

EXPERT ADVICE HOLIDAY LETS



Le Moulin, a former watermill in Aude, is a typical holiday let

Travel, unraveled

Giving you a valuable insight into the holiday market in France, **Glynis Shaw** reveals the results of a recent survey to help you plan how to start and run your own business

France is well established as a popular destination, especially among property owners who want to rent their own holiday home. Our team at French Connections has a good feel for the state of the market, but we also know that any market is subject to change. So we decided to conduct a survey of our owners of holiday lets and gîtes to get a snapshot of just who is holidaying with them in France and when.

LENGTH OF SEASON

First we asked owners about the length of their active letting season. The answers revealed that there is a wide variety.

Around 30% of owners who responded said that they let rooms/cottages for 20-30 weeks of the year and 15% reported 30-40 weeks of lettings. This means that many people are not only attracting visitors during the peak summer period but have extended their season into the spring and autumn 'shoulder' times, making a season from five to 10 months' duration. Some of this includes the Christmas

and New Year peak with lulls on either side.

In contrast, 24% of owners let for 10-20 weeks of the year, just 7% for eight to 10 weeks and very small numbers for even less. The shortest period reported was just three weeks. Finally, at the other end of the scale are

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the 12% who let for 52 weeks of the year, which are likely to include long winter lets.

The last three years have seen some turbulence in the economy and the holiday market overall, and you might expect to see

this reflected in the length of the letting season in France. So we also wanted to find out whether owners' letting periods have increased or decreased in the last three years.

Some 35% of owners responded that their letting period had mainly remained the same during this period. Others (around 20%) reported an increase in their letting period and the increase varied between 10% and 50%.

Interestingly, a further 22% said their letting period had gone down and this decrease also varied between 10% and 50%.

Of the rest, some owners were new to letting and one reported a 100% increase, but overall the response shows that the majority saw no change and those who were either up or down were about even in number, reinforcing stability in the length of the French holiday season over the last few years.

There were some additional comments from individual owners, with a few saying that their bookings for the early and late season were down and another reporting fewer winter visitors. One said that the season had



AN AUDE WATERMILL

Brian and Angela Stephens run Le Moulin, a large former watermill near Issel in the Aude region of Languedoc-Roussillon, and their response to the survey was typical of many. Their holiday let has four bedrooms, sleeps up to nine people and, although it is open for booking 52 weeks of the year, the active letting season lasts for around four months and has remained stable for the last three years.

"We do get some long weekend bookings in winter," explains Brian, "but dates in July and August sell out quickly. We mainly host families and most are from the UK, arriving during school holidays from the third week of July. We have also managed to extend our peak season to include all of July by attracting families from Belgium and Holland, where the school break starts earlier."

Le Moulin used to get a lot of repeat bookings, which are usually made while a family is enjoying a holiday on site and decides to return. But increasingly new families have already booked for the following season, making those peak weeks unavailable.

Only 10-20% of Le Moulin's visitors are coming to France for the first time – and these are likely to be from Australia. "In April we host families from Australia," says Brian. "I think it may be their long



Angela Stephens



Brian Stephens

summer holiday time. Usually they stay for a week as part of a longer break travelling around Europe, before often moving on to cities such as Paris and London."

The property is in Cathar country and full of historical interest, so autumn visitors are usually mature groups of friends or parents with adult children who come to explore the châteaux and abbeys.

With this varied seasonal pattern combined with a consistent level of bookings by people who love France, Le Moulin can be seen as a typical snapshot of the French holiday letting market.

Le Moulin is ID 151435 at www.frenchconnections.co.uk



The former watermill has four bedrooms



Le Moulin sells out quickly during the summer



Families enjoy the French sunshine at Le Moulin



decreased for two years but gone up this year, while another also indicated that while 2012 was a poor year, 2013 is better.

VARIETY OF VISITORS

Having established this fairly long season, we wondered how visitors vary in type at certain times of year. Do owners experience a distinct pattern through their letting season?

A very small number reported extremes – either totally variable or no variation – but the clearest pattern to emerge was from the majority of owners who said they host families during the peak summer season and couples or groups outside the summer months of July and August. Some of the couples are older, while others are younger parents with a baby.

Around 15% of owners report they let to couples exclusively and the same number report hosting groups throughout their season, reflecting the size or type of their accommodation. A small number even said their visitors are always families. One owner commented that older people tend to visit when the weather is cooler.

This does indicate that the majority of owners need to be flexible with the accommodation they offer, making the space practical for families during the school holidays but also comfortable for couples who are mainly using just one bedroom.

SEASONED TRAVELLERS

How many visitors to France are first-timers and how many are dedicated Francophiles? We asked our owners to say what percentage of their guests were visiting France for the first time and the most common response (from about a third) was 'very few'.

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Around a fifth of owners reported no first-time visitors at all, a smaller group said 10-15% were first-timers and a quarter reported 20-30% first-timers. Only a small number reported that over half their guests were on their first visit to France.

There is often a common perception that it is older people who go to France, but our owners reported that the vast majority of visitors are in the 30-50 age group, followed by the over 50s. They also reported a significant number of under 30s and, of course, many host visitors across all age groups. It is fair to say that some of the lower age group are young adults visiting with a family group and being introduced to France by their parents.

Very clearly, the majority of owners of holiday lets host lovers of France who return many times, even if they often try a new area – an indication perhaps of the way the country gets under the skin and into the heart, and also of the great variety of regions to experience. But what level of repeat bookings do owners receive for their property?

A third of owners receive up to 15% repeat

bookings and a further third between 15% and 25%. A fortunate fifth have a 30% to 50% level of repeats and a smaller group reports a level of between 50% and a whopping 90%.

So Francophiles are loyal visitors, although a few owners said that earlier bookings are increasingly pipping would-be repeaters to the post and preventing them from securing their favoured weeks.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Finally our survey asked about the most common types of visitor to France and which countries they come from.

The survey showed that the vast majority of visitors are from the UK, followed by France and then, in roughly equal measure, Ireland, Belgium and Holland. A small number come from Denmark, Germany and Finland, and some owners wondered why they do not get more visitors from European countries. Another small but significant group of visitors come to France from Australia, New Zealand and the USA.

IN CONCLUSION

So, an interesting picture for owners or would-be owners of letting property in France, including an established market of families and couples visiting over an extended period, potential for repeat bookings and also potential to expand the market from its predominantly UK base to the rest of Europe and further afield. ■

Glynis Shaw is joint MD of French Connections holiday rentals and property sales online www.frenchconnections.co.uk