

The airport is just half an hour's drive from tourist hotspots such as Rocamadour, pictured here, Sarlat and Padirac

Ready for take off

AFTER TWO DECADES OF SETBACKS, BRIVE DORDOGNE VALLEY AIRPORT IS NOW ALL SET TO WELCOME INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS, WRITES **CHRIS VON KOETTLITZ**

It has taken a good 20 years of political bickering, frustrations, expectations and preparations, but this summer the Dordogne valley, one of France's top holiday destinations, will finally have its very own international airport.

On the border of the Lot and Corrèze departments, the airport has a huge potential to service the wider area of the Limousin, Dordogne, Midi-Pyrénées and even the Auvergne. Originally planned as a necessary replacement and extension of the existing Brive la Gaillarde city airport, Brive Dordogne Valley is now greeted as a major asset for the region's already thriving tourist business.

True, there are other airports, notably Bergerac and Limoges, which are well known to British travellers, but the new airport is located at the very heart of this popular region, within half an hour's drive from famous tourist hotspots like Rocamadour, Sarlat and Padirac.

It is also very conveniently situated at the crossroads of the A20 and A89

motorways, linking the north to the south and the east to the west of France. How's that for major tourist 'hub' potential!

ALL IN THE FAMILY

As often with projects of this nature, it has been a long and sometimes difficult road. The global economic crisis added a further unexpected hurdle to overcome, as the recession also badly affected the international airline industry. Result: previous negotiations with various low-cost companies came to a crashing halt and the

airport project team had to start from scratch, headed by Brive's *chambre de commerce* and, since last September, newly appointed airport director Dany Blanchet.

In the end, it became an Air France family affair. From 15 June, Airlinair – a 100% Air France company – will fly three times a day to Paris-Orly, and between 25 June and 12 September, CityJet, also a 100% subsidiary of the Air France KLM group, will connect Brive Dordogne Valley to London City airport with three weekly flights, on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Tickets start at €59 for a one-way trip.

Depending on the success of this initial flight programming, CityJet can expand its flights from Brive Dordogne Valley to other UK and European destinations, such as Manchester, Edinburgh, Dublin, Amsterdam or Antwerp.

And is the airport ready for take off? "Certainly," confirms Dany Blanchet. "Operationally, all's going well. We are

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At Souillac Golf & Country Club holiday resort, homes are available to buy from €160,000 to €350,000



On the market: lots of charm in this three-bed, two-bathroom property with 1,000m² garden and countryside views, €239,000 (above), while the property below also has three bedrooms, plus attic to convert and 9,890m² of land with two large ponds for €205,000 (both Century 21 Cabinet Théron Gourdon, www.french-property.com/agents/c21_theron)



going into the final delivery phase of the airport, the navigational systems are being calibrated and tested, and the arrival and departure halls are being given their finishing touches... The airport will be able to handle 400 passengers at a time. Of course, there will still be things that will take longer to put in place. The bar might not be open on the first day, but there will be vending machines, a modern parking area and car-hire facilities.

"All in all we're pleased with the preparations and very confident. It will be a small international airport, and that has a lot of benefits, including shorter check-in times. It will be less impersonal and more efficient than its bigger counterparts."

A very attractive airport it is too, with spacious waiting rooms, an abundance of natural light and an interesting use of local materials; all in a stunningly beautiful setting.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The economic impact of the new airport on the area was originally estimated at an impressive €60 million per year, after an initial five-year development period. In the current economic climate, however, it is generally thought that the development will be slightly slower. Travel from the UK is still hampered by the weak pound and CityJet's AVRO carrier only seats 95 passengers, about half of the 180 originally envisaged to arrive on each flight.

Prediction is always a perilous affair, but hopes in the region are high and the opportunities offered by the new airport are being taken very seriously. To such an extent that, for the first time ever, representatives from local politics, tourist boards and professionals from the tourist industry, such as hotels, resorts and amusement parks, are combining efforts to promote the Dordogne valley, which spans three departments.

A brand new Dordogne valley *maison de tourisme* will open at the end of this year and the area has also been granted the prestigious *grand site* label. In short: a great deal of money and means are being made available to stimulate the tourist trade.

WHAT IT WILL BRING

Ludovic Hanks, director of the popular Souillac Golf & Country Club holiday resort – only 15 minutes from the new airport – says: "The opening of the airport is excellent news for tourism in the Dordogne valley. We have a loyal customer base in the UK, but the region has seen the number of British visitors drop dramatically over the last couple of years, reaching an all-time low in 2009.

"Low-cost travel to our doorstep will definitely help change that trend, and for us the fact that CityJet transports golf bags for free is an added bonus, which will help boost our golf breaks."

The club also has a real estate programme that will benefit from the proximity of the international airport. Estate agent Jane Parris, of Century 21 in Gourdon, confirms: "I believe the new airport will have a very positive impact on the housing market in this region, particularly with flights directly to and from London City airport.

"I would expect to see an increase in demand for the typical rural second home holiday retreat in the €100,000 to €200,000 price bracket. However, with such easy access to the centre of London, I also predict a rise in demand for more substantial properties as permanent homes for families wishing to escape the noise of the city. This new route will enable them to commute for work. These clients may well look for more modern properties with all the up-to-date home comforts and facilities, while still being in a rural setting, probably in the €250,000-plus range."

She adds: "Now is a great time to buy property in the region as prices have dropped by around 20-25% from the peaks that we were seeing three or four years ago, and represent great value in comparison with the UK housing market.

"Property prices have now stabilised but with an increase in demand from the new clientele that the airport will bring, we may well see prices starting to climb again, so I would say it would be best to get in early, before we see the sort of impact created by the airports around Bergerac and Limoges for example." Perhaps it is time to turn the dreams of that other life into reality... ■

For flight information and bookings see www.cityjet.com but please note that flights between Brive Dordogne Valley airport and London City airport are only available on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays between 25 June and 12 September. If you put in other dates, or another week day, the system comes up with a 'sold out' message.

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