

MULTI-STORY BUILDINGS

Houses are so much more than places to live. Across France, buildings give us unique insights into the spirit of a place through the stories they tell, says **Faith Warn**

The architectural styles in France differ hugely from region to region, department to department and, on a much more local level, even sometimes from town to town. And these architectural styles can speak eloquently of an area's history, tradition and geography, giving us a

fascinating insight into the characteristics that make a place unique.

With that in mind, let's take a look at three properties across France that are powerfully evocative of the architectural style, history and geography of their particular corner of this diverse country.



War and peace

Les Petites Cigognes comprises a large courtyard with gîtes, barns and a farmhouse cottage situated just outside the sleepy village of Cussay, which offers a restaurant, post office and a child-friendly fishing lake. It is in the Touraine country of the Loire Valley, the capital of which, Tours, is full of history and art. The old town is atmospheric, with cobbled streets and charming medieval buildings.

Originally created in the 6th century by the monks of the order of Saint Martin, the

hamlet and château of La Cigogne have a long and interesting history. Les Petites Cigognes was one of two farms built in the early 18th century to support the adjacent château, and in 1717 it was transformed to become a staging point for the Relais de Poste, the French postal system, and included facilities for overnight hospitality. Water used for this was provided from the well that still exists on the property.

Jumping to World War II, in 1940 German soldiers were billeted here since the adjacent



road formed part of the demarcation line between Occupied and Vichy France.

The architecture of Les Petites Cigognes is a good example of the traditional enclosed Touraine courtyard with buildings on all sides. All three buildings, the gîtes, the large grange and the long barn are typical of the region and the latter both still retain the original roof timberwork, which has a classic Touraine structure, using hand-cut joints.

Inside the buildings, owners Ian and Sandra Andrews retained the original character of the



Clockwise from top left: A delightful shady spot in the garden of Maison de la Reine that leads to the mill race; Maison de la Reine, situated in the famous vineyards of Burgundy, is a house steeped in history. Indeed, it was once the 13th-century home of Marguerite de Bourgogne, queen consort to Charles of Anjou, the king of Sicily. The house has been partially rebuilt using the original old oak timbers to create the attractive half-timbered façade; the house has undergone several restorations over the centuries and from the rear it now has the appearance of a 'maison de maître'; this stylish home has six double bedrooms, a modern kitchen, large lounge and plenty of outside space

Fit for a queen

Maison de la Reine is an historic half-timbered house in Burgundy, in the heart of France. It is situated in a traditional Burgundian village with houses clustered around the church and town hall. This is a land of forestry, grain production, cows and other livestock – and especially of vineyards. The village has its own white wine with a Chablis *appellation* and is often called the Gate to Chablis, lying just nine kilometres from the famous wine centre with its numerous opportunities for tasting.

Maison de la Reine takes its name from its original construction in the 13th century for Marguerite de Bourgogne. As Countess of Tonnerre, she became queen consort of Sicily by her marriage to Charles of Anjou, king of Sicily. After the king's death Marguerite retired to her lands in Tonnerre and there, as an act of charity, founded the famous Hospice des Fontenilles. This became the hospital of Hôtel-Dieu where, in accordance with her wishes, an annual mass is still held for her husband.

Over the centuries, the house has been kept alive through several restorations. The front of the house was partially rebuilt using the original old oak timbers to create the attractive half-timbered façade that is so

typical of Burgundy. From the rear, it now has the appearance of an equally typical Burgundian style – the elegant, regular lines of a *maison de maître*. The present building is the result of a rebuild in the 1830s and the only part of the original building that remains unaltered is the huge vaulted cellar that runs under the entire length of the house. This has perhaps been used for centuries to store that all-important wine of the region.

The house is within walking distance of amenities including baker, butcher, post office, hairdresser, supermarket and three restaurants. It is about 20 minutes' drive from the regional centre of Auxerre, known for its medieval town. It is interesting to reflect that these handsome buildings would have been constructed around the same time as the house of Queen Marguerite, retaining a spirit of place throughout the centuries.

