac, a charming maze of narrow, winding streets with half-timbered houses.

One of the oldest sites in town is the Royal Château de Cognac, a 10th-century fortress that was later transformed into a palace, where François I was born in 1494. Since 1795, the château has been home to Otard Cognac; its 3m-thick cellar walls are thought to provide the optimum conditions for ageing the spirit. ▶

Angoulême is the capital of Charente

# Cognac COUNTRY

From its sprawling vineyards and sunflower fields to its quaint towns and ancient sites, Charente offers the quintessential French experience, says **Alison Weeks**



# “Walkers will love the ancient pilgrimage trails that extend across the department”

The Royal Château welcomes visitors and there are regular guided tours that take in the fascinating history of the site as well as the distillation process.

Most of the *Maisons de Cognac* offer tours and tastings, including big names like Martell and Hennessy (whose tour includes a cruise on the River Charente). A bit further afield in Jarnac, you'll find the legendary House Courvoisier with its own impressive château. The little producers are also worth a visit as each house has its own way of doing things and its own story to tell.

## LOCAL LANDMARKS

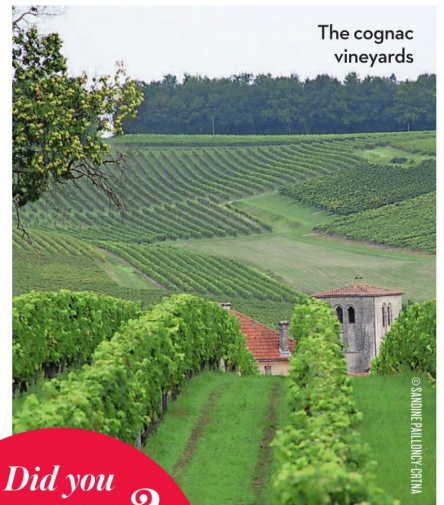
Although the tourism industry in Charente primarily revolves around cognac production, the area's rich history makes for plenty of interesting days out. Castles abound and there are several that are well worth a visit, including the Château de Chalais and the Château de Verteuil. But the most impressive is undoubtedly the 11th-century Château de La Rochefoucauld, the historic residence of one of the French nobility's oldest families.

Other must-sees include the well-preserved Roman baths at Cassinomagus

and the Chapelle des Templiers at Blanzac-Porcheresse, a rare vestige of the 12th-century Knights Templar.

Another major attraction is the charming village of Aubeterre-sur-Dronne at the southeastern edge of the department. With its red-roofed, white houses and cobbled squares set on a picturesque hillside, it's no surprise that Aubeterre ranks among France's official *Plus Beaux Villages*. It's also situated along the Chemin de St-Jacques-de-Compostelle, or St-James' Way, and pilgrims often stop here to see its remarkable underground church, the Église Souterraine St-Jean, carved into a cliff by Benedictine monks in the 12th century.

The ancient pilgrimage trails extend across the length of the department making Charente the ideal destination for avid walkers (religious or otherwise). Meanwhile, cycling devotees will love the Flow Vélo, a 290km cycle route across the department that links the Dordogne to the sea through lush countryside and along the river to Angoulême and Cognac. For those who prefer a more leisurely pace, the River



## Did you know?

The Charentais melon originated in Poitou-Charentes but is now more widely grown in Provence



Sunflower fields are typical of Charente



Angoulême is the city of cartoons



Verteuil-sur-Charente château

FPN

Charente's wide waterways are perfect for boating excursions.

Foodies will enjoy exploring Charente's many markets, especially the legendary Foire du Rouillac. This centuries-old market takes place on the 27th of every month and offers an incredible variety of fresh produce and livestock from around the country. Thanks to the area's mild climate, there's an abundance of local *produits de terroir* to sample. The whole region is renowned for its dairy products and in particular, *Beurre de Charentes-Poitou*, an AOP butter prized for its creamy texture and nutty flavour. Goat's cheese is another local speciality, most notably, La Taupinière Charentaise, a strong, dome-shaped goat's cheese produced near Angoulême.

Outside of the cognac vineyards, one of Charente's biggest (and prettiest) crops is undoubtedly the sunflowers that cover much of the countryside to the north of the *département* and are sold at flower markets across France. Another famous export is *La Charentaise*, the traditional felt or

wool slippers which originated here in the 17th century. Made from felt offcuts from local paper mills, they were said to be the preferred footwear for servants as not only were they silent, they had the added bonus of polishing the parquet!

