



ABOVE: Bric-a-brac for sale near the River Thiou in Annecy

Eye for a bargain

Few visitors look beyond Paris when it comes to flea markets, but keen collector **Eddi Fiegel** shows you can find treasures all over France

I have a confession to make. I have a passion for all things vintage. Well, nearly all things. Furniture – yes; crockery, chinaware, silverware and glassware – yes; clothes – very definitely yes. Not to mention a sub-passion, if you like, for gilt-edged mirrors and elaborate chandeliers. Consequently, I love nothing more than spending a weekend rummaging around a French flea market.

Wherever you are in France, it is not hard to find a huddle of sellers, displaying their often-random wares to the strains of an accordionist or crackly Charles Trenet records while a bunch of like-minded

souls sift their way through the goods in search of a bargain.

Over the years, I have unearthed a Pompadour-style display case that still garners compliments from friends, a spectacular soleil mirror, some gorgeous picture-sleeve EPs by Françoise Hardy, and a 1920s velvet opera coat.

Unlike in Britain, where the announcement that you are heading to a car-boot sale can still sometimes be greeted with disdain, over the Channel, it is considered a standard pursuit.

The flea market in France has more the caché of an antiques market, mixed in with a little rough-and-ready sawdust and

the thrill of a Sunday at the races. You never know, there is always the chance of unearthing some rarefied gem at a knock-down price. It happened to a British couple who bought a spider plant at a car-boot sale for a pound, only to discover the plain-looking planter it had come in was a rare piece of Lalique crystal worth around £20,000.

The French have always had an eye for a *brocante*, with some, like Lille's legendary *braderie*, dating from the Middle Ages. The name *marché aux puces* (market of fleas) has its origins in 19th-century Paris when a cholera outbreak forced markets out of the ➡



city centre. An entire generation of French Steptoes and Del Boys needed to find a new place to sell their wares and soon found one just beyond the city's gates, with many congregating near the fortifications at Clignancourt.

As the market became fashionable, genteel *madames* and *monsieurs* were soon donning their Sunday best to bag a bargain, and the bazaar was nicknamed after the tendency of mites to settle in the upholstered sofas and armchairs frequently to be found on sale.

A century later, Clignancourt is still going strong, as are some 15,000 flea markets, *brocantes* and *vide-greniers* across France.

The lines between *brocantes* and *marchés aux puces* are often blurred, with high-end gems as well as junk turning up at both. So if you are looking for that top-of-the-range Louis XVI dining table, you may well find one at either, although *brocantes* tend to be the more organised, often populated by professional antique dealers.

The *vide-greniers* (literally 'empty attics'), held sporadically and sometimes annually, are the French equivalent of the British car-boot sale or the American yard sale. You can often find them by following the brightly coloured, home-made posters stuck on road signs at the edge of small towns and villages.

These events may be at the bottom of the food chain in terms of prestige but in among last season's cardigans and toys, carburettors and kitchen sinks, you might just find, as a friend of mine recently did, that vintage sleigh-bed you

have been hankering after, at a price that Ikea would be proud of.

So, where are the best bargains to be found? The great thing about France is that with so many markets, you could just as easily find a true treasure at a village *vide-grenier* as at one of the major *brocantes*, but here are some of my personal favourites.

Lille Braderie

The legendary *braderie* in the capital of Hauts-de-France is the granddaddy of them all. Rather than limiting itself to a decorative town square or not-so-decorative car park, Europe's largest flea market takes over the whole town centre on the first weekend of September, attracting more than two million bargain-hunters.

The old town's narrow cobbled streets are closed to traffic while almost every inch of pavement on streets and squares heave with old TVs, chinaware, furniture of all descriptions, books, paintings, vintage vinyl and pretty much everything else inbetween. I once saw a stunning, bubble-shaped 1970s chrome and white space-age hi-fi unit. Sadly, in those novice days, I lacked the means to get it home.

