

Specially for you

Finding a niche in the market is a great way of focusing your business venture. **Glynis Shaw** discovers how these enterprising Brits have transformed their holiday lets in France

Every business owner wants to increase their turnover and thrive, including owners of gites and B&Bs in France. The survey I reported on last month reveals that many owners are doing quite well, but still have some spare capacity.

While it's good news that the market has held up consistently in the last few years, it is perhaps even better news that some enterprising owners are developing innovative ideas to expand into new markets.

These enterprising owners are leading the way with unusual and exciting ideas for organised and inclusive holidays and tours – ideas that grew naturally out of experiences with guests. Could the success stories of two very different ventures inspire you to see an opening for your own new

niche, or even new business model, to take you in unexpected directions that are both profitable and satisfying?

DOING IT FOR THE KIDS

Jon Barnsley bought Le Castel, a classic Napoleon-III château in Normandy, in 2004 and at first ran it as a *chambres d'hôtes*, catering for middle-aged and elderly holidaymakers taking a two or three-night break close to all the top Normandy tourist sites. Now he has transformed it into a thriving centre for luxury family holidays on an all-inclusive basis.

The first family room in the *chambres d'hôtes* had been created in 2005 with a double bed and a single bed. It was hugely popular and echoed the pattern set by a lot of hotels. However, two families



It's really satisfying to see several families enjoying a meal together or the youngsters all playing together happily while parents sit on the terrace with a glass of wine



Jon Barnsley in the lounge of the château

booked in who changed the way Jon looked at Le Castel. Both had a three-year-old and they each wanted separate rooms for the tots, as they had at home, and were willing to pay to ensure their own privacy and relaxation.

As a former national newspaper travel editor, Jon had travelled the world and picked up ideas to adapt for Le Castel.

"I worked out that I could change the château around a little to create four two-bedroom suites. I decided to add kitchens so mums could microwave milk, blitz veggies for weaning youngsters or satisfy hunger attacks."

The next change was to serve children's meals at 5.30pm followed by adult-only suppers at 8pm. This was an instant hit with many parents saying it was the first proper meal they had enjoyed on holiday.

"At first I tried mixing our traditional elderly market with the families but it didn't work hugely

well. I knew it was time to stop when some very lively triplets raced out of their suite and knocked an old lady down the stairs. She left – and I couldn't really blame her! So three years ago I decided to concentrate solely on families."

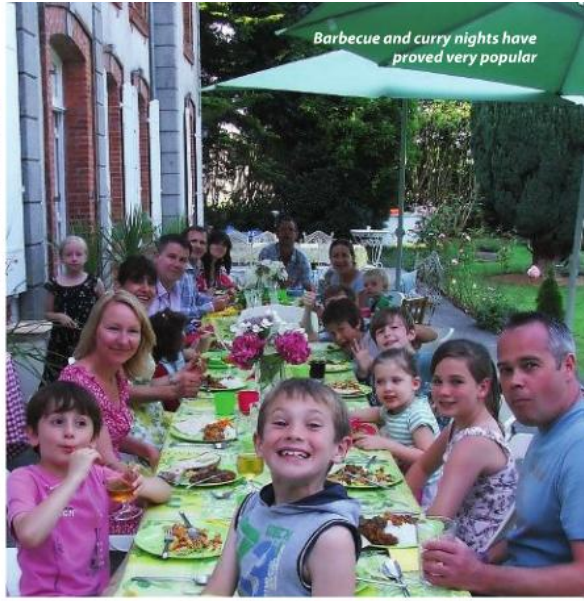
The luxurious, antique-furnished suites were filled with toys and play sessions were added in the mornings and afternoons so that parents could enjoy some precious quiet time.

Jon then discovered that families would happily come to Le Castel for a week, so he established Saturday as change-over day and only sold week-long breaks that were pretty much all-inclusive, with all the drinks, meals, play sessions and the two-bedroom suite as standard.

"It was an instant hit, helped by publicity in *The Sunday Times*, and we now sell out very fast. We have parents coming back for the third year running. Recommendations



Le Castel offers plenty of space for kids to play



Barbecue and curry nights have proved very popular

Recommendations are passed on to other couples who want a family holiday without having to give up their own comforts and some social enjoyment



Luxurious double rooms in Le Castel



Family-friendly twin rooms

are passed on to other couples who want a good family holiday without having to give up their own comforts and with some social enjoyment.

