

Making spirits bright

The festive season is a time for guests to revel in French tradition and for property owners to reap rewards, says **Glynis Shaw**



Christmas in France really is an opportunity to celebrate the sentiment of *vive la différence*. Across the Channel, the festive season gears up later and is less protracted than in Britain. It also seems to capture a traditional joy, magic and goodwill, with imaginative decorations in public places and plenty of community events to ensure a *Joyeux Noël*.

Christmas Eve is at the heart of family and religious celebrations. On this evening, families gather at home for the *Réveillon de Noël*, a late-night feast for which every region produces its own specialities. This is also the time to celebrate midnight mass, an uplifting tradition that visitors are welcome to share. All religious buildings, from city cathedrals to small country chapels, are aglow with dozens of candles and filled with the sounds of carols and hymns.

Although the French Christmas holiday is confined to just a few days, many community

seasonal events extend over several weeks – and perhaps the greatest are the Christmas markets held all over France, each with its own character, traditions and range of goods.

Market magic

The markets originated and developed as a source of ingredients for the cooks of rural France, who would spend much of the two weeks before Christmas preparing and baking typical local festive dishes for the *Réveillon*.

These days, Christmas markets are loaded with atmosphere and with wonderful smells, sights and sounds that combine to offer a

sensuous experience – and a great chance to get immersed in the language! Fresh produce and delectable foodstuffs are on offer and alongside them are handcrafted gifts, unusual

candles, cards, nativity scenes, decorations and ornaments for the tree.

Alongside the markets, many towns and cities host cultural festivals for Christmas and these are a great draw for

visitors. Attractions might include skating, colourful parades through streets and squares, concerts, art exhibitions and dance shows. The atmosphere is fun and inclusive, with all generations joining in.

Many guests will want to drive out and fill up the car with food and gifts, which presents a great opportunity for owners of properties readily accessible from the Channel ports and Eurotunnel



Facing page, clockwise from top: Christmas in Lille is celebrated on Place Rihour; seasonal 'pâtisseries' include chocolate orange brioche and speculoos; Carcassonne's Place Carnot is the focal point during the festive season

This page, top: More than 80 chalets teem with gifts, nativity figurines, decorations and festive food in Lille
Bottom: the Big Wheel in Carcassonne offers visitors a view of the city from a height of 50 metres



Top tips for successful Christmas lettings

- Make prices attractive and consider using special offers to set your property apart from others
- Be as flexible as possible with arrival and departure dates
- Post photographs of the property and area at Christmas time in your listing
- Describe local events and attractions in your listing, especially Christmas markets and cultural festivals
- Leave plenty of information at the property about where to go, what to see, and seasonal shop and restaurant opening times
- Decorate the property to make it welcoming, homely and colourful
- Ensure you provide adequate heating and warm bedding
- Leave a welcome hamper or wine
- Provide a contact phone number just in case of any emergencies during the holiday period

Lille, Arras, Licques (with its turkey parade) and Amiens.

If your property is further afield, encourage pre-Christmas visitors to take the train, linking the Eurostar with TGV destinations, or to fly and travel light, leaving plenty of luggage space for the return journey. Emphasise, too, the events and attractions on offer to make the trip about the experience as much as the shopping. Major Christmas markets are in Avignon, Bordeaux and Toulouse.

2 Christmas week
Christmas week in France may appeal to couples looking for a romantic hideaway destination or to groups of extended family. They will want to arrive in time to shop for food and get prepared, so owners may need to be flexible on departure and arrival dates.

This is a chance to earn some winter income and you can certainly charge extra for Christmas week – but don't overdo it. Most owners pitch their prices at less than the summer peak season and many make special seasonal offers to promote their property. Do budget for heating and for providing extras like decorations, logs, a food hamper or wine.

The most appropriate properties for Christmas letting are well-equipped for winter warmth, close to a village for local facilities, offer pretty rural or seaside walks and are within a short drive of a town with activities and attractions.

3 New Year week
Generally, visitors choose to stay for either the Christmas week or the New Year week, so the opportunity is for two separate letting weeks, each usually charged at the same rate. This means being prepared for changeover day and ensuring that the house is equally welcoming during both periods with heat, decorations and local information.

At New Year, getting out and about is likely to be even more important and guests are likely to be less familiar with local customs, so make sure you give them plenty of tips about where to go and what to do, from outdoor pursuits to major events.

