

The gites at La Mirabelle have shared communal areas that prove popular with guests



Dressed to impress

IN PART TWO OF THIS SERIES ON HOLIDAY LETS, **GLYNIS SHAW** EXPLAINS HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL HOLIDAY-LET OWNER BY PROVIDING THE RIGHT FACILITIES

When you come to furnish and equip a holiday rental property, how should you make decisions? The guiding principle should be to satisfy and delight your chosen market. Facilities and hospitality that meet – and even exceed – the needs and expectations of your guests will help ensure recommendations and return bookings.

If your market is predominantly couples, aim for hotel-quality facilities and comfort with a more homely, individual feel. Provide top-quality beds and bedding, choose warm colour themes, make lighting subtle with dimmer switches and lamps, and add decorative touches but keep decor uncluttered.

Heating is also important to extend your season, as is indoor entertainment and a private outdoor space with comfortable seating, shade and a barbecue. In walking areas, provide a place for muddy boots and if you're in cycling country, consider providing two bikes.

Families want an appealing but easy-going space that offers plenty to do. Indoors, a well-equipped kitchen is

important, along with entertainment and games.

Beyond the essential TV, games such as table tennis, pool, table football, Scrabble, cards, draughts and chess are all popular. A swimming pool and pool toys may be the main focus of outdoor fun, but garden

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and sports equipment such as bikes, balls and games of boules or skittles will all help to make both parents and children feel that everything has been thought of to give them a good time without leaving the house.

I've learned another sound principle from running gites and my 14 years'

experience bringing owners and holidaymakers together online. It is to establish mutual respect between owner and guest.

When you put thought and care into offering good facilities, guests respond by looking after them well. The best visitor response can sometimes come from unexpected, thoughtful touches alongside the essential, practical facilities.

FURNISHINGS

In living areas, make use of colour for design interest and choose a style that suits the house and its location. Washable upholstery covers are practical and for winter lets, a comfortable sofa really matters. A sofa-bed will wear out more quickly than a regular sofa, so choose robust quality. Keep ornaments to a minimum to avoid a cluttered feel – but do hang pictures to lend interest.

For beds, quality and cleanliness are important. Buy good-quality, long-lasting mattresses that give support for a decent night's sleep, even on a basic bed frame. Mattress protectors benefit both owner

and guest as they look and feel good and are washable.

Similarly, ensure that pillows are comfortable and that bed linen looks nice and smells fresh, even if it is plain. I favour providing linen because made-up beds look more inviting, especially when guests arrive after a long journey.

Be sure to offer sufficient hanging space, even if it's a rail with a cover or canvas wardrobe, a full-length mirror, bedside lamps, fans and a hairdryer. A clock/radio is a nice extra.

KITCHEN

The kitchen is crucial for self-catering visitors, so it should be well fitted and appealing. Of course, everything should be spotlessly clean – but most especially the oven.

Provide crockery, cutlery and glasses in abundance and remember chopping boards, cooking utensils, a garlic press, bottle openers and plastic glasses for outdoor use, especially around the pool. A good kettle is vital, as are a basic coffee-maker and cafetière; candle-holders and a vase will also be appreciated.

Guests generally prefer to do their own laundry, so provide a washing machine, even if you set it to wash only at 30°C. A dishwasher is expected these days, even in a two-person gîte, as are an iron and ironing board. Finally, on the safety front, don't forget fire extinguishers or blankets.

BATHROOMS

A white suite is best and baths, showers and curtains should, of course, be spotlessly clean and free of mould. Install an effective shower with a proper head and keep limescale at bay, especially in the many hard-water areas of France.

Do provide a non-slip mat for the bath, mirrors, cupboard or shelf space, hooks on doors and ample hot water. Installing a modern 'wet room' in your bathroom is a good idea as it gives disabled access, offers shared showers and is a selling point.

TECHNOLOGY

For time spent indoors, a CD and DVD player are expected, as are UK or English language channels on TV. Books and indoor games are also a good idea. An increasing number of visitors also want internet access so do provide this facility if you can, whether it's through a wireless connection or a PC using dial-up.

