

CASE STUDY



Meg Campbell is the seasoned owner of a holiday property in France, and has 20 years' experience of letting. Château de Bussas at St-Jean-du-Gard, near Alès in the south of France has six accommodation options: a choice of smaller units or the whole eight-bedroom château, which sleeps 20 people. There is also a games room, swimming pool, barbecue, children's play area and a river for swimming and fishing.

Meg has obviously seen many changes over the years. What are the six most important things that she has learned during her time of letting?

1 It is essential to have a good team of local support if you do not live on-site. Properties with pleasant French caretakers help to keep the ambiance French rather than British. Also, remote rural properties can look very attractive, but do present a security risk in some parts of France, so live-in local support is ideal. We have a really friendly French couple who have lived on-site as caretakers for 20 years and our guests love them.

2 Website advertising is a really useful tool, but it is still very important to have some telephone contact with possible guests to clinch bookings and avoid unpleasant surprises. For example, groups can get larger!

3 Guests in France are often travelling with low-cost airlines and can no longer bring their bed linen and towels, which they preferred to do in the early days to keep down the cost. So, local laundry is a must but I would never ask guests to pay extra for linen and laundry.

4 Making any profits in the holiday letting business gets easier with time and experience but is always hard work. The more the management and cleaning work is farmed out, the smaller the profits are! Although local support is ideal, it does eat into the profits owing to high French employment tax (50% added to salary).

5 People respect your property more if they feel you are asking a reasonable price. It also pays to create a homely, personal feel with books and pictures, for instance, as visitors then feel like welcome guests in your home and respond accordingly.

6 It is important to move with the times. Bathrooms and kitchens that were adequate 20 years ago need modernising to match the standard of people's own homes and expectations. I aim to make them look modern and comfortable with good facilities but still in keeping with the period character.

Château de Bussas
www.frenchconnections.co.uk



opens up another market of people who might not be able to get away without the facility. Indeed, all visitors may feel more comfortable knowing it is available. When on holiday it's useful to look up attractions, find out more about a potential visit (particularly if the venue is quite a distance away), book restaurants/attractions online, and generally keep in touch.

So it pays to have flexible expectations about who represents your market. For instance, a large house may appeal to families during school holidays but may equally be booked by mature couples or 30-somethings during spring and autumn, simply because they want space, comfort and a good location.

HIGH STANDARDS

With the huge choice of destinations available online, browsers want to see a full and accurate description of the property. So polish up your listing and images and give enthusiastic details of the house, the garden, nearby places and events, where to eat, what to do and extra facilities like activities and meals.

Everyone is looking for high standards and value for money. Now is the time to pay particular attention to

cleanliness and presentation. If you can afford to install that dishwasher or power shower or to renew the bedding, then do so. If not, ensure that everything is spotlessly clean to welcome each new visitor and offer thoughtful finishing touches. Also provide either a warm personal welcome or a well-organised information pack with helpful suggestions and contact numbers.

Finally, there is a powerful recent trend in researching holiday information that also crosses all sectors of the market – and that is user reviews. Research has shown that holidaymakers trust the independent feedback of fellow holidaymakers more than that of a professional. So do gather guest comments and display them in your online listing, choosing a selection of brief, genuine, unique comments that collectively include references to as many aspects of the property and the holiday as possible. Your listing host should verify them with the authors and provide a guest book facility in your property advertisement.

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