

Capital Charm

Love Paris but not sold on big city life? Try one of its hidden villages on for size, suggests **Rachel Johnston**

Ah, French village life. Trinkling bicycles and family-run *boulangeries*; chit-chat over choosing veg at the weekly market; perhaps a *deux-chevaux* rambling unsteadily along a cobbled street. This picture of Gallic perfection is what many of us yearn for, on holiday or in retirement, as a peaceful retreat from the ubiquitous rat race that seems to consume our lives.

But it isn't just a village's rustic charm that has our hearts clamouring, nor is it simply about swapping blaring sirens for a crowing rooster. For many, the sense of close-knit community that a village can offer is at the top of the must-have list, as often the cruellest irony of big city life is feeling overlooked, isolated, and lacking identity.

Urban village

If you have your heart set on the village vibe, Paris might reasonably be the last place you would look for it. But largely unbeknownst to the 15 million or so annual visitors, there are a number of discreet pockets of this cosmopolitan capital that retain an old-world, classically French charisma. These are not tourist trails, but more the sort of places you might stumble upon on foot when looking for

a coffee and a *pain au raisin* and then rush to write a blog about. Whether it's tranquil stretches of grass, winding vine-clad alleys or a meandering river that you have in your village mind's eye, Paris – surprisingly – has an answer for it all.

Of course, my aim isn't to dampen the excitement of living in the city; the allure of a little pied-à-terre right at the heart of booming civilisation is a very real one, and not everyone

wants the quiet life all the time. The benefit of an 'urban village' is having both lifestyles within easy reach, which is great news for the commitment-phobes among you.

What's more, buying in Paris needn't be quite as costly as you think, with average property prices in Paris expected to fall below €8,000/m² for the first time in four

years. The Prime Global Cities Forecast from Knight Frank reported that luxury prices in Paris remained very competitive in the last quarter of 2014, compared with other key European cities.

Catherine Ryall of Sextant Properties is enthusiastic about the market and its immediate future. "Paris has proved itself largely resilient in the sweeping price drops that the French property market has suffered

Above: *Plaisance's picturesque Rue des Thermopyles*

in recent years," she explains. "This is all the more impressive compared with other parts of France, where some markets have almost stagnated. With sterling now at a seven-year high, this is a buyers' market and there's no better time to invest in the French capital."

Cream of the crop

With this advice in mind, I've handpicked four little-known areas of Paris – two on the Right Bank and two on the Left – that provide an old-fashioned charm all of their own while remaining slickly connected to the city centre by the excellent metro system.

Most enticingly, each chosen 'village' offers the cheapest average property price in its respective *arrondissement*. As Londoners will know, moving just a few streets south or west can make little difference to a postcode but several thousand pounds' difference to a sale price, and the same is true in the French capital. All four areas serve up community spirit and countrified character by the bucketload, to prove that being a city slicker doesn't mean you're all concrete and no cobblestones. *Vive le village!*

sextantproperties.com
vingtparis.com
leggettfrance.com
savills.fr
century21.fr



Canal St-Martin

Arrondissement: 10th

Metro stations: Gare de l'Est, Jaurès, Jacques-Bonsergent, Château-Landon, Louis Blanc

Average property price: €7,450/m²
(10th average €7,660/m², neighbouring Porte St-Martin €8,350/m²)

Those that have seen *Amélie* might remember the canal stone-skimming scene and wonder where, in Paris' frenetic maze of traffic and apartment blocks, such a haven can be found. Perhaps you'd assumed the scene had been shot outside the city, but in fact, this gently flowing waterway with its fizzing locks is the closest of our 'villages' to Gare du Nord, where Eurostar travellers roll in, making it the ideal spot for a speedy getaway.