"We currently only offer all-inclusive week-long breaks during the main school holidays. We will be expanding by introducing three and four-night breaks for families with pre-school age children in

September, October, April, May and June."

Typical families are professionals with one to three children aged up to eight years old, and the vast majority of guests are from the UK or Ireland, with many from London and the south. All travel by car so they can pack the things they need and their holiday starts on the ferry

with a cabin and entertainment for the children.

"I have three members of staff who do the cleaning, meals and play sessions. The food has a mainly French flavour but everyone loves our barbecue and curry nights.

"Outside, there's a marquee, trampolines, a swimming pool, den and play area with swings and

slides. All this ensures that Le Castel offers luxury and relaxation for the parents as well as plenty of fun for the children.

"It's really satisfying to see several families enjoying a meal together, or the youngsters all playing together happily while the parents sit on the terrace, glass of wine in hand and having a good chat." ▶



REAL LIFE TAILORED HOLIDAYS

The gite was booked out for the first year



The tours of 'brocantes' and markets have proved a hit



Hannah and Paul Metson outside their pretty B&B



FLEA MARKET THERAPY

Hannah and Paul Metson moved to France three years ago to escape the hectic life they had in the UK, where they were working around 70 hours a week. Now successfully running a gite and three B&B rooms in northern France, they are embarking on expanding their market with French shopping tour holidays for visitors.

Back in 2010, after looking at 13 houses in two days, they found La Jeusselière, a farmhouse and barn in Pays-de-la-Loire, close to many historic market towns and villages.

"We were running short of time and went along on a foggy winter morning expecting to say that the property wasn't for us, but we fell in love with it. Surrounded by fields on all sides, but only 10 minutes' walk into a friendly village with all the amenities you need, it was the perfect spot for a holiday retreat.

"Having signed for the house in March 2010, we arrived in May and commenced the renovations. The first property completed was La Petite Jeusselière, our one-bedroom barn gite. That first year we booked the gite out for 10 weeks, even though it was the end of July. We haven't looked back since."

In 2012 the Metsons completed three en-suite *chambres d'hôtes* rooms and offered guests a fine dining experience with their *table d'hôte* menu. Again the rooms have proved popular and a lot of guests stay while on property viewing trips in the area, as it is a great location from which to explore Mayenne as well as Normandy and Brittany.

"Last September, Julie Huh came to stay in our gite while she was househunting," remembers Hannah. "Julie is a furniture restorer, *brocante* owner and interior designer. She is South Korean by birth and met her Scottish husband while studying in Australia – and they are now moving to France!"

"Julie loves French style and is buying a *maison de maître* in Mayenne. During her stay with us, we discovered that many Koreans love all things French and we enjoyed helping Julie to explore the lovely *brocantes*, *vide greniers* and Emmaus outlets in the area. They have a better selection at considerably lower prices than the well-trodden markets in Paris, so proved to be an exciting discovery.

Surrounded by fields on all sides, but only 10 minutes' walk into a friendly village with all the amenities you need, this is the perfect spot for a holiday retreat

"Julie was putting pictures of her purchases on her French blog and people were asking to buy them within seconds! Popular items were

old tea towels (*torchons*), painted crockery and monogrammed linen, but there were some more surprising 'collectables' such as old keys and old wooden coat hangers which are used to display clothes hanging on the wall of a room."

Hannah and Paul are helping Julie through the house-buying and renovation process and are now working together setting up buying tours. Julie has done some soft marketing and there is keen interest in the tours from an interior design company.

The tours will start in the next few months, with six to eight people on each seven-day break, starting at the flea markets in Paris, then a night in a Loire château and on to La Jeusselière for three nights, with two meals there plus a meal in a local restaurant. Previous guests have reported enjoying eating in the Metsons' dining room and sampling the freshly cooked French food with a twist.

"We're looking forward to acting as tour guides, taking our visitors out and about to discover the local markets and *brocantes* and helping them put together their precious French style. We are looking into ways of shipping goods back for customers and, of course, people can contact us direct to set up custom tours." ■

Glynis Shaw is joint MD of French Connections holiday rentals and property sales online www.frenchconnections.co.uk
Le Castel is ID 4859
La Jeusselière is ID 154163