

INTERNATIONAL

Meet the super-commuters from the Continent

Improved transport links offer new meaning to work-life balance, finds Liz Rowlinson

Last month, eager train buffs took the first non-stop Eurostar from St Pancras to Amsterdam in the Netherlands. In just three hours 41 minutes from London, it is now possible to walk out of the fine Gothic Renaissance Revival facade of Centraal station and stroll along canals lined with elegant gabled townhouses, bohemian cafes and art galleries in one of Europe's most charismatic capitals.

The new service runs twice a day, although the return journey will not be quite so quick until passport protocols are agreed in 2019. Will the increased accessibility of Amsterdam persuade people to invest there? There's a certain appeal about dividing your week between two countries – and having a foot in two cultures – as dozens of commuters to various parts of France have discovered.

Eurostar cannot yet provide data on the take-up of the Dutch route, but it has half a million members of its loyalty scheme (across all routes), many of whom travel weekly from the UK to the Continent and back, consisting of British, French and Belgian commuters. "This includes expats who travel at least twice a month, and some travel



SCENIC ROUTE
A Eurostar train races through the Dutch countryside, top; a chateau in Pas-de-Calais, below, €645,000 with Leggett

once a week," says Rob Haycocks, its spokesman.

Are property agents seeing an upturn of interest in Amsterdam? That alluringly laid-back Dutch lifestyle aside, the reasons to buy there do stack up. Amsterdam sits with Berlin, Frankfurt and Paris as a good option for investment, and alongside Dublin was the only European location in Savills' top 10 global cities for residential price growth in 2017 (at a huge 20.9 per cent).

"The city is a very interesting proposition for investors right now, offering yields of five to six per cent, because prices are still lower than Paris and demand exceeds supply," suggests Alex Koch de Goereynd of agent Knight Frank. "One million dollars (£740,295) typically buys you 495 sq ft (of property) in Paris, or 1,160 in Amsterdam."



PEACEFUL
An apartment in Amsterdam, €600,000 with Engel and Voelkers



British parents are looking at Dutch universities as a cheaper alternative

He adds that there are also more inquiries from British parents who are looking at Dutch universities as a less costly alternative to sending their children to British institutions.

Wieger van der Linden, of agent Engel & Voelkers, agrees the market in the city has become more international since 2014. "Now 30 per cent of our clients are from the UK or America, buying for investment or because they are working in the city," he says. "There is the attraction of no extra tax on second homes here, and property buying costs were reduced from six to two per cent."

The transfer of the European Medicines Agency from London to Amsterdam by 2019 will attract further

international interest to the south of the city, where the international schools are also based, suggests van der Linden. "The Oud-Zuid [old south] residential area near the Vondelpark offers some upscale family homes. Wherever you are in the city, you are only 15-20 minutes from Centraal station."

The central "canal ring" is the other sought-after area – priced at around £490 to £570 per sq ft – with four-bedroom canal-side houses from around £1.8million (£1.5million). A two-bedroom apartment within one of these is for sale at €625,000 (engel-voelkers.com).

And what about Rotterdam, a stop

on the new route? Unilever, the Anglo-Dutch consumer products giant, recently announced its European HQ will be based there, but the city centre was virtually destroyed during the Second World War and attracts little international interest – yet – according to Knight Frank.

Elegant avenues and historic buildings are certainly not lacking in Paris, a city to which many British people commute weekly from London (or vice versa), says Susie Hollands of agent Vingt Paris. "People reach a stage when they are flexible in their career and move back and forth between the two cities," she says. "Paris's ninth and 10th arrondissements are popular and only

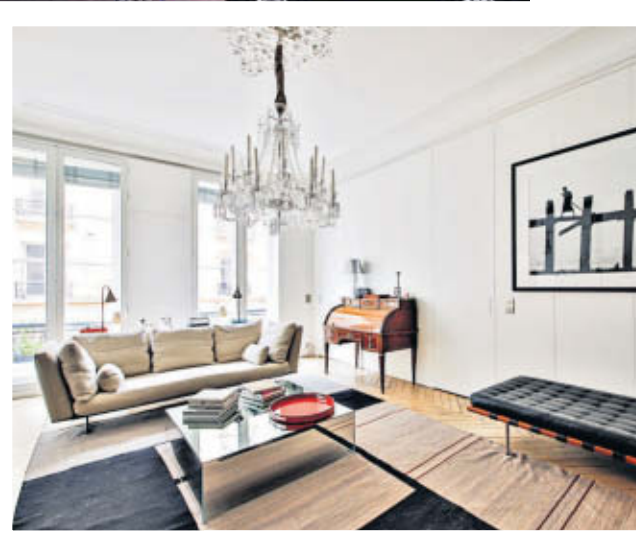


10 minutes in a cab from the Gare du Nord, the Eurostar terminal. The price for a turnkey property is around £1,070 per sq ft."

