

WHERE TO LIVE

Indre



France's hidden

Loire

Take a detour from the Loire Valley's busy tourist routes and you'll discover Indre, a quiet rural department with rolling valleys, woodland, lakes, bustling market towns and historic villages where time seems to stand still, says *Lauren Howells*

Look at a map of France and place your finger where you think the middle is. That's Indre." It's an explanation we've used on many occasions to explain to family and friends the location of this relatively unknown area of rural France. Forming the southernmost part of the Centre-Val de Loire region, just off the tourist trail of the Loire Valley, it's one of France's least densely populated departments and a largely agricultural area.

If tranquillity and peace are what you're after, Indre could well be the place for you. But, as I discovered when I started house-hunting here over two years ago, there's much more to this place than first meets the eye. When we decided to start looking for a house in France, I have to be honest and say that our only criterion was

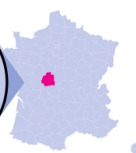


to be as far south as possible without breaking the bank. This region, and the Indre department in particular, met the brief! While price is what drew us initially, we certainly landed on our feet.

One of the great things about this rural department is that it really feels like very little has changed in the last 50 years. Local tourist literature beautifully describes the former province of Berry, of which Indre forms a part, as like “diving into a tableau from your childhood”. Surrounded by the pure beauty of nature in so many diverse and wonderful forms, set against the backdrop of rolling valleys, woodland, lakes and bustling market towns, it’s impossible not to agree.

The landscape of Indre is as rich as it is diverse. From the Loire Valley-esque Château de Valençay in the north (Valençay town was ▶

Indre



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reputedly the first place in France to have both AOC wines and an AOC cheese), through the forest and agriculture surrounding the department's capital, Châteauroux, to the picture-postcard villages dotted high above the curve of the Creuse valley and the bewitching beauty and serenity of the famed Parc Naturel Régional de la Brenne.

ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

Indre's collection of contrasting countryside and spellbinding scenery has inspired countless artists, writers, musicians and even filmmakers over the years. French writer George Sand, whose 18th-century family estate can still be visited in Nohant, used this area as inspiration for many of her novels. The 14th-century Château de Sarzay, for example, provided inspiration for her novel *Meunier d'Angibault*. Its fully furnished rooms can still be visited today. So enamoured was she with the countryside that she invited others to spend time with her and draw their own inspiration from this wonderful place, including Frédéric Chopin, Franz List and Eugène Delacroix, to name but a few.

Only a few minutes down the road from George Sand's estate, the bustling town of La Châtre provides residents and tourists alike

Above left, top and bottom: Château de Bouges; colourful market produce at La Châtre
Bottom: A statue of the postman who featured in Jacques Tati's comedy *Jour de Fête*, filmed in Ste-Sévère-sur-Indre



with the opportunity to enjoy a *petit verre de vin* against the backdrop of a wonderfully French market square. A walk through the old town, past a smattering of medieval half-timbered buildings then down to the P'tit Mur quarter and the river, where a maze of tiny streets are studded with quaint French houses and former tanneries, is well worth a trip. The superb Saturday morning market should not be missed, so buzzing with life that it seems as if all of the department's inhabitants must surely make this colourful market a weekly ritual, in order to purchase goods from stalls selling everything from seafood to handbags to local brewed beer and cheese, before sitting back to enjoy a *café* in one of the bars or restaurants which spill out onto the Place du Marché all year round.

The Creuse valley, which runs through Indre, was frequented by painters such as Monet and Detry, with the stretch of river from Argenton-sur-Creuse becoming known as the Vallée des Peintres.

A visit to the village of Gargilesse reveals why artists have travelled from far and wide to paint this valley. Its accolade of being one of two of the Plus Beaux Villages de France within the Indre department is well deserved. Just one glimpse of its melange of rooftops as you



The beautiful wetlands of the Park Naturel Régional de la Brenne

come in from the curving road on the north side of the village, leaves me in no doubt that it could inspire anyone to pick up a paintbrush. Today, Gargillesse is still popular with artists, and galleries displaying their work are dotted around this small but stunning village.

Another claim to fame for Indre is in the form of film, set in the wonderfully charming village of Ste-Sévère-sur-Indre, at the southernmost edge of the department. As soon as you drive into this small village, it feels as if you are being taken back in time to when Jacques Tati directed his 1949 film *Jour de Fête* in the village. Many of the locals played roles in Tati's comedy about an easily distracted postman. The feeling of excitement and wonder is still palpable today.