So popular is the *braderie* that the streets often become jammed with punters shuffling along, elbowing each other to get a glimpse of the wares, while wannabe Juliette Grécos strum away. Restaurateurs get into the spirit, too; with record quantities of *moules frites* being consumed, they hold a competition to see which



restaurant can build the highest tower of mussel shells.

If you want to bag a bargain, get there as early as you can on the Saturday. Don't try to bring your car or van anywhere near the town centre once the *braderie* is in full swing. You'll have a nightmare retrieving it. braderie-de-lille.fr

Grande Brocante de Chambord, Loire Valley

Another winner in the scenic stakes is this *brocante* held every May Day in the shadow of the Loire Valley's grandest château. With more than 500 sellers from all over France taking over the grounds and spilling out on to the village's 16th-century lanes, this is a major event in the flea-market calendar.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A folding screen on sale at the May Day antiques fair held in the grounds of the Château de Chambord; Even rusting bikes can find a buyer; Hundreds of items laid out in front of the Palais des Beaux-Arts at the Braderie de Lille

BUYING TIPS

Sell on these items for a tidy profit:

- Antique mirrors – preferably with gilt frames, the more ornate and florid the better.
- Soleil mirrors.
- Glass chandeliers.
- Zinc watering cans.
- Wicker laundry baskets.
- Vintage wooden armoires.
- Bergère chairs or sofas.

WEIRDEST FINDS

- Iron girdle.
- Dolls in preserving jars.
- Iron pith helmet.
- Prosthetic leg with a skating boot
- Stuffed boar's head.



Nevertheless, you can still find some gems without breaking the bank.

My favourite finds include a swirling, wrought-iron garden swing, a circular 1920s typewriter and gorgeous Cézanne-style landscapes.

It is worth looking out for decorative faience tin-glazed chinaware, if you like that kind of thing. Sellers start setting up around 5am so it is worth heading out early if you want to nail that deal before anyone else. chambord.org

Marché aux Puces, Annecy, Haute-Savoie

While the best bargains do not necessarily turn up in the most picturesque places, it never hurts to have a chocolate-box setting. And they don't come much lovelier than Annecy in Haute-Savoie, nicknamed 'the Venice of the Alps' thanks to its combination of crystal-clear canals and pastel-coloured townhouses, all set against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains and a gorgeous lake.

On the last Saturday of the month, ➡



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Perhaps you will find a piece of Lalique on a glassware stall, like one British couple; Market day in the antiques town of l'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue; Stalls fill the streets of Pézenas during the Mediterranean town's biannual grand fair

the Old Town hosts a wonderfully laid-back flea market with up to 200 sellers laying out their wares on trestle tables in the narrow arcaded streets. As well as the usual random selection of goods, you will find many local specialities including Savoyard ceramics, cheese-making gear and skiing kit, as well as the occasional armoire, dolls and paintings, all amid tantalising wafts of Reblochon cheese and *tartiflette* from the food stalls. Prices are not rock bottom, due to the number of tourists who come mainly for the scenery, but nor are they as high as at larger, better-known markets. Opening hours are 8am to 6pm, so for the best deals get there early, or leave it late when sellers keen to get home are more amenable to a haggle. lac-annecy.com

Vide-Grenier, Époisses, Burgundy

The delightful village of Époisses, midway between Dijon and Auxerre, is best known for its round cheeses and 16th- and 17th-century buildings, so this is the kind of slightly off-the-beaten-track area that often has a great *vide-grenier*.

There is usually one around here on a Sunday morning in early May, when the atmosphere is part mini flea market, part village *fête*. Antiques dealers and

locals sell everything from art nouveau lamps to embroidered tablecloths and gardenware while a local dignitary or two turns up to say a few words on a makeshift PA system.

