

HIDE AND SEEK



Want to enter the tourism game? **Glynis Shaw** looks into whether you should buy in a popular area known to holidaymakers or play your hand with a hidden gem

If you buy a property in France to run as holiday lets, what type of location should you choose? Is it best to be located in an established tourist region or to discover a lesser known area? Let's consider the advantages and disadvantages of each option and how you can optimise the opportunities available to you.

Firstly, it has to be said that one day you are likely to use the property you buy as your own permanent home or an occasional holiday home, so you really need to love the area and feel happy there. On the other hand, you want to generate some income from letting, so you need to have a business plan to persuade holidaymakers to book.

An established tourist region has the advantage of having a ready market of visitors looking for holiday accommodation, but this means there is also likely to be more competition for bookings, so it is important to ensure that the property has qualities that make it stand out from the competition. This might be a special location, charming period architecture, great facilities, stylish interior or excellent customer service.

It is also important not only to have such qualities but to sell them to the maximum in your advertising. Do this by displaying plenty of excellent photos and enthusiastic descriptions that really emphasise your strong points and show a personal investment.

Owners of properties in less well-known areas also need to pay attention to the quality and facilities at their holiday rental but a priority is to market the advantages of the area. Display photos of beautiful, peaceful countryside and unspoilt nature. Spell out features such as avoiding the crowds, accessibility, opportunities for outings and day trips – even the cachet of discovering a place your friends have never heard of before.

Another strong advantage can be the appeal of enduring local traditions, restaurants, cafés and *auberges* where the cost of a meal is much less than in the tourist hotspots. The lower cost of a holiday in a lesser known area is a great selling point, persuading families that they can

afford to eat out and couples that they can take back fine wine at bargain prices.

Our two case studies are great examples of putting these principles into practice. One is a pretty house based in an excellent location in popular, sunny Poitou-Charentes close to the west coast, while the other is a handsome property in the beautiful, accessible countryside of the often overlooked north-east of France on the border between Lorraine and Champagne-Ardenne.

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Johannes' property is set within the grounds of the Villers château estate

Hidden gem

Johannes Landman runs a unique holiday let in the heart of the Argonne forest, close to Ste-Menehould in Champagne-Ardenne. This handsome hunting lodge is set on the centuries-old, six-hectare estate of Villers at Villers-en-Argonne, with a hilltop château, *pigeonnier* and park. The lodge contains two adjacent gîtes, has views over unspoilt countryside and forests and offers exclusive access to the château park and a covered swimming pool.

"We are in the east of champagne country, an area that I think has been vastly underestimated," says Johannes. "We came here because my French wife, Laurence, has family connections and now I love the place. The glorious countryside has rolling hills and forests and is a paradise for nature and wildlife. There are interesting places to visit and guests can enjoy horseriding, hunting wild boar and deer with French guides, fishing, cross-country cycling, walking and water sports.

"It is true that we don't get many French visitors as this region has a history of conflict, having been fought over since the time of Joan of Arc, and some prejudices still remain. The east also tends to be thought of as close to industrial cities."

Johannes emphasises the charms of the area in words and pictures in his extensive advertising to attract other nationalities who are much more open to discovering this region. "We are listed on five websites to capture markets in several countries, emphasising local holiday benefits.

"Our prime selling point for the British is that we are only about three hours from Calais and in champagne country. They like the lovely small town of Bassuet where excellent quality champagne can be bought direct from the producer at far lower prices than in the big centres of Épernay and Reims. Visitors always enthuse about the great quality and reasonable prices in our local restaurants, making their spending money go that much further.

"Belgian visitors like to holiday in large family groups and enjoy the local food. The Dutch also enjoy the relaxed, child-friendly atmosphere while Americans love to explore the countryside and visit the nearby cities and memorial sites of World War I. Canadians and Australians, on the other hand, appreciate our accessibility from Paris (2.5 hours) and are attracted by the festive name of the region, Champagne, taking time to relax in the French countryside after a stay in its capital.

"By reaching all these markets, I let our holiday rentals for about six months of the year, which owners cannot do so easily if they are dependent on skiing or summer sunshine. In peak season prices are quite high but in low and mid season guests can find a real bargain."

ID 150944 at frenchconnections.co.uk



Laurence and Johannes Landman



The lodge is located in the heart of the Argonne forest



Guests will be attracted by light, comfortable interiors



The master bedroom in the west wing



Tourism hotspot

Christine and Kevin Braine's gîtes are located on the Charente/Charente-Maritime border in cognac country. Les Bouleaux and Le Puits are secluded wings of a renovated Charentaise house with considerable charm, accessed by a private drive and surrounded by grapevines and sunflowers.



The house is on the edge of a small village called Les Vignes, just 15 minutes from the famous town of Cognac and inside the 'golden triangle' of Cognac, Saintes and St-Jean-d'Angély, so called because the area has so many attractions for visitors.

"We bought the property in order to relocate and run holiday lets," says Christine. "After looking around several regions we chose this one because the climate is very sunny, it is well known and there is so much to see and do. Cognac is world-famous as home to many upmarket character houses and has a beautiful old town and river. Saintes has a Roman amphitheatre and is always buzzing. The port of La Rochelle and the sandy beaches of the Atlantic Coast are just 45 minutes away and Futuroscope is a 90-minute drive north."

But all this means that there is a lot of competition and the Braines are very aware of that. "At the time of buying, we chose a great location that's quiet and private but close to everything, so that was a good start to help us attract guests. Since then, we have continued to add and improve our facilities and service. We are never complacent."

Each of the gîtes now has its own private swimming pool, one of which is heated, and there is also a gym, while kitchens have been updated with quality appliances.

"Another exclusive attraction that we offer guests is a personal tour and tasting, courtesy of our neighbour, who is a producer of cognac, wine and pineau, the local apéritif," Christine says. "Visitors are delighted because this is a genuinely local, unique experience, there is no charge, samples are generous and prices for the quality produce are very low."

This area is best known as a summer destination and the Braines' season runs from the beginning of May to the end of September. "June, July and August tend to be fully booked and September can also be busy, whereas May is quieter and often attracts househunters exploring the region. The rest of the year we have plenty of time to enjoy living here."

ID166176 at frenchconnections.co.uk



The traditional French look will always attract British guests



Ensure you take good photos of your pool area



Always mention added features such as garden dining



A well-equipped kitchen will increase your chances of bookings in a competitive market



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