



This page: A location with access to water, be it a river, lake or the seaside itself, is important to holidaymakers
Facing page top to bottom: Najac, with its stunning fortress, has been listed as one of France's most beautiful villages and is a popular attraction; good photographs of the property showing long views and selling the lifestyle are essential for marketing purposes; Glenn Van der Pas and his partner Susan Cutter bought their property in Najac to let out to holidaymakers

Property

If you are going to buy a home, you want to fall in love first – but remember to keep your business head. The property must also appeal to holidaymakers, so consider whether it truly meets their needs and preferences.

Kerb appeal, charm and being photogenic are important because photographs are your prime selling tool, so make sure the building and setting can be shown well from several angles. In the French countryside, probably the most appealing styles to visitors are period houses with character.

Look for a sympathetic conversion with original features such as exposed beams, stone walls and tiled floors. Be sure that this period tradition has been combined with simple modern lines and contemporary comforts. Most visitors do like a state-of-the-art kitchen and an en-suite bathroom.

Privacy, peace and space are important, and make sure the garden or land is in proportion to the house and big enough to offer what guests need. Check out practicalities such as whether there is enough sunny space to build a swimming pool.

Finally, think about how much maintenance the house and garden might need and whether this works with your budget and time. If you are letting from the UK, you want to avoid the bother and expense of potential emergencies occurring in your absence.

Price

At one time, you could make money by buying a ruin in the French countryside and having a conversion carried out. These days, labour costs have risen and that conversion could cost more than is realistic – unless you have the time, skills and energy to take on a challenge and carry out the work yourself.

The sums will probably work better if you buy an established business, whether that demands some modernisation or is ready to walk into. Many owners in France are selling properties that are already successful letting businesses at a price that includes all the furniture, fixtures and fittings.

This can be the simplest option for getting started as you are taking over a going concern and the vendor can help with the handover of the business to you. Be sure to look at evidence of bookings and income for the last few seasons and ask for a database of customers. Also ask about running and advertising arrangements and costs.

Owners often advertise their properties for sale privately on accommodation listing sites, so it may be possible to deal direct with an English

Whether you set up your own holiday accommodation business or take on a going concern, it's important to buy with your head as well as your heart, says **Glynis Shaw**

It is a good time to buy property in France. Prices are still fairly stable, so you can get more house for your money than in most regions of the UK, and the exchange rate between sterling and the euro is favourable, with the option of rate fixing for a property purchase.

It is hardly surprising then that more people are thinking about investing in a property that will make a return for them

as an accommodation business. Some look to set up their own business, while others prefer to take over a going concern. Some plan an immediate lifestyle move to live in France. Others will use the property as a holiday let until they retire.

Regardless of what your individual plans are, when searching for an accommodation business in France, how do you prioritise what to look for?

speaker and avoid agents' fees. Of course, we would always recommend getting independent competent legal and accounting advice.

Your budget must take account of how much return you can realistically get from letting. Consider whether to pay cash and be mortgage free, or go for a bigger property that demands a mortgage but gives you a better return proportionately. Allow funding for equipping, maintaining and marketing the property.

Location

Yes, the old saying still applies. Location, location, location is key. A holiday letting business works best when its location is accessible, attractive and close to amenities.

Self-catering holidaymakers typically travel to France by car so look for a property within striking distance of an existing *autoroute*, or find out whether one is definitely planned for the near future. The ideal location is within a 40-minute drive of a motorway, a station that links to a TGV line and an airport with both budget and scheduled airline flights.

When it comes to region, if you buy in an already popular holiday area, make sure you have a powerful, unique selling point. If you buy cheaply in an up-and-coming region, be prepared to work hard for business and have a strategy for when the competition grows.

The setting for the property should be appealing and a good view is always an attraction. Visitors like to be able to walk to a shop and to be within a few minutes' drive of restaurants, supermarkets and outdoor markets.

Appeal

What facilities and extras appeal to holidaymakers? First is broadband internet access, preferably wifi. Guests want to bring their tablet or laptop to play games, research the area or keep in touch with work and they want to hook up their mobiles.

Next is access to water, whether it is for swimming, sitting beside, boating, cycling or walking. This might be a beach, a swimming pool, private or shared (very important to families) or it could be a local lake or river with places for wild swimming or a *plan d'eau* man-made beach.

What activities are available to guests locally? Check out horse-riding, cycling, walking, boating and therapies like massage and reflexology. If it is a gîte complex, think about where you could hold a communal barbecue or locate *boules* and table tennis.

Will you let only in summer or do you want to attract winter lets? If the latter, then find out whether shops, restaurants and attractions are available in the area all year round, especially at Christmas and New Year. This will also enhance your own lifestyle.

The same applies for places to visit on a day or half-day outing. Check out beaches, historic towns, prehistoric sites, museums, outdoor attractions, theme parks and water parks, mountain villages and national parks – especially iconic names that everyone has heard of. These will add colour to your marketing and complete the holiday experience for guests. ►



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Top to bottom: *Swimming pools are popular with holidaymakers and Glenn and Susan's is both private and heated, which extends the letting season; quality and comfort were key to the couple's plans for the property – the original barn is now a lovely living area and a modern kitchen has also been added*



A thriving enterprise

When Glenn Van der Pas and his partner Susan Cutter decided to move to France in 2000 to run a holiday let, they drew four lines to demarcate the area which best provided for their ideal climate, landscape and accessibility. Right in the middle was historic Najac in the Aveyron department of Midi-Pyrénées.

Officially designated one of France's *Plus Beaux Villages*, Najac boasts a Richard the Lionheart fortress, multiple restaurants (one of which has been Michelin listed), stunning scenery and extensive recreational activities. Close by is the bustling village of La Fouillade which has plenty of shops, and it was near these two places that the couple found their property.

"In 2008 we decided to buy another letting property nearby," remembers Glenn. "La Vallée was an old barn whose roof and walls were the only things worth saving, but the location was fabulous and accessible. Rodez airport is one hour away and Toulouse 90 minutes by car or by direct train service from Najac. I always say we bought the views and changed everything else!"

Quality and comfort were key to Glenn's plans. Guests have privacy in the park-like grounds of nearly four acres, as well as being able to enjoy the stunning views. The original barn is now a grand vaulted *salon*. A kitchen and dining room have been added along with four double en-suite bedrooms, office space, utility room and a playroom. The private outdoor pool is heated by a powerful heat pump, so is not sunshine dependent, which extends the letting season.

"Holidaymakers come because of the area but it helps to have a lovely house," says Glenn. "The secret to letting a place like this is keeping the children happy, because that way the parents are happy. We now let for 30 weeks of the year (with an occasional longer winter let) and have a really good return. Families come in the school holidays and during half-term breaks, and at other times we offer flexible pricing and attract couples looking for luxury.

"We carried out this project seven years ago but now I would advise buyers to forget renovation unless you are a builder, as costs are higher and, currently, the prices of finished properties much lower. The buy-to-let business is growing up. Buy a beautiful place that somebody else has broken their heart over, and have a business plan."

Glenn and Susan are now selling La Vallée as a going concern with all furniture and fittings, and are willing to help the new owner create continuity in the business by advising on the total package of owning and letting. ■

*Glynis Shaw is joint MD of French Connections holiday rentals and property sales online
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La Vallée is on the market for €450,000 at frenchconnections.co.uk