Things wind down around lunchtime, when there is a chance to grab a fried *andouillette* sausage baguette and a glass of beer. Do check vide-greniers.org for local listings as these events move around like quicksilver and the venue for last week's sale could be this week's empty car park. burgundy-tourism.com

Les Puces de Canal, Villeurbanne, Lyon

Held on an industrial patch of wasteland next to a canal on the outskirts of Lyon, this may not win any prizes for its Instagram potential, but it is nonetheless one of France's major flea markets, with more than 400 sellers. Every Sunday morning, sellers arrive in the early hours to set up their pitches on makeshift trestle tables, on blankets on the ground or in a corrugated-roofed hangar.

There is an amazing variety on sale, from rustic garden furniture, vintage leather luggage, books, Bakelite radios and Bergère chairs, to paintings, knick-knacks and old clothes, monogrammed tablecloths, wine-making gear and marble-topped bedside tables.

FLEA MARKETS CALENDAR

January - Marché à la Brocante Saleya, Nice (Mondays year-round except for days before a national holiday).

February - Foire à la Brocante des Quinconces, Bordeaux (Rue Sainte Catherine, also July).

March - Foire aux Antiquités et à la Brocante, Barjac, Gard (Easter weekend, also Aug).

April - Grande Réderie d'Amiens (also Oct).

May - Foire aux Puces de Crèvecœur-le-Grand, Oise.

June - Chalon-sur-Saône & La Clayette, Saône-et-Loire.

July - Grande Braderie de Strasbourg.

August - Farfouille de Leyment, between Lyon and Geneva.

September - Braderie du Canal Saint-Martin, Rennes.

October - Grande Braderie d'Automne, Besançon.

November - Antibes (weekly throughout the year).

December - Lécousse Vide-Grenier Couvert, Ille-et-Vilaine.



With so many stalls, it can be dizzying, so unless you want to end up wandering in circles, you will need to be organised and methodical, working out your planned route on arrival. On the plus-side, there is secure parking in the main car park. pucesducanal.com

Grandes Foires à la Brocante et Antiquités, Pézenas

The small town of Pézenas, between Montpellier and Béziers is a major name in the antiques trade, thanks to its unusually high concentration of antique dealers and superb flea market.

Twice a year, on the first Sunday in May and the second Sunday in October, more than 150 sellers fill pavements and roadsides in the medieval old town and 19th-century 'new town' with everything from iron garden furniture to art deco crystalware, cast-iron radiators, rococo mirrors, vintage *toile de jouty* linens, paintings and the occasional Sèvres coffee set. Savour the sweet smell of *crêpes* and candy floss, and the sounds of the organ-grinder, but be prepared to hone your haggling skills, as the tough-nut, puffer-jacketed dealers know how to drive a hard bargain. antiquites-pezenas-france.com

L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, Provence

After the Lille *braderie*, this is probably France's best-known *brocante*. About half an hour's drive east of Avignon, this gorgeous Provençal town with its watermills and canals may be small but with more than 350 antiques and second-hand shops, it draws collectors and buyers from around the world.



The biannual antiques fairs, over the Easter weekend and on 15 August, are major dates on the international antiques calendar. Less hectic is the weekly Sunday market held on the edge of the river bank on Avenue des Quatre Otages. This combination of food market, flea market and antiques fair can include silverware, Provençal pots, ceramics, Bergère suites, cameras and old boules sets.

This, however, is a cut above some of France's lesser-known flea markets and *vide-greniers*. Many professional sellers display their items with panache, tying decorative ribbons around neatly piled-up linens, and as you might expect, prices are similarly inflated. But it is still possible to unearth a rare treasure or just something you love. Vendors start setting up around 9am, but get there before that to snap up the best pieces and secure a parking space nearby. provençeguide.co.uk/explore/isle-sur-la-sorgue-and-antiques-42-1.html

Websites: vide-greniers.org; brocabrac.fr; pointsdechene.com; aufildesbrocantes.com; fleamarketinsiders.com; fleamarket.com, a searchable online guide to the world's best flea markets [📍](#)