The house now has six double bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms, a fully equipped modern fitted kitchen, a dining room and spacious lounge. Outside there is a flower garden, and a bridge that leads from the garden and over a mill race to a private walled park, while at the front of the house, there is spacious garage parking for several cars. Maison de la Reine is on the market for €400,000.



stone and wood work when they renovated the property to create gîtes, while also offering all modern conveniences.

They also had the long barn re-roofed in early 2008 and the bare-roof structure with exposed timbers clearly revealed details of its construction. The original oak beams and roof tiles were recycled, again to retain the character and materials.

Les Petites Cigognes truly captures the spirit of place in the tranquil Touraine countryside, while echoing so much of its history – the

power of the medieval church, and the importance of stone farm buildings to support the elegant, extravagant life of the châteaux. This is a farming area with fertile soil and a traditionally abundant supply of food and wine, where an increasing number of farm and country properties now offer an attractive holiday base for exploring the Loire and its famous châteaux.

Gîtes at Les Petites Cigognes sleep up to four, six or eight people, from £275 per property per week. ▶

Left to right: Les Petites Cigognes is a gîte complex set in the heart of the Loire Valley, which is famous for the sheer number of its spectacular châteaux; the comfortable lounge in one of the gîtes at Les Petites Cigognes; the entrance to the property makes quite a first impression; the gîtes at Les Petites Cigognes have retained original features while also boasting modern conveniences for the 21st century



The fabric of life

A Provençal *mas* is almost always a characterful stone building that clearly reflects the history, geography and climate of this sun-drenched region – and Le Mas Jasmin is certainly no exception.

The *mas* is situated in Lussans, close to Uzès, in an area where the majesty of the southern Ardèche, with its rock cliffs and rivers, gives way to the Provençal plain, a gentle land of vineyards, sunshine and lavender where southern France ultimately meets the Mediterranean coast.

This village house, with its courtyard and a 2,000m² garden and swimming pool, was probably built in the 1600s as a farmhouse. Now it is quiet, enclosed and private, but back in the 18th century it would have been a hive of activity as part of it was a *magnanerie*, or silk worm factory, an enterprise commonly run by farmers' wives in Provence to make silk to augment the farm income.

A *mas* was traditionally a farmhouse, the centre of a self-sufficient farm that would produce its own fruit, vegetables, grain, milk, meat and even that silk. Typically, the building would face south to offer protection against the northern Mistral wind, with narrow windows to protect against the heat of summer and the cold of winter. The kitchen and room for animals was on the ground floor and

bedrooms with food storage places on the upper floor.

Pale-coloured local stone was used to build Le Mas Jasmin, which features vaulted ceilings that are typical of the architecture of the area, influenced by the 600-year Roman occupation some 2,000 years ago. The domed ceilings would have been supported by wooden structures during building, which are

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gradually removed at completion.

Several of the domed ceilings on the ground floor of this *mas* have hooks embedded into them. These were used to prepare and hang meat to feed the family during the winter. There is also a large subterranean room that was – and still is – used to collect rainwater, as drought was a common problem. These days it is used to water the garden.

Clockwise from top left: Back in the 18th century, Le Mas Jasmin would have been a silk worm factory, an enterprise that was usually run by the farmer's wife. Today, it is a family home with seven double bedrooms and seven bathrooms, plus a separate guest house; quiet, enclosed and private, the garden stretches for over 2,000m² and is an ideal spot in which to enjoy the peace and sunshine of Provence; a swimming pool is sure to be popular in this part of France; the property retains many original features, such as the pale honey-coloured stone that is typical of the area

The need for water was addressed by the Romans in their construction of the famous and impressive Pont du Gard, the Roman aqueduct that is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and lies close to the property. Roman architecture has also left its mark in Orange and in Nîmes, with its beautifully preserved colosseum, and the local centre of Uzès is an atmospheric old market town that is popular with British people both for holidays and as a destination for relocation.

Le Mas Jasmin is now a family home with seven double bedrooms and seven bathrooms, and there is a separate house with two en-suite bedrooms that would make an ideal gîte for letting or guest accommodation. It is on the market for €1,200,000. ■

All properties in this feature can be found at www.frenchconnections.co.uk