

Here come the Brits *The French countryside hosts a new English invasion*

By William Underhill,
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The last time the English passed through Agincourt was in 1415. That's when Henry V and an outnumbered English Army scored one of its bloodiest triumphs in centuries of conflict with France. Ten thousand Frenchmen were slaughtered in a few hours, a victory immortalized by Shakespeare.

Now the English are back. The tile-hung farm just opposite the village museum is English-owned. So is the schoolhouse by the battlefield. At times the only clients in the fancy restaurant beside the medieval church are English. And Agincourt—Azincourt to locals—is not alone. Across this quiet swath of northern France the English are snapping up properties by the score. "These days I hardly have five minutes to turn around," says Maggie Kelly, an English estate agent who reckons her monthly sales in the area have doubled since the late '90s.

Today's invaders seek only peace. Tempted by better transport links and low prices, a swelling army of migrants and second-homers is heading across the Channel in search of a tranquility lost in hyper-stressed, overcrowded Britain. The largest of Britain's mortgage lenders, Abbey National, reports a 50 percent hike last year in the number of loan applications from would-be purchasers in France. That's on top of a 75 percent rise in 2001.

Embassy officials in Paris reckon that some 500,000 homes in France are now in English hands. Most newcomers look for holiday homes in the warmer south, but more and more are coming to the damp plains of the north. For many, their new tumbledown farmhouses or cottages won't be just for vacations: they're planning to settle. "The English just don't seem to be as happy as people here," says Siobhan Stevens, a 52-year-old teacher who moved to Azincourt four years ago, marveling at the quality of life locals seem to enjoy—in stark contrast to her less-than-merrie England.

A glance in any estate agent's windows helps explain the attractions. More than twice as large as the United Kingdom but with a roughly similar population, France has escaped the pressure on space that has driven British house prices relentlessly upward. Last year alone property values in parts of England's prosperous southeast surged by almost a third. The quaint cottage on offer for 90,000 euros near Azincourt might cost three times as much back home, 100 miles away. "The English are very good businessmen. With the pound still very high, they can purchase anything at a much lower cost," says Chretien Lepage of Maison de la France, part of the French tourism office.

Easy access may be just as important. The opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994 has put England in range for a growing band of commuters from northern France—now just two hours from London by rail. Other transplants have tended to cluster around the airports served by the no-frills budget airlines that have taken off in recent years. Says Leslie Albiston, who heads the flourishing international school in Toulouse: "When I came here in 1984 there were five flights to Britain a week; now there are nine a day." For the price of a round-trip rail fare from London to Manchester, the disenchanted English can now fly direct to the French Riviera.

But most of the migrants talk of charms that are tougher to define. For a generation of Britons, the economic reforms of the '80s and '90s brought unsettling changes. The price of greater affluence included crowded roads, a countryside sometimes squeezed into near extinction by encroaching suburbs and an end to the job-for-life culture. What the fugitives seek in rural France is the reassurance of continuity and the virtues that go with a slower pace of life. "It's all about old-fashioned family values," says Miranda Neame, who runs an English-language

newspaper for expats. For good measure, the settlers point to the higher standard of public services in paternalist France. "Here you don't have to wait for a hospital appointment: they actually ask you when you want to come in," says Michael Hymas, who quit England for a farmhouse near Azincourt four years ago. A report on the migration phenomenon for the French Embassy in London puts the issue plainly: "Many of the British currently moving to France do so for the higher quality of life."

Not that France is the paradise that all hope to find. The local passion for bureaucracy exasperates

the English who attempt to set up their own businesses. "It's said that the best way to make a small fortune in France is to start with a big one," says Paul Gee, who sells British Aga stoves, mostly to incoming compatriots. Victoria Kaulback, an advertising exec who moved to Paris last year, agrees. "Sometimes I go to work knowing I won't achieve much," she says. "But at least the lunch will be great." That's a trade-off increasing numbers of British seem happy to accept.

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