### À BON MARCHÉ

You may also hear the term 'Charentaise' when looking for property as the traditional stone houses are ubiquitous here. A stereotypical Charentaise will have Roman roof tiles and pale blue shutters, with exposed beams inside. And although they often come with plenty of land and outbuildings, you can find a good deal if you know where to look.

According to estate agent Charles Miller of Charente Immobilier: "The north and north-east of the department are the cheaper areas and bargains can be found - properties here can also come with more land. There are no vineyards here so land is much cheaper and more available."

Unsurprisingly, property prices are higher in the cognac-making region

## 5 REASONS TO LIVE IN CHARENTE

- 1:** Affordable and attractive property. A 90m<sup>2</sup> home would cost an average €105,300. The area has many quintessentially French properties, the type Brits dream of, with symmetrical limestone facades and powder blue or green shutters.
- 2:** There's a reason why there are so many sunflowers - the department enjoys 2,400 sunshine hours per year.
- 3:** Lovely riverside towns like Cognac, Jarnac, Confolens and Ruffec, and capital Angoulême is a city on a human scale.
- 4:** Vineyards producing wine, cognac and Pineau des Charentes. The local gastronomy is great too!
- 5:** Four airports within easy reach (Poitiers, La Rochelle, Limoges and Bordeaux) with flights to and from the UK, plus high-speed train services from Paris to Angoulême.



The Plus Beaux Village of Aubeterre-sur-Dronne

(which is also closer to the coast) as Charles notes: “The most sought-after areas are in the vineyards to the south of Cognac and Jarnac. Properties here come at a premium. The area around Ruffec, to the north of the department, is also popular - properties are cheaper but the area is more rural.”

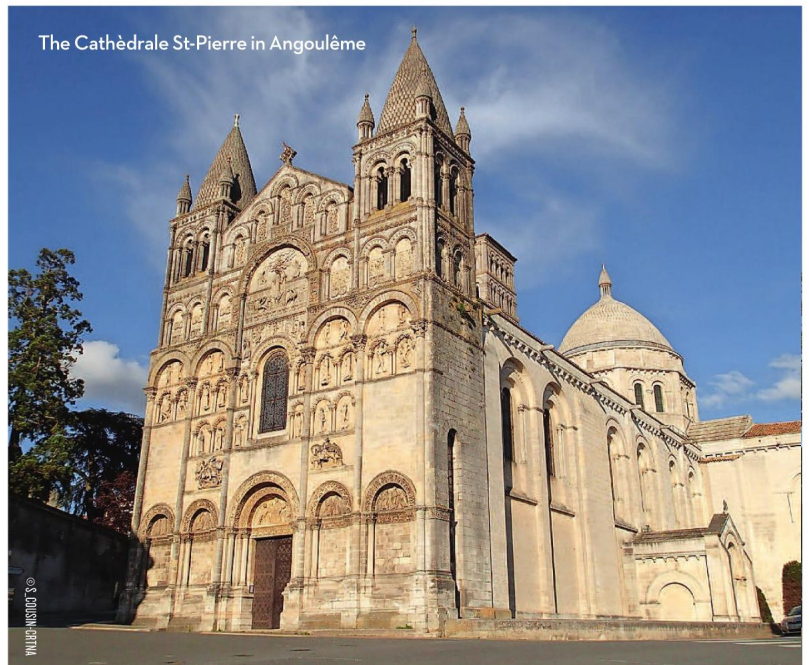
Yet even the more expensive areas still look like good value compared to other parts of France. The average house sells for around €1,590m<sup>2</sup> in Cognac while the average for Charente is around €1,170m<sup>2</sup>, well below the national average.

Whether you are looking for a holiday home or a permanent residence, Charente’s travel links make it a great choice for British buyers. There’s a direct TGV train from Paris Montparnasse that will get you to Angoulême in 2h30. And there are regular flights from London Stansted to Poitiers and La Rochelle with more flight options a little further afield at Bordeaux (from Gatwick) and Limoges (from London Stansted and Manchester).

A British expat himself, Charles explains that it’s the quality of life on offer that makes Charente so appealing. “The beaches of the Atlantic coast are just next door in Charente-Maritime and the area is packed with history. It’s a great place for outdoor activities - cycling, horse riding, canoeing, fishing, walking and so on, and it is statistically sunnier than the rest of France (with the exception of the south-east). All this, and the prices are still incredibly reasonable.” ■



The town square in Ruffec



The Cathédrale St-Pierre in Angoulême

TURN OVER ▶

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