

Paws for thought

What type of property is best if you plan to offer pet-friendly holiday accommodation and also keep animals of your own? **Glynis Shaw** speaks to three owners for some first-hand advice

It's a cliché to say that the British are a nation of animal lovers. Nevertheless, it is true that many people here and in other European countries have pets and many like to be around animals – and especially when they are at leisure or on holiday.

So how can owners of holiday lets in France respond to this by catering for visiting pets and keeping animals? And what type of property is best?

The introduction of pet passports in 2001 made it much easier to take a beloved animal along when going on holiday to France. Under the Pet Travel Scheme, which developed the passport, animals can travel easily between EU member countries without going into quarantine, provided that the owner follows regulations.

Holidaymakers have responded enthusiastically. Since the majority of visitors to France travel by car it can be easier, nicer and cheaper to pack Rover in the back than to board him in kennels – and he can share in the holiday fun.

As the owner of a holiday let

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in France, you are legally prevented from advertising that pets are not allowed. So, best to say nothing on the subject or state that pets are welcome. Most host listing websites offer a 'pets welcome' option as a category for owners in their advert – and as a search option for holidaymakers.

If you are dreaming of running gîtes in France and keeping animals for the benefit of yourselves and your guests, then the project can be as large or small as you like. The amount of land and degree of enclosure you need will depend on the type of animals and whether you also plan to encourage guests to bring their own pets.

There are three important things to do:

- Be sure to clearly inform prospective guests about your own animals
- Establish some basic rules for having pets in your property
- Make sure the accommodation is fit for purpose, with minimum potential for trouble or damage both indoors and out.

Our three case studies all have valuable experience to share as they run accommodation where pets are welcome, and all of them are enthusiastic animal owners too. ■

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Case study 1



Animal magic in Dordogne

Gail (pictured above) and Mike Smith have been living and running gîtes in France since 2004. The renovated stone cottages – former farm buildings – are set in five acres deep in the Dordogne countryside near Brantôme.

"Ours has been a farm since the 17th century and all our neighbours still farm the surrounding land," says Mike. "We have been a working smallholding but now keep fewer animals, although we always have miniature pot-belly pigs and a few laying hens. April and May visitors may see an orphan lamb or two and for late summer visitors, there's the arrival of the turkeys.

"Visitors do sometimes book specifically because of the animals and 90% of these do so because the children will like them," says Mike. "It gives the children a bit of daily interest and the parents can enjoy a little respite! A few chickens, two ducks and some breeding rabbits were just as successful with visitors for us as when we had a herd of goats, sheep, turkeys and pigs.

"Our three horses – Pamplemousse, Tequila and Tommy – are our pride and joy. We try to ride or train our horses most days, but especially from autumn to spring, and spend many happy hours exploring the local area. This sometimes inspires visitors to have a go and we can arrange horse-riding for those with and without experience, as there are several centres nearby catering for all ages and abilities.

"For anyone thinking of buying a property to keep animals and run gîtes, I would advise that it doesn't matter about the property you choose beyond the obvious. Too much land will, at worst, be too much work or become a nature reserve, while too little will be frustrating. We couldn't have made a better choice of property for a gîte business and it came down to nothing more than location.

"Buy a property that would be your own dream French gîte holiday experience and your guests are sure to share your enthusiasm."

French Farm Gîtes are ID 148167 at frenchconnections.co.uk

Case study 2





A dog-friendly village cottage in Normandy

UK-based Paul and Valerie Crawford own a three-bedroom cottage on the edge of the village of Cerisy-la-Fôret in Normandy, and are happy to allow holidaymakers to bring their dogs with them.



"We have had the cottage for nine years and as we go on holiday with our own dog, we thought it only right that we allow others to do the same," explains Paul. "Our Bernese Mountain Dog, Bo, is our second to take advantage of the pet passport scheme. She is much admired by French people, who always want to speak to her and we have been welcomed into bars and cafés because of that."

"Each year we have two or three visitors who bring their dogs with them. This is done on trust as every owner will tell you that their pets are always the best behaved – and to date we haven't had a problem. The ground floor is fully tiled and there is an enclosed rear garden. We ask that guests don't let the dogs go into any of the bedrooms as these are carpeted. We also reassure visitors that, in our experience, France is quite dog friendly." *L'Etang cottage is ID 5176 at frenchconnections.co.uk*



Case study



A warm welcome for pets in the Pyrénées

Dave and Kath Vowles (pictured right) moved to France in 2002 to live in a beautiful farmhouse and run four gîtes at a former farm near Mirepoix in Ariège. All are set in five acres of land in the Pyrenean foothills, bordered by a pretty stream. As experienced animal lovers, they keep two dogs, two donkeys and two horses, and they also welcome pets.

"The majority of summer pets are dogs, and out of peak season it is just as likely to be cats, but for long winter lets we have had a variety of animals here, from horses to a sulphur-crested cockatoo!" says Dave. "Overall, about one in five visitors bring pets."

We have four rules for practical and safety reasons:

- Pets are not to be left unattended in the gîte unless in a travel crate or similar
- Owners clean up after their pets



- Pets are not allowed in the pool area for everyone's safety
- Pets are not allowed on furniture or beds as we often have guests with allergies.

"Pets can be left unattended outside the gîte as each one has an enclosed garden or terrace. They are reasonably escape-proof, but as no one likes fences that look like a kennel-run, this has been done aesthetically. Most dogs spend their time within the terrace/garden of their gîte or out with their own family."

"We assess on arrival and by reading the signs from the animals, we can take action to avoid any likely problems. If pets clearly don't get on, it's easy to keep them separate. No two gîtes share a common fence to avoid the risk of animals being aggressive to another pet."

"All floors are tiled inside the gîtes and we have spare bowls, pet baskets, leads, travel crates and puppy pens, with pet-sitting also an option. We ask that young animals sleep in a travel crate

to avoid risks of chewing or 'accidents' overnight. Our property is ideally situated on the edge of a small village in the Pyrénées with direct access to countryside and plenty of woodland paths for dog walking.

"Experience with the animals you are planning to keep or accept is important if you are considering doing something similar, as is a good command of the language. Guests are away from home, in a country they may not know well, and they will rely on you."

"If you plan to keep a donkey or horse of your own at the property you are buying, then do remember that the length of time the animals will be out in the paddock varies significantly from north to south. As a rule of thumb you probably need a hectare of land per horse (half this for a donkey), assuming that you will be buying hay. If you want to cut and make your own hay then you need at least double this, and you'll need all the equipment as well as hay storage facilities."

Dave and Kath's farmhouse gîtes are ID 158549 at frenchconnections.co.uk