OUTDOOR LIVING

A swimming pool must comply with AFNOR (the French safety standards body) regulations for safety and maintenance, cleanliness and pH balance. Install a pool suitable in size for the number of guests. Also provide a cover and encourage guests to use it, ▶

Case study



Le Cosquer Huella provides luxury self-catering accommodation for couples

Samantha and Alan Eden: luxury hideaways for couples at Le Cosquer Huella

The Edens bought Le Cosquer Huella at Loqueffret, in Brittany's Finistère, with the aim of offering luxury self-catering for couples. Alan is a builder, so renovating the farmhouse to create two apartments was a welcome challenge.

Samantha grew up in the Cotswolds at her parents' B&B, so she planned facilities based both on that experience and what the couple would want for themselves.

"Couples holiday more often and through a longer season but our research showed that to get luxury accommodation in France they usually have to rent a bigger place than they need or settle for something tiny or more basic. We decided to offer real home comforts at a very competitive price," Samantha explains.

"People come to Brittany for traditional French countryside. So we combined romantic French rococo style furniture – including king-size beds with quality linen – with whirlpool baths, a hydro-massage shower, leather sofas and wood-burning stoves."

Indoor entertainment is comprehensive – satellite TV, hi-fi, DVD player – while each apartment has its own separate private garden with a barbecue and country views. Guests find a breakfast hamper on arrival and appreciate the fully equipped kitchen even though they usually eat out for main meals. Le Cosquer Huella attracts couples of all ages from many countries, and is especially popular with 'empty nesters'.

Le Cosquer Huella 147713 at www.frenchconnections.co.uk



Samantha and Alan Eden wanted to offer their guests real home comforts at a competitive price



The living area furnishings take traditional French style and give it a contemporary twist



All the rooms have been decorated to a high standard and are comfortably furnished

to keep the water clean and warm overnight and reduce evaporation.

Pool surrounds can look cold and bleak, so make yours comfortable and inviting. Provide ample loungers, mattress cushions, shades and small tables, and ensure that the grass is regularly mown and the garden well maintained. Visitors love al fresco dining, so provide a nice big table and plenty of chairs, a good-sized barbecue and outdoor lighting. Light-responsive and timed lamps are economical and practical. You could emphasise a no-smoking-indoors rule by providing ash trays outside.

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LOCAL INFORMATION

Guests want to know what's on and where to go. Gather information, maps and restaurant recommendations in a box or folder. Leaflets from local attractions and tourist offices are useful, listing markets, festivals and community events.

A guest book or *livre d'or* is essential and glowing feedback should be quoted in your advertising to encourage new business. Recent research has revealed that holidaymakers who book online trust the reviews and recommendations of fellow travellers more than any other source of information.

TOP TIP!

Spending as much as you can on good-quality fixtures and fittings will ensure that they last, making them more cost-effective in the long run

TEST BEFORE YOU SELL

Before you market your property, live in it yourself for a day or two – you'll discover what's missing or doesn't work and how improvements can be made. Once guests arrive, good communication and regular, reliable cleaning and inspection will avoid problems or complaints. ■

Glynis Shaw is joint MD of French Connections holiday rentals and property sales online.
www.frenchconnections.co.uk

Don't miss the next part on marketing your holiday let in the August issue

Case study

The swimming pool is a wonderful congregation point for visitors



A themed play area will capture the imagination of younger guests



Feeding the animals is a great way to pass an hour or two

Michelle Langan and Paul Clark: Fun-packed family gites at La Mirabelle

With two children of their own, Michelle and Paul have used imagination and inventiveness to turn La Mirabelle, their complex of four gites at Asnieres La Giraud in Charente-Maritime, into a youngsters' paradise.

Certainly, they offer well-equipped kitchens, modern bathrooms, TV, wifi and games inside the properties, along with private patios – but it's in the shared space outside that the fun really takes off.

"We decided what we and our friends would want from a family holiday and used that as our model," explains Paul. "The pool is very popular, of course, and the seven-a-side pitch where the neighbours come for football evenings. Our volleyball court is just finished and there is a zip wire in the woods.

"Then there's basketball, table tennis, snooker, bikes, scooters, rope swings, a sand boat, boules, darts and lots more. Kids love our campfires and parents appreciate our film shows because they get time to themselves."

The investment is significant but Michelle and Paul feel it's worthwhile for their own children's quality of life and for building quality customer relationships over time. "Half of last year's visitors immediately booked to return this year, so we know we're pleasing our market."



Michelle Langan and Paul Clark have developed a winning formula for family holidays

Mirabelle Gites 151321 at www.frenchconnections.co.uk