Completed in 1826 following orders from Napoleon, the 4.5km-long Canal St-Martin connects the Canal de l'Ourcq to the Seine and is surprisingly unknown by tourists, frequented mostly by Parisians. It feels like another world here; there are no museums, monuments or royal-inhabited properties, just two long streets on either side of the water – the Quai de Valmy and Quai de Jemmapes – abuzz with local residents and all the amenities you'd need, and closed to cars on Sundays. One of the best places to meet new pals is Chez Prune, a lively bistro with a waterside terrace where you can graze inexpensively on delicious cheeseboards and replicate the experience of a riverside village pub. In the summer months there are few nicer



This renovated one-bedroom apartment is less than 100m from the canal and is for sale inclusive of furniture. Situated on the building's fifth floor (served by a lift), its south-west aspect means plenty of natural light and it even has a woodburner to capture that rustic village feel. €472,500, vingtparis.com

picnic spots than the banks or footbridges of the canal itself, and strolling along it to buy your morning baguette is an easy routine to get used to.

Here the traces of a bygone era are in the small-scale industries that cling to the canal's banks: Carré, which still makes handmade ceramic tiles, the Clairefontaine paper factory and Cristalleries Schweitzer, where glass has been repaired in much the same way since 1890. These independent businesses make a refreshing change from the city's chain stores and further add to the village atmosphere. There's a thriving street art scene here too, with new Banksy-esque creations popping up all the time – they're perhaps not to everyone's taste, but they certainly give Canal St-Martin a defined identity and a young, modern vibe. Who said villages can't be cool?

Auteuil

Arrondissement: 16th

Metro stations: Mirabeau, Église d'Auteuil, Chardon-Lagache, Michel-Ange-Auteuil, Jasmin

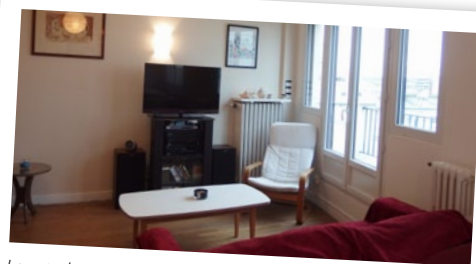
Average property price: €8,500/m² (16th average €9,210/m², neighbouring La Muette €9,410/m², Porte Dauphine €9,380/m² and Chaillot €10,530/m²)

Paris' 16th has long been associated with wealth and high society and, with its ornate buildings, wide avenues and prestigious schools, it's easy to see why. Located on the city's westernmost fringe, it incorporates the 845-hectare Bois de Boulogne which has been the subject matter of numerous Impressionist canvases, showing the upper classes rowing and promenading while taking in the clean air. If you're attracted to village life for its rural element and you crave green space, *bienvenue chez vous*.

While the district of Passy is often considered boringly bourgeois and full of expensive, characterless apartments, its smaller neighbour, Auteuil, has more rustic charm. Its architecture is heavily Art Nouveau and *hameaux* – gated communities – are scattered about, composed of colourful private houses behind stone walls or down alleys. Hameau Boileau is a quirky assembly of individually designed homes, and romance is personified by Villa Mulhouse, with its enclave of four secret alleys awash with vines and rose bushes. The main Rue d'Auteuil still has



a look of an old country village street, flanked by steep tiled roofs and wooden-shuttered windows with hanging signs advertising a *teinturier*, a *bijoutier* and – most importantly – a *chocolatier*. The district even has its own botanical garden, the Jardin des Serres d'Auteuil, where a classical music festival is held each year. Despite the concentration of foreign embassies in Auteuil, French is almost the only language you will hear as you wander around, and it's



Located on a quiet street in south Auteuil and walking distance from a popular food market, this two-bedroom apartment boasts a balcony with a superb view across the district's rooftops. €590,000, leggetfrance.com



green, flowery and peaceful: just like the best French village.