Don't forget to tell guests about the mistletoe tradition and the *Galette des Rois*, which they will find in local *pâtisseries*. ■

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(La Bouzole, overleaf, is ID 158924)*

Festive events often continue into the New Year, which is marked with firework displays, dinners and even balls (*soirées dansantes*). New Year's Eve is known in France as La St-Sylvestre, named after an early Pope whose feast day is 31 December. Tradition again calls for a feast, *Le Réveillon de St-Sylvestre*, which usually includes champagne and delicacies such as foie gras. At the stroke of midnight, everyone kisses under the mistletoe – a New Year rather than Christmas tradition – and exchanges best wishes.

On New Year's Day, *le Jour de l'An*, friends and family may give cards and presents and will gather to share their resolutions. Although work, routine and services continue as normal between Christmas and New Year and from 2 January, the official end of the festive season is on the sixth of the month. The religious tradition of Epiphany is marked by eating a *Galette des Rois*, a traditional cake containing a hidden lucky charm.

Rent it out
For owners of holiday properties in France, the many attractions of the French festive season offer three distinct opportunities for hosting guests and generating business.

1 The pre-Christmas period
Most Christmas markets start in late November, allowing around a four-week period during which visitors can browse markets for food and presents, go shopping at large stores and specialist boutiques, and enjoy cultural events and outdoor activities. Some may want to stay for a full week, but many are likely to prefer a shorter stay so you could offer a special price for, say, a three-night break.

Many guests will want to drive out and fill up the car with food and gifts, which presents a great opportunity for owners of properties readily accessible from the Channel ports and Eurotunnel. This is especially true for those within striking distance of major markets like



Clockwise from top left: *La Bouzole is an idyllic retreat at any time of year; the Richardsons provide plenty of wood for the stove at Christmas time; the music room is adorned with mistletoe and a twinkling tree; the property enjoys far-reaching views that are especially magical in the snow*

Case study: a Christmas villa near Carcassonne

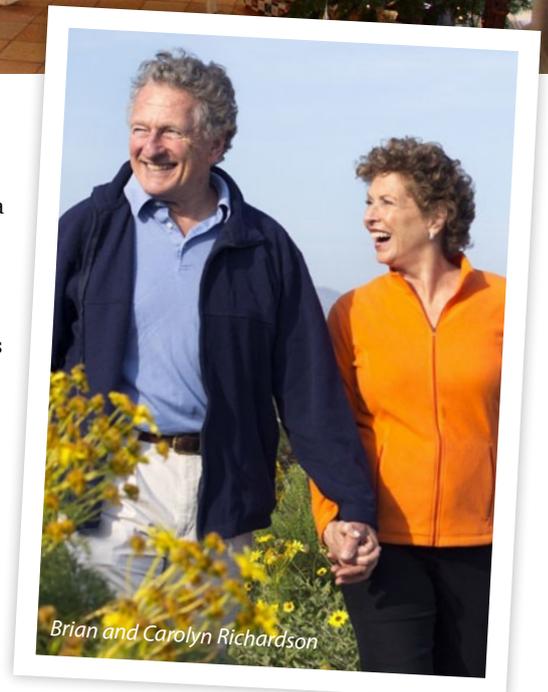
Brian and Carolyn Richardson’s holiday home in Aude is located close to Montolieu, the ‘village of books’ and one of France’s state-appointed towns given over to literature and the arts, hosting a variety of activities all year round. The villa is also only a short drive from the historic city of Carcassonne and its airport, making access easy from the UK.

La Bouzole is set in a private garden with fruit trees and an uninterrupted view of the Pyrénées. The Richardsons let the property all year round and have made sure that it is particularly attractive to visitors at Christmas, with a wood-burning stove, free supply of wood and a six-seater hot tub in the garden. Local attractions include festive markets, the *Magie de Noël* festival in Carcassonne and the opportunity to ski within a two-hour drive at

resorts such as Ax-les-Thermes and Les Monts d’Olmes.

“This year we have promoted the property with a special offer of just £450 a week for Christmas and the rest of the winter season – a saving on our usual rate of £600 and much less than the summer peak of £1,100,” explains Carolyn. “We go down in November for three to four weeks and leave the house ready for Christmas guests, with decorations, a tree, a vast stock of logs and even a car that guests can hire cheaply.

“We make sure that guests have local support, from somebody to pick them up at the airport to our maintenance man who takes care of the hot tub and car. We like the idea of our visitors having a wonderful Christmas and New Year in this beautiful part of France.”



Brian and Carolyn Richardson