

## Lively, young and quirky

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Alain de Bordas is proud of his home, with good reason. He's one of only a hundred or so people in Montpellier who own a *hôtel particulier*, or townhouse, of a kind built during the 17th and 18th centuries in a historic, central neighbourhood known today as Ecusson.

Modern Montpellier is an agglomeration of 391,000 people that stretches out from the old neighbourhood, once bounded by city walls. Its 19th-century architecture lies to the north and west, while Antigone, a dramatically modern 20th-century commercial, residential and office district is to the east. These areas are where most people live. But it is old Montpellier, with its narrow alleys of squared-stone, four- and five-storey houses in need of renovation, that is increasingly drawing the more adventurous homebuyers.

Spotting a *hôtel particulier*, like the Hôtel Baudon de Mauny on Rue de la Carbonnerie where de Bordas lives, takes practice. The giveaway is a tall double doorway, usually flanked by a shop on each side. Step through this, where the coach and horses used to turn in, and you find yourself in an arched tunnel, some 12-15 metres long, that opens on to a little courtyard. Across is an entrance opening to a flight of internal stairs to the first floor, where salon rooms with high ceilings, stucco decoration and floors paved with *barres au sol*, or polished flagstones, a prized Ecusson architectural feature, overlook the shaded space. On the second floor, there are typically four or five family bedrooms and servants' quarters under the eaves.



"We love living here," says de Bordas of the house his ancestors bought in 1829, 52 years after its construction by the king's regional representative, who gave it his name. De Bordas is both an old *Montpelliérain*, having lived in the city until he was seven, and an incomer, who only returned in 2001, following years working in Paris as a telecommunications company manager.

He and his wife Nathalie initially bought and restored a farmhouse outside the city centre but then moved on to the *hôtel particulier*, which they also refurbished and opened as a guest house, last year. They have three children, aged three, six and seven, who now walk to school, play in traffic-free alleyways and entertain themselves in parks just a few hundred metres away. Family outings might be to Nîmes, with its Roman ruins, Arles or the fishing port of Sète. The lagoons, flamingos and horses of the Camargue are only an hour away and it's only about 20 minutes to the long sandy beaches of the Grande Traverse.

Paraskevov Pressian, who bought a flat in Ecusson last year, also raves about the lifestyle. "Ecusson is the heart of Montpellier," he says. "It's lively, it's young and you really feel the spirit of the city."

He acknowledges that the neighbourhood can be a little noisy on hot summer nights but, since most streets are pedestrianised, there is little traffic or fumes. He can walk to the Musée Fabre art gallery, to the 19th-century opera house and theatre on Place de la Comédie and then west across the Esplanade Charles de Gaulle into the Corum, a monolithic modern concert hall.

Other destinations include the two wide streets that bisect Ecusson – Rue Foch, with stylish shops, préfecture and law courts, and Rue de la Loge, a pedestrian thoroughfare from Place de la Comédie – while an evening stroll through the arch that marks the north-eastern boundary of the neighbourhood brings you to the top of a hill with views over the city and to the gates of the city's tranquil botanical gardens, one of the oldest in the world.

You can also walk to the supermarket or the shopping centre in Antigone but Pressian, who came to Montpellier from the Bulgarian capital Sofia to study medicine, says he prefers the covered market on Rue de la Loge in the centre of Ecusson or the local shops on his doorstep. "I buy fruit and vegetables from them every two or three days," he says. "The butcher and the fishmonger are less than 200 metres away."

He also frequents the "small, cheery restaurants, the bars that are always open". "You come back from work and there are things to do in the evening, places to go, bars to meet your friends," he says.

He paid €275,000 for his flat on the second floor of a building dating from the late 18th or early 19th century. He spent €20,000 removing partition walls and creating a new bathroom and now has a showcase 100 sq metre space comprising bedroom, dining room and living room, with traditional large windows, high ceilings, a period fireplace and the flagstone floor. "When the estate agent opened the door, I knew instantly that I wanted to live there," he says.