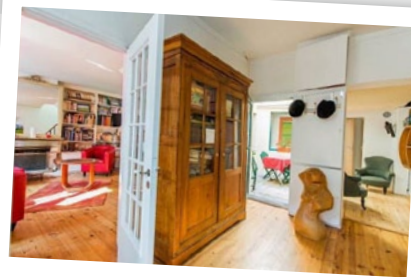
Though property in Auteuil is highly sought-after, it's worth noting that it's the cheapest of the 16th's four districts by a significant margin. Transport links into the city centre are no less developed here than in neighbouring areas and you're slightly further from the tourist crush at Trocadéro and the Eiffel Tower, yet retaining magnificent views of it from many apartments. ▶



All Butte-aux-Cailles photos © Paris Tourist Office/David Lefranc

Butte-aux-Cailles

Arrondissement: 13th
Metro stations: Place d'Italie, Tolbiac, Corvisart, Glacière
Average property price: €7,690/m² (13th average €7,810/m², neighbouring Croulebarbe €9,220/m²)



If you're after a house rather than an apartment you'll need a slightly bigger budget, but just imagine owning this stunning 19th-century example in the heart of Butte-aux-Cailles. It has three bedrooms and plenty of villagey features: a patio, a living room with working fireplace and a large wine cellar. €1,095,000, savills.fr

Nestled between bohemian Montparnasse and the Quartier Asiatique is a particularly well-hidden district, whose labyrinth of narrow streets and tiny houses recalls a Paris of another era. Originally a windmill-dotted hilltop village outside the city's limits, Butte-aux-Cailles takes its name from first purchaser Pierre Caille, though a connection has also been made with the humble quail, *la caille*, allegedly once an inhabitant. What could be more pleasingly bucolic and villagey than the image of verdant pastures covered in windmills and quails?

Today the area remains generally working-class and is a haven for artists and musicians, with Parisians still making up the majority of the residents. The luckiest live at 'Petite Alsace' on Rue Daviel, a half-timbered row of 40 houses built in 1912. Opposite, Villa Daviel is a terrace of stone cottages opening onto a pedestrianised street that would look more at home in Puycelsi than Paris.

If no quail farmers remain in Butte-aux-Cailles today there are at least still beekeepers: Les Abeilles, on the district's eponymous main street, is a veritable hive of activity where hundreds of honey varieties and products are sold. There's a real community feeling in haunts like L'Oisive Thé, a popular tearoom whose name plays cleverly on *l'oisiveté* (meaning idleness), and Place Paul Verlaine is just like a village square, with a decorative 19th-century well sourcing natural spring water.

If living close to a mainstream shopping centre sounds like too much of a headache – Printemps *et al.* are towards Place d'Italie – make sure you stick to the western side of the district when househunting.



Plaisance

Arrondissement: 14th
Metro stations: Plaisance, Pernety, Alésia, Porte de Vanves
Average property price: €8,340/m² (14th average €8,760/m², neighbouring Montparnasse €9,720/m²)

You'd be forgiven for wanting to dive into this feature's opening picture Mary Poppins-style; visit Rue des Thermopyles in person, and you'll probably try to persuade a resident aged *Madame* to sell to you *en viager*. This remarkable cobbled street, whose houses are half-buried under rambling wisteria, is one of the capital's very best hidden secrets. Cats mew and cuckoos call, and you feel a million miles away from the clichéd Paris of the guidebooks.

The aptly-named Plaisance quarter is a mere stone's throw from popular Montparnasse but battles with less than half as many tourists, and comes in considerably cheaper in the property stakes. Its main artery streets – Rue Vercingétorix, Avenue du Maine and Rue d'Alésia – are animated by day and calm by night. Lots of families settle here as it's safe and friendly, and what the area lacks in museums and monuments it makes up for with numerous gardens, artisan shops and markets, three mainstays of village life. You're also spoiled for choice when it comes to cafés and *pâtisseries* but these are small, family-run affairs, not greedy chains; ideal places to catch up with existing friends and make new ones.

There's never been a clear boundary between Plaisance and Montparnasse in artistic terms, with a few surviving *ateliers* on Villa d'Alésia – 'villa' meaning dead-end street – reminding us of the days when the area was a suburban village where artists lived, worked and scraped a living. This particular street is somewhat of a timewarp, having escaped the modernisation that has altered the rest of the 14th over the last half a century; turquoise shutters and out-of-control pot plants abound, and living here means owning at least three tinkling bicycles. ■



In a quiet position near Pernety metro station, this one-bedroom apartment is bijoux but bright and has a lovely parquet floor and fireplace. €329,000, century21.fr