

Working holidays

Holiday lets and holiday let management are two different approaches to earning a living in France. **Faith Warn** analyses the rewards and challenges of both

One of the most popular ways to relocate to France and set up in business is to run holiday lets. In the last 15 to 20 years, thousands of owners have bought – and often renovated – a multiple property and now live on-site running their own holiday lets or gîtes.

Many owners of single holiday homes in France have also traditionally let their property to cover costs – but in recent years that number has grown. To meet

the needs of this market, a new business alternative is catching on – living in France and providing a management, maintenance and marketing service to absent owners of holiday lets.

One is an established business model and the other is one that's developing to meet market demands. But what does it take to establish and nurture a thriving enterprise based on each of these two approaches? What are their challenges and rewards?



Sean May runs a holiday cottage business in France with his wife Cecile



Barn Cottage has been completely transformed since the Mays arrived

HOLIDAY LET BUSINESS

Over the last seven years, Sean and Cecile May have developed a successful business running Laborie holiday cottages, near Meyronne in the Dordogne valley. Their venture started when, after 18 years of living in London, they were keen to return to Cecile's native France and bring up their two (now three) girls away from the big smoke. Having both worked in

television in London, they were confident that their collective marketing knowledge and people skills would go a long way towards running a gîte business and in 2005 they set out to find a suitable property to buy.

"Based on our assumption that holidaymakers want period charm, we looked for a stone house with other stone buildings that could be converted into gîtes," remembers

Sean. "We had no fixed region in mind and it was by pure chance that, on a visit to Cecile's parents, we discovered what was to be our gîte business: Laborie."

Having found their charming set of buildings, the couple set out to confirm that it was well located both for them as a family and for their clients' holidays. "In retrospect, this was the key to our business success: finding a property with a local mini-supermarket, *boulangerie*, butcher and good restaurants within easy driving distance. It is also well located for the many sightseeing attractions in our area."

Laborie consisted of three stone buildings: an already-renovated farmhouse that required only

cosmetic improvements; a stone bread oven building that needed a new kitchen (which is now a circular room formed from the interior of the old oven itself) and other renovations; and a barn that had to be stripped back to its shell before renovation could start.

Unquestionably, this was the hardest part of beginning the business, says Sean, and to keep costs down, he and Cecile's father did the majority of the renovation with aid from local artisans where needed. After a gruelling eight-month renovation, they opened for business in 2006.

"Leaving the security of our careers in London and opening our first business was a complete leap in the dark, and full of unexpected surprises and tribulations. Running a gîte business isn't the romantic



Top right: The spacious interior of Barn Cottage

Above: Charming exposed stone walls feature throughout, including in the bedrooms

myth of sipping wine by the pool while welcoming new guests on a Saturday changeover. You must constantly improve facilities to satisfy a clientele that demands increasingly high standards of accommodation."

Sean and Cecile market Laborie through the French Connections website, using plenty of description and high-quality photographs of the three accommodation options, the overall setting and local attractions, along with some rave guest reviews. This leads to a steady stream of enquiries and bookings for several months of the year.

During their winter closure, the couple find that there are always improvements, repairs and touch-ups to do to each of the three

properties. The biggest challenge is to complete them effectively and at speed, so that everything is ready when the business re-opens to guests in spring.

What are the rewards for running a holiday let business? "Firstly, you are your own boss and this is fantastic. Secondly, it's always enjoyable to meet people from around the world. From Australians to Americans, we have a truly international clientele who fall in love with the beauty of our little corner of France. Finally, as a family it is wonderful to watch our children enjoy the benefits of growing up in the beautiful French countryside."

Laborie Cottages are ID 102766 at www.frenchconnections.co.uk

TOP TIPS FOR RUNNING A GITE RENTAL BUSINESS

- Choose a property with charm, good accessibility and close to shops, restaurants and attractions.
- Take professional advice on tax and accounting.
- Carefully and realistically plan both time and budget for renovation and do as much work as you can yourself.
- Provide excellent facilities and constantly look to update and improve in response to guests' expectations.
- Take a professional approach and expect to keep busy with changeover days and guest care, especially in high season.
- Plan a marketing budget and use quality photos, descriptions and user reviews in your online listing.
- Aim to fill spring and autumn weeks as well as the peak of summer.
- Maintain good contact with guests, make friends and give them incentives to recommend.
- Leave a visitor's book in your holiday home. Comments from previous visitors can not only inspire future guests when they're planning days out, but positive feedback can also be used by you as quotes in publicity material.



Cante Grl, a farmhouse holiday rental managed by Steve and Carinne Trinder

HOLIDAY LET MANAGEMENT

Steve and Carinne Trinder started running their own gite seven years ago and went on to set up Le Cloup Assistance Location, a now-thriving business on the border of the Tarn, Aveyron and Tarn-et-Garonne departments that manages and markets houses and maintains gardens and pools for absent owners of holiday let properties.

"We had both been teachers," explains Steve, "so were pretty adept at communication, which is vital to this business. I had also worked in estate agency in France and that was useful, along with the experience gained by running Les Chênes, our own gite near Varen. I started out maintaining gardens and pools locally for absent owners and we both then saw an opportunity to expand into management and marketing."

Steve and Carinne now offer a full service, from taking photographs and writing a description of the house to placing advertising, responding to enquiries, formalising bookings and meeting guests on arrival. "We decided from the start not to try and create a new website for clients' online advertising but to use an existing, successful listings site that would guarantee them immediate exposure."

"We chose French Connections because it consistently ranks high

on search engines and now most of our clients' properties are booked from spring until late September through the site." When a booking is confirmed, Steve takes a flat rate fee, rather than a percentage commission charge, to allow owners to make the maximum possible return.

Their business is fully registered in France – a simpler process than expected. Vital to this, he says, was research and planning to clarify the exact nature of their services, holding meetings with the local *chambre des métiers* over six months before lodging the registration and attending a four-day training course on running a business in France.

TOP TIPS FOR RUNNING A MARKETING AND MAINTENANCE BUSINESS

- Offer owners a complete, personal service and have a real enthusiasm for the work.
- Be clear about the nature of your business, register with the French authorities and maintain regular accounts.
- Communicate well and be friendly, welcoming and responsive to demands from owners and guests.
- Organise contact records and bookings meticulously.
- Advertise your client properties on an established site that will get bookings for an extended season.
- Make an advanced schedule to manage your time well, especially in high season.
- Be prepared to get your hands dirty with cleaning, unblocking drains and mending wardrobes but understand your limitations and when to arrange for a local artisan!
- Encourage clients to recommend you to other owners.



Steve and Carinne Trinder live in France with their family and run a property management business

Steve and Carinne have built up a dozen or so clients through word of mouth and offer a really personal service to both the owners and their guests. They set

up personalised rental contracts directly between owner and guest, send out reminders and arrange payments. At the property, they provide a welcome basket, meet and greet guests, and call in during their stay for support and a friendly chat, as well as maintaining the garden and pool for those owners who request it.

"Our biggest challenge is time management, especially in summer. With a family of our own, we have to be very well organised. But the rewards come through meeting people and helping them have a great holiday in France. This is a thoroughly enjoyable business to run."

Les Chênes is ID 5888 at www.frenchconnections.co.uk

www.french-property-news.com