BACK TO NATURE

The vast wetland of La Brenne regional natural park consists of nearly 3,000 lakes. People come from far and wide to observe the abundance of birds from free-to-access observatories that are dotted throughout this unspoilt, enchanting terrain. *Cistude* tortoises, European pond terrapins, can also be glimpsed through the reeds, usually sunbathing on logs in the summer months, adding to the delightful other-worldly feel of this place. A walk in any direction on the trails, with only the gentle hush of the reeds blowing in the wind, is an almost spiritual experience and is about as far from the hustle

and bustle of modern-day life as you can get.

Although the area is brimming with nature, Indre is by no means isolated, and the department's capital - the medieval town of Châteauroux - offers residents and tourists a wide range of shops and restaurants.

This fascinating department also offers those of a more energetic disposition a multitude of ways to indulge their sporting side, with Lake Éguzon taking centre stage. Windsailing, canoeing, waterskiing and fishing are just a selection of the activities on offer, while those who would prefer to relax are spoilt for choice when it comes to which beach to sit on for the best view of the lake. Away from Lake Éguzon, further to the east of Indre, the Base de Loisirs in Pouligny Notre-Dame is equipped with a *téléski nautique*. This innovative system, consisting of a 525-metre circular cable which can pull up to seven water skiers around the lake at the same time, ensures that this small lake comes alive with visitors in the summer months.

AFFORDABLE PROPERTY

When it comes to moving to Indre, the good news is that house prices are very affordable, and it's relatively easy to find a renovated, detached property with enough land for a *potager* for around €120,000. Annette Elphick, a freelance estate agent working for Jovimmo Immobilier, explains why she think

Gargillesse's melange of rooftops as you come in from the curving road on the north side of the village leaves me in no doubt that it could inspire anyone to pick up a paintbrush



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DID YOU KNOW?
 The village of St-Valentin in Indre is known as the 'Village of Love' and celebrates Valentine's Day with a special festival each year

WHY LIVE IN INDRE?

- Indre is one of France's least densely populated departments, so it's ideal if you don't want to be living too close to your neighbours.
- Many well-known writers and artists have been inspired by its bewitching beauty, so it's a great place to live for those who want to pursue their creative side.
- There's a strong sense of community and people are very welcoming.
- House prices are among some of the cheapest in the whole of France.
- If you're energetic, you can participate in watersports on the lakes in the summer and take a day trip to the ski slopes of the Massif Central in the winter.

house prices remain low in the department: "It's underdeveloped because it's still seen as an agricultural area," she says. When asked about her favourite part of living here, Annette says: "If somewhere is 20km away it takes 20 minutes. You don't have to think about leaving an extra hour to get through queues of traffic."

The ski resorts of the Massif Central are within easy reach of the department. British-born Lyn Duclos lives in Indre with her French husband and two teenage children and runs La Touche Anglaise, providing holiday language stays for French students who want to learn English. She makes the most of her proximity to the mountains on an annual basis. "Mont-Dore is only a couple of hours away from here. It's really easy to get there in a day," Lyn enthuses.

Lyn tells me that when she and her family decided to move to France 10 years earlier, they discovered La Châtre while on holiday. "It was everything we wanted. It had the schools, the hospitals and the easy access to the train and airports," she says.

Sandwiched between two very different climates of the Atlantic and the mountains of the Massif Central, Indre offers more distinct seasons than anywhere in the UK, as Lyn explains: "When we moved here, my husband told me that we were going to live somewhere

where you'll get extremes of temperatures. One year, La Châtre was the hottest place in France at about 42°C, then one winter we were here the temperature went down as low as minus 20°C. It's good extreme, not bad extreme!"

As I chat with Lyn about her lifestyle in this laid-back area of France, we can hear the gentle chattering sound of the cranes overhead on their journey to Africa for the winter. "It's like England was about 30 years ago. It's much calmer, I don't feel that everybody's rushing around all over the place. Everybody is welcoming... I've got a better social life here than I had back in England!"

Indre is the real France we all fantasise about. It is truly wonderful in its tranquil simplicity and seems to effortlessly inspire all those who visit. When asked if she would ever consider going back to the UK, Lyn smiles and shakes her head. "No... never. Every time I go back to England I can't wait to get home." And who could blame her? Indre seems to cast a spell on all those who set foot here.

TURN OVER ▶
 For an expat's story of starting a new life in Indre



Above: The crypt in Gargilesse's Romanesque church has some remarkable frescoes

Bottom: Market day in La Châtre

