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It's all about the hunt

By Paul Shearer

The great passion for 'la chasse' drives prices in the Sologne region of north-central France



Driving south on the auto route from Orléans to Bourges, the Sologne region presents a mysterious wooded backdrop for over an hour. For the hunter, the area is known as a centuries-old sporting playground.

In the 16th century, François I was only 20 years old when he came to the French throne. He was excited by the new Renaissance thinking emerging from Italy, and continued the family restoration of the royal palaces at Fontainebleau,

Amboise and the Louvre, giving full expression to his passion for modern construction with the Château de Chambord. The chateau he built there was the biggest in the Renaissance world, with 216 fireplaces, 390 rooms, a double-helix staircase, and a series of apartments based on the same floor plan. It was a display of political power, and while no one knows who the architect was, since no drawings remain, Leonardo da Vinci had been invited over to France by the king. And during the short stay before the artist's death, François I had started to call Leonardo "mon père".

More

The precise origins of Chambord may be obscure, but it seems to have encouraged the royal passion for hunting. "François I created the *code de la chasse* and is known in France as *Le Père des Veneurs* (the Father of the Huntsman)," explains Jean d'Haussonville, director-general of Chambord. The walled park which surrounds the chateau extends to 5,500ha and is the largest walled park in Europe. Now the national reserve of hunting, as well as a major tourist attraction, Chambord sits on the boundary of the Loire valley and the Sologne.

This vast and magnificent building promoted the first wave of building of hunting estates in this region which, confusingly, spans three departments – the Loiret, the Loir-et-Cher, and the Cher. It stretches from Orléans in the north to Vierzon in the south and from Chaumont and Chambord in the west, to Gien in the east.

There are more than 1,000 properties in the region with more than 200 hectares. "500,000ha, and over 3,000 ponds, and yet 95 per cent of the population there live on just 5 per cent of the land," says estate agent Patrice Besse's specialist in the area, David Mercier. "If you look at the Sologne from the air it begins to make sense."

The ponds, or *étangs*, are a mostly man-made result of the irrigation of this former swampland and are highly sought after. "Depending on their size, lakes will change hands for €15,000-€17,000 a hectare, whereas forest will be priced at €8,000-€12,000 a hectare," says Hubert Drouin, vice-president of the Fédération des Chasseurs du Loiret.

Stags, deer, wild boar, hare, duck, pheasant and woodcock are among the game that are chased through the woods, on horseback and on foot, with or without accompanying dogs. *La chasse* in France is regulated, as the state tries to balance the demands of man and beast, agriculture and nature. The exact details of the regulations are devolved to local authorities, but the principles remain the same.

Each year property owners or tenants must apply for their quota of big game, known as a *bracelet* (except for wild boar). The number of *bracelets* attached to a property sets a minimum and maximum number of “kills” for that year. The quota may vary from year to year as the authorities try to maintain stable populations of animals. Wild boar numbers, for instance, have increased five-fold in the past 20 years, and the hunting season has been extended as a result. Once permission to hunt has been obtained, the land can be rented to hunting organisations to recoup the cost. Hunting for most species is seasonal, starting in August and September and finishing before spring.

Some Solognat owners have begun to fence off their land in order, as they see it, to protect their investment. They even feed the animals on their land so as not to disappoint visiting hunters. Ecologically, this enclosure, or *Solognisation* as it has been dubbed, hinders the natural flow of fauna. And there is a tension between those who want to fence off their land to create hunting enclaves, and those who want to refresh tourism in the area with a back-to-nature theme.

Most though, are drawn to the region by their passion for hunting. Fifteen years ago Jean-Gérard and Marie-France Gouëffon de Vaivre found a 16th-century château where the only sound on a moonlit night is the gurgle of the stream that runs past the back door and the distant hoots of an owl. After restoring the château to create a bed-and-breakfast, the couple have welcomed groups and organised hunts in the neighbour’s 56 *bracelet*, 2,000ha forest. Illness now forces a sale at €1.24m.

“Small traditional farmhouses can be bought for €350,000. With a bit more land around them, they are closer to €500,000. For a château with around 12 hectares you could start at €750,000,” says Mercier. The hunting fraternity may be getting a little older as fewer younger people take up the sport. “There are many of France’s most important families installed in the Sologne. For some hunting is a social activity, for others it is a passion. It’s hard to imagine that *la chasse* will disappear,” says Gonzague le Nail of agency Cabinet le Nail. The timelessness of *la chasse*, so beloved of François I 500 years ago, is likely to continue well into this millennium.

Buying guide

Pros

- The area is close to the magnificent royal châteaux along the Loire and only a couple of hours from Paris
- The quality of the hunting in the Sologne is some of the best in Europe
- Game, wild mushrooms and fruits of the forest make excellent cuisine in the area washed down with the local wine, Sancerre

Cons

- Not for nonhunters
- Like many rural places, everything is a car ride away
- New owners fencing off their property is an emerging political issue

What you can buy for ...

€100,000 half of a 21hectare hunting and fishing ground close to Chambord

€1m half of a 315-hectare area of hunting forest

Details

- The Château de Chambord, www.chambord.org
- David Mercier, www.patricebesse.com, tel: +33 663 48 76 75
- Gonzague le Nail, www.cabinetlenail.com, tel: +33 243 98 20 20

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