One such commuter is Jodi Humphreys, 49, a software developer. She

'Paris feels like London did 10 years ago and I know several people moving there'

TRÈS CHIC AND COSY
An apartment in St Germain, €1.85million with Vingt Paris, left; a house in Pas-de-Calais, below left, €214,000 with Leggett



and her banker husband rent an apartment in London's Chancery Lane, but are shopping for a Haussmannian apartment in the ninth, 10th or second arrondissements. "In Paris, you can get a bit more for your money than in London and we plan to use Eurostar to commute weekly. I can work remotely from there for two days a week," she says. "The train is far more enjoyable and less stressful than flying." With another summer of French air-traffic control strikes looming, few might argue with that.

Certainly not Ciarán O'Brien, a Shoreditch-based architect, who loves the convenience of hopping between cities every week for inspiration, and to spend time with his girlfriend, Hannah, an American fashion buyer who works on the glitzy rue Saint-Honoré. He is also house-hunting there.

"I can leave my office and be at St Pancras in 30 minutes, through fast-track security and be in Paris in two hours 15 minutes," says the 33-year-old, who loves the flexibility of working as a "virtual nomad."

"Paris feels like London did 10 years ago, and I know several people moving there. It's due for a renaissance." With its property prices projected to outperform London and New York in 2018 it is certainly on the way, and singer Rihanna is reported to be the latest celebrity property hunting in the capital.

There are also regular commuters to other areas of France served by Euro-

star, including the Pas-de-Calais department, Lille, and Avignon and Marseille in the sun-drenched south. Tim Sage, an agent for Leggett in the Seven Valleys area in northern France, an hour from the Gare de Calais-Frétun, knows of several couples who commute weekly to the UK.

"This verdant area of rolling hills is rather like Kent, and is ideally positioned for access to London, Brussels, Paris and the rest of France. The average house budget of British buyers is around €140,000," he says. "Property hotspots include the village of Hesdin and the pretty seaside town of Berck. Lille has also become popular due to Eurostar and while it is relatively expensive, it's half the price of Paris." Only six miles from the Lille Flandres Eurostar station there is a four-bedroom recently renovated home for sale for €338,400 (frenchestategents.com).

Fancy a few more hours of guaranteed sun? Head to Avignon (five hours 50 minutes from London by Eurostar) for a part-time home in Provence, or to Marseille (six hours 27 minutes), suggests Leggett's Trevor Smith. "Recent buyers have included IT consultants who commute every two to four weeks from homes within 25 minutes of Avignon, and with British Airways now flying three times a day to Marseille, it's convenient to have plenty of options," he says.

"There's also a new direct train link between Avignon's Eurostar and TGV [high-speed rail] stations so that onward travel will be much easier – to popular locations such as L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, Nîmes, Montpellier and Aix-en-Provence." While prices are inching up by a couple of percentage points a year, it's still a buyers' market, he suggests. "Within commuting range, we have a beautiful Provencal stone house with four bedrooms and sunny terrace in the pretty village of Saumane – 20 miles from Avignon – at €355,000."

And, finally, do the British commute to Brussels? Jean de Kerchove of Immobilière Le Lion suggests there are many Eurostar commuters to the Belgian capital but the bulk are from Paris, from where it is an easy one hour 20-minute journey. "The French who have a base in the city love Uccle and Ixelles (handy for the Gare du Midi), while the British favour the eastern side, where the British International School is which is closer to the airport than the station." For a two-bedroom pied a terre in the trendy Chateaufort area you will pay over €600,000.



CITIES OF LOVE
Ciarán O'Brien, who commutes from London, with girlfriend Hannah in Paris



PROPERTY OF THE WEEK

The former home of Fawcett Towers actor Andrew Sachs



The family home in London of legendary *Fawcett Towers* actor Andrew Sachs is on the market, writes Tom Belger

The comic star earned a place in the nation's hearts in his most famous role, as the hapless Spanish waiter Manuel in the classic *Seventies* sitcom.

His distinctive catchphrase "I know nothing" went down in comedy history, with Manuel the endearing victim of John Cleese's jokes.

Born in Berlin in 1930, Sachs' career spanned more than 50 years and went far beyond the show with which he will forever be associated.

He narrated countless programmes, from the award-winning television series *Troubleshotter* to audiobooks of *Thomas the Tank Engine*.

His final major role came in the 2012 comic drama *Quartet*, before his death in November 2016. His wife, Melody, revealed he had been suffering from vascular dementia.

The couple spent 30 years in their detached Victorian home in Kilburn, north-west London.

The pair, their three children and relatives gathered at the house for family occasions, and loved to host social events. The freehold property has five bedrooms and is spread across two floors, with a study where Sachs did much of his writing, including his autobiography, and rehearsing for voice-over work.

He was so admired for his diligent preparation that he became known to some as "one-take Sachs".

The property is on the market for £1.85million with Savills (020 3425 5600, savills.co.uk).

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