

Drawing the crowds

HOLIDAYMAKING TRENDS ARE CHANGING BUT WITH ATTENTION TO DETAIL AND CAREFUL MARKETING, YOU CAN BE AHEAD OF THE GAME, SAYS GLYNIS SHAW



Meg Campbell has spent years building Château de Bussas in the south of France into the successful holiday let business it is today

The market for holiday lets in France has always seen shifts and trends. But the last two years seem to have heralded a faster pace of change. How can property owners and managers absorb these changes and respond to the market and its demands? With flexibility and a positive attitude, it is possible both to meet and to capitalise on them.

Post-downturn uncertainty seems to have settled. More definite trends are emerging regarding the nature of the holiday let market and the expectations that visitors hold for holiday accommodation.

DIFFERENT PATTERNS

Traditionally, the time for booking summer holiday rentals was seasonal. People searched and booked during January and February, followed by low activity until late bookings during July.

Then, in 2009, came not only lower bookings overall but a lull in the early months followed by a peak in late bookings in June, July and August. Last year was different again as the January-February peak returned and booking levels were sustained during the year right up until August, with a slight lull only in March.

This pattern seems set to continue, so it pays for owners to be flexible. If all your weeks are not filled by the end of February, there is no need to panic and it is worth actively promoting your property for most months of the year. You can certainly do this by using special offers, as discounts are still attractive to holidaymakers as long as the product is right.

You can also maximise page views of your online listing by showing the best possible

a regionally themed email newsletter to opted-in previous site visitors. Promotions like this can be judiciously timed to generate bookings when you most need them.

Changes are also being seen in the profile of visitors to France. Gîtes and villas used to be the province of middle-class families taking their main summer holiday with the children. They enjoyed self-catering, were happy to bring their own bedding and liked to

feature strongly among visitors to France – and they are being joined by others. For instance, urban 30-somethings who have had foreign holidays in exotic locations are now discovering their nearest neighbour. They appreciate the possibilities for eco-friendly travel and the ready accessibility to a wide range of outdoor activities in France. They also think nothing of hopping across the Channel for a sporting or cultural event.

Young families who might previously have chosen Spain are now willing to drive to France. Some are on a tight budget and opt for camping holidays or great-value self-catering properties. Other families – especially older professionals who have young children – want more luxury and also less isolation than at an individual country house.

They are happy to stay in a complex of gîtes where families can mix. A high level of creature comforts, organised children's activities and the availability of meals on-site are very appealing to this market.

LOCAL ATTRACTIONS

Internet access is demanded by those who need or want to keep in touch with business while in France – and this

IF YOUR WEEKS ARE NOT FILLED BY THE END OF FEBRUARY, DON'T PANIC. EQUALLY, IT IS WORTH PROMOTING YOUR PROPERTY FOR MOST MONTHS OF THE YEAR

thumbnail photograph. This small image should have kerb appeal, tell a story and grab attention. One swimming pool photo looks much like another; it is an attractive view of the house itself that persuades people to click for more details.

THINK PROMOTION

Our owners report success using good thumbnails for promotion as a 'featured property'. This is either on the home page of our website or on

stay around the pool and barbecue with occasional outings. Extended groups of three generations and two families sharing were common.

Then the market became dominated by more affluent mature couples who could afford to take several holidays a year. Many were dedicated Francophiles who would visit different regions of the country, taking an interest in the culture and language.

These traditional groups still