

The hottest properties in France are the ones by nuclear stations

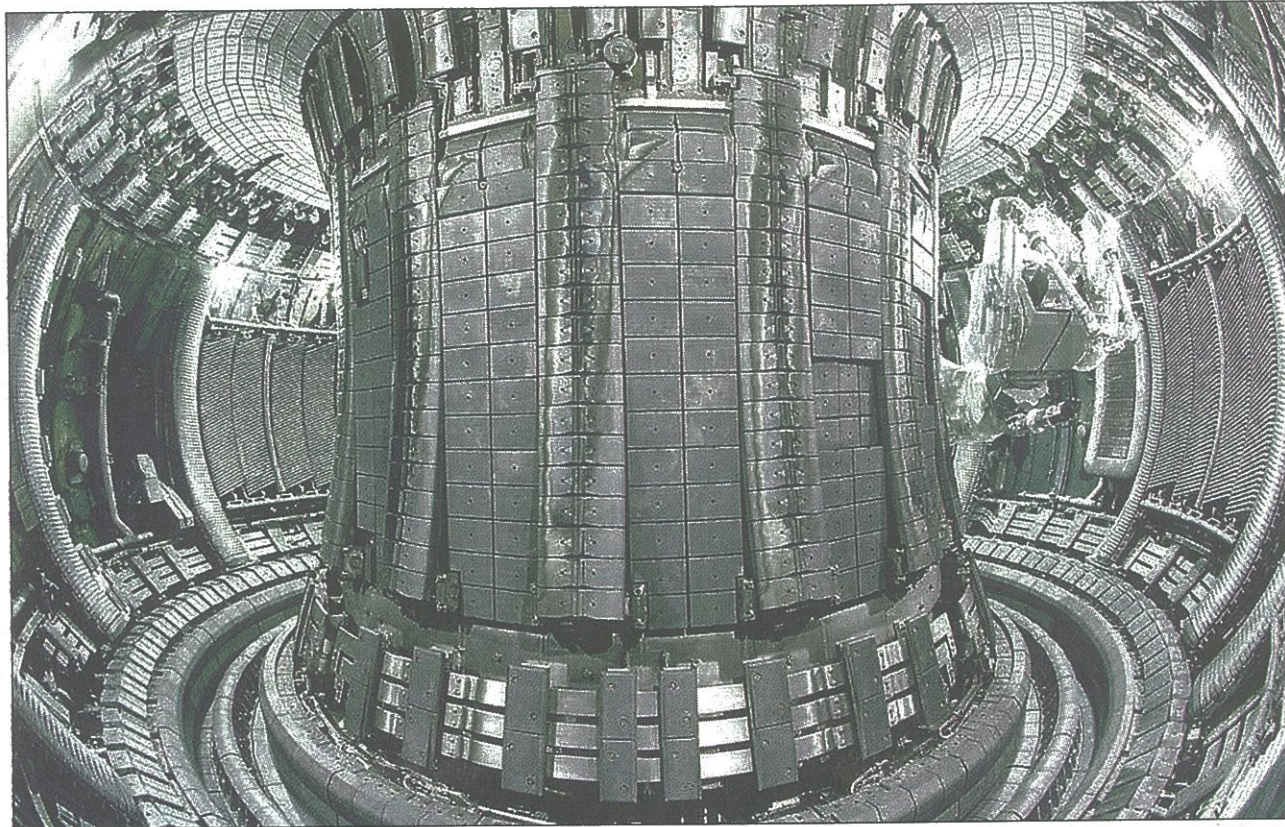
Lower taxes, cheap power, high demand... homeowners near a new reactor in Provence are enjoying a boom, says **Jon Bryant**

If it's sunny weather you want, then property in Provence is usually a good bet. But if it really is the sun itself you're after, then a tiny area of northern Provence may be your only option. Construction has just begun on ITER, a next-generation nuclear fusion reactor that can heat up a spinning doughnut of plasma to over 100,000,000C, the temperature at the heart of the sun – and property nearby is going to be much in demand.

