



Café culture

FAITH WARN LOOKS AT THREE ENTICING PIEDS-A-TERRE IN THE HEART OF SOME OF FRANCE'S MOST LIVELY TOWNS AND CITIES...

One of the great appeals of France is its unspoilt countryside – and this is reflected in the fact that most holiday lets are in rural locations. But it's also true that the French are primarily urban dwellers and that they 'do' towns and cities rather well, often creating a pleasant environment with a wealth of facilities and events on hand. The owners of these apartments have all discovered the appeal of town-centre locations and help to fund their urban escapes through holiday lets, whether managed hands-on or from a distance.

GOING NATIVE IN ILLE SUR TET

Ille sur Têt is nestled between the Pyrénées and the Mediterranean. Although only 20 minutes from Perpignan, the town is well off the tourist track and people still go about their daily lives as generations have before them. Here in the Roussillon province, locally known as French Catalonia, in a quiet residential side street about three minutes' walk from the medieval, walled town centre is a bright, airy house with shuttered windows,



Ille sur Têt is perfectly placed for both the Pyrénées and the Med – if you can drag yourself away from the Gifts' sunny studio terrace

Nigel and Jackie's top tips

- ✓ Prepare a good advertisement with great pictures.
- ✓ Promptly respond to enquiries in a friendly, welcoming tone.
- ✓ Present a clean, comfortable and inviting holiday home, offering extras such as towels and a hairdryer – an eye for detail goes a long way.
- ✓ Personally greet guests and provide comprehensive information about the area.
- ✓ Be prepared to have time for your guests as and when they need it.



high ceilings and marbled floors. Once it belonged to a rich fruit farmer, now Francophiles Jackie and Nigel Kift have converted it into three apartments – one for their own use and two for holiday lets.

"We were looking for an apartment to let out to help fund our trips to France and this house seemed the perfect solution. Now we spend six months a year in Ile sur Têt happily running summer lets and also fly over to meet tenants who arrive for long winter lets. We like to be on site ourselves to meet and greet, take care of cleaning and offer the personal touch, so this arrangement suits us really well."

Their studio sleeps two and the two-bedroom, two-shower room apartment accommodates four. Each has its own terrace with sweet-smelling plants and rates are reasonable, with the studio just £210 a week in August.

"Our guests are independent travellers who like to absorb themselves in French life. They often manage to learn more of the language because local people are so friendly and not overwhelmed by tourists. Visitors love the idea that they can spend a morning on the beach, an afternoon in an art gallery and an evening stroll out to eat and drink on their doorstep. The next day they can walk out into peach and apricot orchards or take a cheap bus ride to the city of Perpignan. Another day they might be up on Mount Canigou in the Pyrénées. You can even get to the Costa Brava in less than two hours!"

KEEPING COOL IN SUNNY UZÈS

With its treasure trove of medieval architecture, Uzès is fast establishing a reputation as one of the most beautiful small towns in France. Narrow streets lined with fine old houses converge on the splendid and colourful Place aux Herbes, scene of a Saturday market that's considered to be one of the best in Provence.

Just paces away, in a quiet side street of tall 18th-century buildings, is the Madeleine apartment, French home of Dublin-based wine writer Mary Dowey. "I specialise in the wines of the Côtes du Rhône and fell in love with Uzès on a working visit. At first I bought a little house there but my family was expanding, so we then acquired the apartment. I use it



Self-catering is easy in city centre flats, with markets such as the Place aux Herbes in Uzès to hand – Mary Dowey's classic apartment is in a typical 18th-century building

THE FRENCH ARE PRIMARYLY URBAN DWELLERS AND THEY 'DO' TOWNS AND CITIES RATHER WELL

now six or seven times a year and the rest of the time it's available for holiday lets, as is the house."

With one double bedroom and a shower room plus a guest suite with a further double/twin bedroom and bathroom across a charming terrace, Madeleine is ideal for two couples. Rates peak at €650/week in high season, compared to local rates of about €125 per night for a B&B.

While the apartment has been recently renovated, Mary strives to maintain a homely feel – but ensures that it's strictly uncluttered. "Less is definitely more", she insists. "That's important for cleaning as well as guests' expectations." Her frequent visits ensure that any glitches are quickly fixed and she has a good rapport with a local lady who meets the guests with keys, settles them in and arranges cleaning.

The urban setting offers many advantages to holidaymakers: access to the market and speciality food shops in this sunny location makes self-catering

easy. There's also a wide choice of gourmet and budget restaurants, cafés, bars and wine shops. There are also vineyards, pretty villages, the Mediterranean coast, walks in the Dentelles mountains and the wild expanses of the Languedoc within easy reach.

