



Paul and Annette's holiday complex offers plenty of pools, comfortable living and sunny skies near the Med in the south of France



Pillow talk

Sharing tips and experiences with other holiday property owners is the best way of learning the trade. **Glynis Shaw** asks two couples what they have learned over the years

Owners of successful holiday lets in France are a great source of advice, ideas and information for anyone running a letting business or thinking of doing so. I asked two of our owners to talk about their very different properties and to share the biggest things they have learned while running a holiday let.

Farmhouse near the Med

Paul and Annette Spink first visited Argelès-sur-Mer and Collioure in the Pyrénées-Orientales department in 1979, before they were married, and were taken with the region, its culture and climate. They returned for several holidays and bought a village house in Sorède in 1986. Now, after another move and additional property purchases, they own a collection of four adjacent properties in Villelongue-dels-Monts, all run as holiday lets.

Roussillon Farmhouse and Mas d'en Porte (ID 154955 at frenchconnections.co.uk) are traditional stone farmhouses sleeping 12 and 10 people respectively and the two adjoining cottages, Des Alberes and Canigou, each sleep six people. All are set in 6,000m² of gardens with three swimming pools.



Over the last 30 years the Spinks have turned a hobby into a successful holiday rental business, which they have managed while working in the UK. "Of course, this consumes a lot of our spare time but it's been fun dealing with and hosting guests from all over the world – the majority from the UK, Scandinavia, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

"We are blessed by our location in the most southerly and one of the sunniest locations in France, making it a popular year-round destination. We have renovated and equipped our properties to cater for discerning guests who wish to have a 'home from home' experience. Our market tends to be guests who are celebrating a special occasion, three-generation families, large groups of friends, early retirees and people taking sabbaticals.

The biggest things we've learned about running holiday lets can be distilled into a few key points and we really concentrate on these:

• Marketing We advertise on a multitude of advertising platforms and have our own website, generating a consistent flow of enquiries. In recent years, we have had to spread the net wider to maintain our 12.5% conversion rate and plus-90% occupancy.

• Quality We place cleanliness high on the agenda and ensure all equipment, such as wifi, phones and TV is functioning correctly. We achieve this through a well-trained team of housekeepers, each dedicated to a particular property for consistency. Our local manager obtains feedback from guests to address issues.

• Kitchens We've learned that quality is important to guests. Our designer kitchens, manufactured in the UK to our own specifications, are equipped with Rangemaster ovens and leading brands of appliances.

• Bathrooms The majority of our bedrooms have en-suite facilities and all properties have at least one bath in addition to showers.



• Swimming pools These are essential for our guests and are open from early May to the end of October.

• Customer service To ensure our guests have a wonderful holiday experience we provide a personal concierge-style service, organising car hire, taxi transfers, chef service, grocery shopping, restaurant reservations, wine-tasting tours and membership at the local tennis club, and supplying bikes and sports gear.

• New equipment Setting and achieving an annual sales and expenditure budget is fundamental. This enables regular investment, upgrade and replacement of furniture, equipment and appliances in order to maintain standards.

• Local amenities The two most frequently asked questions by potential guests are: is there a shop, boulangerie and bar in the village, and how far away is the beach?

• Networking Share your own experiences with other local property owners, find out what works well for them and learn from one another.



Linda and Bernard's tiny cottage retreat is the perfect place to either unwind and relax, or use as a base for exploring the beautiful Aude countryside

Bijou retreat in Aude

Linda and Bernard Devine own and run La Petite Maison Devine as a stylish, luxurious one-bedroom retreat for couples (ID 163887 at frenchconnections.co.uk).



This 18th-century terraced cottage is set in the medieval village of Laurac-le-Grand in the Languedoc-Roussillon region.

The Devines have many years of experience in the hospitality trade. Linda also has a business background of sales, marketing and customer service with exclusive London hotels while Bernard has engineering and building skills – all of which are put to good use running their holiday let.

The cottage extends over three floors with a private terrace and spa pool and the Devines aim to offer a holiday experience that exceeds guests' expectations.

"The biggest things I've learned come under two main headings," says Linda. "These are communication with the guest and the importance of providing excellent customer service."

Communication with guests

"It is essential that by the time of arrival the guest has had as much communication from the owner as they need," says Linda. "Some send many emails, while others don't get in touch until we contact them for the balance of the rental."





We operate an open-door policy and emphasise that we are on hand to offer assistance or advice to our guests

“I’ve learned that most guests look at the photographs, study the reviews, check out the price and book. They rarely read all the details of the property – so I aim to fill in the gaps through direct communication, using three main stages:

Stage 1

- Respond to enquiry, agree dates and request deposit.
- Introduce the website, where links to tourists boards are available so guests can plan days out.
- Introduce the Google map page so guests can plan their travel route.

Stage 2

- At balance of payment time, enquire about their travel arrangements and advise on shopping and the rural opening hours.
- Highlight the links and map again.

Stage 3

- Two to three weeks before they travel, email reminders on the time of availability of the gîte and the security deposit.
- Advise where to meet or where the key safe is. Provide contact telephone number.
- Wish guests a safe journey and express our delight in welcoming them to Laurac.

“We like to think that by the time the guests arrive we feel familiar with each other – it’s always exciting on the day of arrival to put faces to names.”

Customer service

“We live in the same village as the cottage and I have learned that if you are based at or close to the gîte, then it’s possible to offer excellent service and support, which guests greatly appreciate.

“Late arrivals are never a problem – and these can often occur, especially in high season when guests can take a flight or train to Toulouse, Avignon or Carcassonne. If they go to Avignon and pick up a car, it can take hours to drive along the coast in high-season traffic.

“Whatever the time, we always meet and greet and if they are not too tired, will give a guided tour of the property and show the workings of the kitchen, international TV system, wifi and hot tub, and take the security payment. If the guests are exhausted we will agree a time for the next day to undertake all of this.

“All guests are welcomed with the basics of food and wine, kitchen and cleaning products. We also leave a vase of flowers, our personalised welcome letter and a greetings card if it’s an anniversary or honeymoon.

“We operate an open-door policy and emphasise that we are on hand to offer assistance or advice. Halfway through the week we will need to do a water check on the hot tub, and if we have had no communication, we use this as an opportunity to check that all is well.

“On Friday afternoon we email guests to arrange a time for handover, either on Saturday morning or Friday evening, and have often been invited to a drink or barbecue.

“We always email them a couple of days after their departure to thank them for their business and guest comments, and hoping that they have had a good journey home. Finally, we take the opportunity to request a review.” ■

*Glynis Shaw is joint managing director of French Connections holiday rentals and property sales online
Tel: 01580 819303
frenchconnections.co.uk*