The public attitude towards nuclear power is very different in France to the UK. Having never suffered any radioactivity accidents (and with no real gas or oil supplies), France sees its future as atomic. Philippe Renaud, head of the radio-ecological studies laboratory at the Institute for Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN) based in the Cadarache research facility, says: 'French people who live far away from nuclear facilities are actually more scared than those who live close by. Settlements near nuclear facilities have buried cables, cleaner streets, more swimming pools, lower taxes... put simply, life is better the closer you live to a nuclear facility.'

Around 1,000 scientists and their families will be relocating to the area around Cadarache, 20 minutes north of Aix-en-Provence, near France's established nuclear research centre, where there is an international school, new housing projects, a modernised road network and an estimated expenditure from ITER and its workers of €100m a year.

House prices in the region – the less swish, wild boar and truffle area of northern Provence – have been rising by around 20 per cent annually. Slowing last year, they are set to rise again as the world's top nuclear scientists arrive over the next decade. The idea is that the scientists (mostly Japanese) will merge into existing communities near the plant. Estate agencies have been sprouting up



The toroidal magnetic chamber at the UK's Culham Science Centre, a model for the forthcoming ITER reactor in France. AFP/Getty

everywhere, even in the tiny village of Saint-Paul-lez-Durance which is the nearest settlement to ITER. Immobilier La Provençale opened last autumn.

Pascal Cortejo, who works there, says the locals wrongly imagine their houses will sell for double the price. However, when I visited Saint-Paul, two Japanese families were heading straight to the estate agency to see what was on offer: a three-bedroom bungalow with swimming pool for €415,000; a villa in the middle of a forest for €385,000; and a 25 sq m studio for rent for €530 per month – that's more expensive than Tokyo.

Despite the influx of foreigners, the mayor of Saint-Paul-lez-Durance, Roger Pizot, is determined to maintain his village's character and to keep house prices 'normal.' Born in the village, he used to ride around the forest on a horse before Cadarache appeared in 1959. Today he hosts meetings with the world's top nuclear scientists.

The 'internationalisation' of the region will be unstoppable – there are already seven Japanese restaurants in Aix although the ITER welcoming agency expects most foreign families to move near the international school at

Manosque. There's a large community of Russians in nearby Pertuis and the Luberon, with its wisteria-clad cottages and stone farmhouses. Heading north, you reach pretty towns like Forcalquier and Saint Michel l'Observatoire. Stuart Baldock, from Property Vision in France, says the lovely, unspoiled area attracts clients who want 'real France' rather than the rarified luxury of the Côte d'Azur: 'A million pounds should buy an authentic old house on several hectares of land – the price of a large flat in Nice.'

'The salaries of foreign engineers and scientists will be higher than the aver-

age French salary and their tax situation will be different, but it really depends how people want to live,' says Sylvie André, head of communications at the ITER agency. 'Some will want to buy, others to rent. Foreign workers and their families are offered French lessons by the welcoming agency but at school the children have the right to be taught in one of six languages.' Over 250 families have already arrived from Japan, Korea, India, Greece and the US and the agency is keen to integrate them.

Physically the area will change too. ITER's experimental reactor will stand 50 metres high in a field. Some of its components are almost as long and weigh 600 tonnes apiece. From 2009 they will arrive at the port of Fos-sur-Mer near Marseille and be carried first by barge and then by road via a series of bypasses – no curves, no bridges.

Surrounding the ITER construction site are thousands of metres of electric fencing and razor wire. Contingencies are also in place against flooding, forest fires, seismic activity (yes, it's on a fault), electricity failure and air crashes. The dangers of a nuclear accident are less than minimal, yet there's something slightly unnerving about Saint-Paul-lez-Durance's 2008 village calendar. On the back is what to do in the event of a nuclear emergency, including: go indoors, leave the children at school, draw the curtains and turn on the radio.

France currently has more than 20 nuclear power stations, which produce 80 per cent of the country's electricity, compared with just 27 per cent in the UK, 19 per cent in North America and 36 per cent in Japan, according to the French atomic energy commissariat CEA. The next nuclear hotspot is at Flamanville in Normandy. Due for completion in 2012, the plant is only half an hour's drive from Cherbourg. No electricity bills – and house prices rose 13 per cent last year.