And despite its southern location, Mary reports that the heat is never oppressive, even in high summer: "Uzès is slightly elevated with a nice breeze and the thick walls of the old buildings keep apartments cool. It's a beautiful place to spend time throughout the year." ▶

Mary's top tips

- ✓ Answer enquiries swiftly and helpfully.
- ✓ Rooms should be homely and attractive but uncluttered. Less is more.
- ✓ Make sure that any problems or repairs are quickly fixed.
- ✓ Offer weekly cleaning to guests who stay for a fortnight or more – it helps keep the property in good shape.
- ✓ Encourage feedback from guests (and act on it – remedying shortcomings and using positive comments as good publicity).

TAKING THE SEA AIR IN ST VALÉRY

William the Conqueror set sail for England from St Valéry sur Somme and the town is still a traditional fishing port at the mouth of the Somme on France's north coast. As you'd imagine, St Valéry is steeped in history and there's a fine Sunday market for local smallholders and other sellers.

Right on the waterside, Quai Perée, in a period town house, is a duplex apartment owned by Kate Field. "We looked at several properties within an hour's drive of Calais and chose St Valéry because it's by the sea, a charming ancient town with good amenities – including five golf courses within 30 minutes' drive – and once you arrive there, there's really no need to get into the car again until you return home."

The Fields bought the property nine years ago as an investment and for personal use when they lived in London. When they moved to Devon and couldn't visit as often, they made it available for holiday lets, appointing an agent to handle all the marketing and onsite arrangements. "We feel that having agents on hand is essential and continued with Kent-based La Vie En Rose, who were managing the property for the previous owners."

The apartment has two triple bedrooms and two bathrooms, sleeping up to seven people, a fully fitted kitchen and a lounge/diner. Many period features have been retained in refurbishment, including large character windows with spectacular views across the bay and good people-watching on the quay below. Prices are competitive, at just under £400 a week in high season.

Most guests are groups of adults and booking dates are flexible, in response to the location's suitability for short breaks. The Tunnel is nearby and trains from



Kate's top tips

- ✓ Open a French bank account.
- ✓ Pay bills by direct debit if possible.
- ✓ Get a 'local' managing agent who knows on-hand craftsmen.
- ✓ Visit your property regularly, at least annually pre-season.
- ✓ Don't use expensive or valuable items/furnishings.



St Valéry sur Somme is perfect for short breaks, just 15 minutes from Calais – Kate Field bought her apartment there as an investment and a holiday home



Calais station take just 15 minutes. During peak times, availability is by the week but otherwise bookings of one to six nights are accepted and many visitors like to hop across for a mid-week stay.

Even in a few days, guests can enjoy not only the waterside urban setting, just paces from shops, restaurants, concerts, festivals and exhibitions, but also visit the nearby bird sanctuary, beaches of the Côte d'Opale and World War II sites, take a fun steam train to Le Crotoy across the marshes or a serious train to Eurodisney. And if St Valéry's historic centre doesn't cater for all your needs, Paris is just two hours' away. ■

All these apartments can be found on www.frenchconnections.co.uk





Thoughts from the pigeonnier

It's the month of February and that can only mean one thing – it's time for love! Valentine's day is upon us once more, but for a change this year, why not make the object of your affection a country instead of (or preferably as well as) a person. It's time to fall in love with France all over again (although I'm presuming that, if you're reading this, you're already pretty soft on our Gallic neighbour). Perhaps you've put your dreams of French property on hold this past year, and it's time to reignite your passion. Or you may be new to the overseas property matchmaking game. Whatever your situation, there's a French property for you – from a cute country cottage to a fairytale château, a seaside apartment to a ski chalet, or a city *pied-à-terre* to a rural ruin to renovate. I hope we can help you meet your perfect property partner.

You're not alone in your love for France, that's for sure. For the fourth year running, France has been voted the best country in which to live in *International Living's* quality of life index. They report: "The French believe that every day is a pleasure to be slowly savoured – and lingering at the dinner table for three hours in conversation isn't considered abnormal. Family, friends, and good food are all vitally important to the French – and so is having enough time to appreciate them all." Hear hear!

We could probably all do with taking things a little more slowly. Although, if you find a property you fall in love with, act quick!

Karen Tait

KAREN TAIT Editor



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Meet some of this month's contributors...



FAITH WARN

Faith is a Kent-based writer and broadcaster with a lifelong love of France and is fascinated by the inside stories of fellow Francophiles. She is an editorial contributor of news, guides and holiday ideas to www.frenchconnections.co.uk, including the new *France Lovers* blog.

See Faith's article on urban holiday lets with top tips for successful rentals on page 64



JULIA SALVAT

Julia works for the Pays de Gâtine (the equivalent of a district council), helping to welcome the English-speaking population to the area. Having worked in London and Paris, she arrived in the Deux-Sèvres over 20 years ago, so she knows all about integrating into rural French life.

Julia looks at the services available in France for senior citizens on page 40



JENNY GARDNER

Jenny runs French Services, a problem-solving and interpreting company, helping people whose French projects have hit snags. She is also a writer of French teaching materials which enable people to understand French culture through mastery of the language.

Brush up your French with Jenny's latest French lesson on page 89