

Play to your strengths



Capitalising on your location and drawing inspiration from local styles will help you to attract guests. **Glynis Shaw** views two holiday lets that have done this with success

Some houses are powerfully evocative of the architectural style, history and geography of their particular corner of France. This month, I decided to go on a hunt to find holiday rentals that are prime examples of properties that capture the spirit of place.

Both are built in stone and both have been sympathetically converted to create an apartment for guests that is light, bright and full of character. But that is where the similarities end.

The regional character reflected differs greatly between the two properties. One is situated in the town of Dinan, historically a bustling centre of trade in Brittany's Côtes-d'Armor department, and the other is in the village of La Bastide-d'Engras, one of the oldest protected settlements in the Gard countryside of sunny Languedoc-Roussillon.

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Glorious Gard

La Brèche is a traditional village *mas* or farmhouse in the pretty village of La Bastide-d'Engras in Gard, Languedoc-Roussillon, and is set in a commanding position overlooking extensive forests. The nearest town to the property is bustling St-Quentin-la-Poterie, which is known as the town of the potters.

La Brèche is one of the oldest houses in the village. It is built within the line of the medieval *bastide* and takes its name from the ancient gate. Below the house are extensive cellars, which still include an original *garde manger*, wine vat and plough. The vaulted stone entrance dates back to the 12th century and the rest of the house has accumulated organically over the centuries. This is a significant and well-loved building for the village community as at one time it was home to the village shop, café and school.

The village is set on a sandstone ridge and the balconies look across the canopy of the forest towards Uzès in the south and Mont Ventoux in the east. The ancient castle on the ridge has a rich history, playing its part, for example, in the Wars of Religion. This is very much *la France profonde*, where villagers still work their smallholdings and are generous with their produce, such as fruit, mushrooms and haunches of local wild boar.

The house is owned by Duncan Barker, a painter, and his wife Annie, a designer in silk and linen. Their aim was to be sympathetic when renovating La Brèche, and rather than gut and rebuild, they have kept as much as possible of the existing character of the building, aiming mainly to refresh and lighten through choice of decor.

This page: The picturesque village of La Bastide-d'Engras
Facing page: The owners carried out a sympathetic renovation of La Brèche to keep as many original features as possible. They have created their own apartment with separate holiday accommodation, and the ancient 'bastide' village has plenty to recommend itself too

The couple have split the property to create their own apartment and studios together with an independent, two-storey holiday apartment with three double bedrooms and three bathrooms. Outside space is at a premium, but a series of south-facing terraces have been built into what was once the neighbouring house, and there is even a garden of vines and swimming pool.

Visitors come to this area, known as the French Tuscany, to cycle, walk or simply enjoy the local countryside, food, wine and culture. The Barkers have now decided to provide painting holidays from September. The ancient *bastide* village should provide plenty of inspiration, with its cluster of historic houses set against a backdrop of picturesque walls and towers.

At the nearby town of St-Quentin-la-Poterie, the craft pottery tradition has been continued and brought into the present day. There is a popular pottery market along with workshops and *ateliers* where you can see potters at work and buy creative ceramic art. The region also has an amazing cultural heritage as it lies at the heart of Roman France; the Pont du Gard, Nîmes, Avignon, Orange, Arles and Aix are all easily accessible.

La Brèche sleeps six, from €800/week (ID 160406)



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Delightful Dinan

La Maison Blanche lies within a conservation area in the centre of the medieval town of Dinan, close to the north coast of the Côtes-d'Armor department of Brittany. The preserved heart of Dinan is famous around the world for its medieval architecture and La Maison Blanche is entered from a sloping cobbled pedestrian street, with the picturesque river port lying at the bottom of the hill.

The house was built in the first half of the 19th century by a Dinan merchant, possibly of linen, for which Dinan was once known. Old plans of the area show that the lawned open space behind the house had originally been the site of numerous workshops and small forges, and one can very easily imagine this thriving port town buzzing with the activity of specialist craftsmen and busy merchants in the Middle Ages.

Set on the banks of the River Rance, Dinan has been designated a *Ville d'Art et d'Histoire* and is filled with artists, sculptors, engravers, bookbinders and glassblowers. The city ramparts, which complete a circle around the old town, date back to medieval times and every other year a colourful themed festival is held in July in the old town, where itinerant musicians, jousting knights and their ladies mingle with the crowds.

The hallway of La Maison Blanche is entered through dramatic great oak double doors and leads into the centre of the house. Inside this two-bedroom apartment, owned by English art director Anna Imrie and available as a holiday let, many original features are still in place, including high ceilings, French windows and open fireplaces.

Despite the age of the building, the sitting room enjoys a great sense of space and light, emphasised by the sympathetic decor. It leads to a newly refurbished kitchen and the dining room, where French doors give access to a private courtyard. Up a spiral staircase is the imposing master bedroom with its romantic four-poster bed, and the single bedroom has a view of the ramparts.

Other unique houses in the quarter are also stone-built or half-timbered, making the attractive street full of historical interest. This ancient thoroughfare descends from the old town via a small, winding valley originally formed by a bubbling stream – now beneath the pedestrian cobbles but still visible here and there through metal gratings. A few steps away from the house is the old open-air laundry, once fed by the stream below.

Dinan is an excellent example of a Brittany town that has retained all the historic charm and character of its port and centre, while also bringing them to life and offering plenty to attract and occupy modern-day visitors. The covered market has been restored, many of the former warehouses in the port are now excellent restaurants, and private yachts and passenger ferryboats have replaced the merchant ships of old on the River Rance. ■

La Maison Blanche sleeps three, from £487/week (ID 153867)



The covered market has been restored and many of the former warehouses in the port are now restaurants



Clockwise from top: On the banks of the River Rance, Dinan has been designated a *Ville d'Art et d'Histoire*; a number of original features are still in place in the apartment; the bedroom has a view of the ramparts; the distinctive half-timbered buildings of Dinan; the light and airy sitting room; the house is in a conservation area