

Town & country

Revisiting the age-old question of whether rural or urban French life is best, **Glynis Shaw** decides that maybe somewhere in the middle might be the perfect solution

If you live in France and run a holiday let or *chambres d'hôtes*, do you choose a village location, surrounded by peaceful countryside, or a town location with a year-round buzz?

If you go for a town setting then remember that even some towns in France can seem pretty quiet. When you're offering accommodation, it makes sense to choose one that has a lot to draw visitors throughout the year.

Suitable towns tend to be historic and picturesque, with iconic landmarks or lots of interesting architecture. They are also likely to be close to beautiful countryside and may be set on a river, beside a lake or at the seaside. In travel terms, it's handy to be within striking distance of an airport or ferry port.

Your location in town does not have to be central – and hence premium property price – but it should be within walking distance of all the main attractions. A good view of the town from the property also helps. A holiday apartment with flexibility on booking period or a *chambres d'hôtes* can both work well as you're likely to attract people who want to stay for a weekend, a short break or a week or two.

Most people looking for village life in France are thinking of a typical British village, with shops,

amenities and active community life. However, what is often described as a French village may be little more than a hamlet or farming community inhabited by just a few extended families. Life may be very quiet, the community hard to break into and amenities few and far between.

Changing social habits and rural depopulation are causing thousands of cafés, bars and shops like *boulangeries* to close in small villages, necessitating a trip to town for visitors who want to

shop or eat out – and we know that holidaymakers in the French countryside love to be able to walk to such offerings.

So, if you seek village life, it's often best to look for what is technically a

small market town in a peaceful setting – one that has a mixed population, a choice of places to eat, a colourful market and plenty of facilities and events including the traditional village fête.

Your visitors will appreciate a place like this as much as you do. They may not come in winter, but in the summer months are likely to be happy to stay put for a week, just making a couple of day trips to explore the surroundings. ■

*Glynis Shaw is joint MD of French Connections holiday rentals and property sales online
Tel: 01580 819303
frenchconnections.co.uk*

The village still retains a really French feel. It's one of the prettiest in the area, full of quaint cobbled streets and colourful shuttered houses



Village house

Mark and Sarah Carter run a two-bedroom, two-bathroom holiday let in a 300-year-old house in one of the oldest parts of Caunes-Minervois in Aude.

"We always call Caunes-Minervois a village although it is, strictly speaking, a small medieval town close to Carcassonne and the extensive Minervois wine region at the foot of the Black Mountains.

"The village still retains a really French feel. It's one of the prettiest in the area and full of quaint cobbled streets and colourful shuttered houses. We bought our house as a holiday home seven years ago and moved to France permanently in 2012.

"It was Sarah's father who drew us to the village. He had a home here 25 years ago and was one of the first English people to live in Caunes-Minervois. He spoke French

and made an effort to endear himself to the locals – and now they have adopted Sarah and have

welcomed us with open arms.

"These days there is a whole community of English-speaking people living in the village and lots of businesses built by newcomers – and that makes life easier for us.

"We also really love the beauty of the place – the view of the Pyrénées covered in snow, the sense of peace and relaxation, which our visitors also enjoy. You can sit on our balcony and hear only the sound of birdsong and the abbey bells.

"The 8th-century abbey is quite famous and a draw for visitors, as are the local craft workshops, from wood turning to pottery and jewellery making.

"Throughout the spring to autumn months, events are held in the village including jazz concerts, classical music



evenings, local wine tasting and a sculpture and marble festival. In the surrounding countryside, people go hiking and mountain biking, so there is always something going on.

“The village has a number of restaurants, plus all the amenities of a bar/café, bank, shops, *boulangeries* and a weekly market that are too often missed in a French village these days.

“Our advice would be to live in a village that has these amenities so that you can survive a couple of weeks without needing to go into a big town.

“Here, we feel far from the city and even in August it doesn’t feel busy. In winter, some restaurants stay open, but there is a general feel of shutting down – and we don’t mind the contrast.

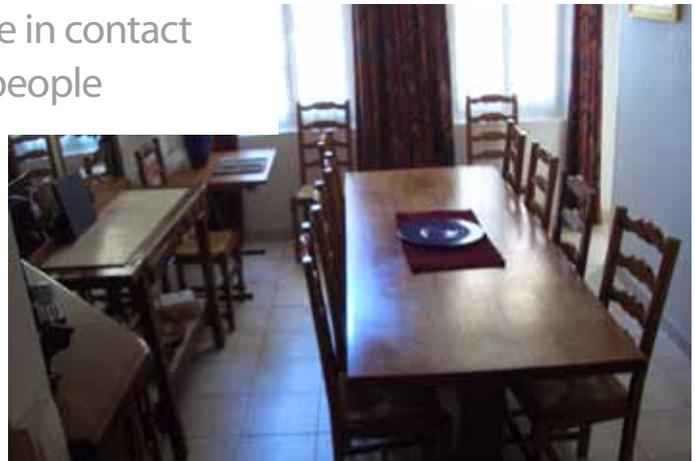
“We’re now running a *chambres d’hôtes* as well as our holiday let, so it’s a chance to rest after a busy season.”

The house sleeps six, from €650/week (ID 158890) ▶





When the house is not booked for weekly lets, I offer bed and breakfast. It's such a pleasure to be in contact with so many people



Town house

Carol Morris offers guests weekly rental or bed and breakfast accommodation at Les Chats, a house in the popular harbour town of Honfleur in Normandy.



"I was born and brought up for the first 18 years of my life in Southampton where the port was a main feature of many people's lives, and where water and the sea were ever present.

"When I first came to France, to Paris, many years ago in order to learn French, I really missed the sea. How I longed to see an expanse of open water, even though the River Seine is impressive as it winds its way through the capital.

"One day, when talking to a French person about this longing for the sea, he suggested

that I go to Honfleur, the point where the River Seine flows into the English Channel. So I took his advice – and discovered not only 16th-century

Honfleur, undamaged by the bombs of the D-Day landings of World War II, but also the whole of the stunning Normandy coast.

"Since then this area has been integrated into my life, culminating in the acquisition of a charming house near the centre of the town, built on a very small footprint but rising up four storeys.

"Although I have no actual documents regarding the date of construction, the house must date back over 200 years to a time when ground tax was paid according to the space taken up by the structure, so people ingeniously built tall, thin

houses to avoid taxes.

"The St-Leonard district of Honfleur used to house the men who worked on the railway which reached out into the middle of the river to unload the cargo boats docked there. It now has a road stretching alongside the recently renovated St-Leonard church, with every sort of shop one might need.

"On the other side of the church is a small park with a fast-flowing waterway leading into a covered pool where the residents did their washing many years ago. And all this next to the tourist office of Honfleur. As a town, Honfleur is so alive all year round but surrounded by the past.

"There are cafés and restaurants galore, lots of art and antique shops, concerts and theatre and so many places of interest to visit. The Musée Eugene Boudin celebrates the artist who heavily influenced Monet; the Satie House museum

reveals the man behind the music, while the Musée du Vieux Honfleur brings the past alive – and there is even a calvados museum. Plus, there are still a few working fishing boats as a reminder of tradition.

"The town is surrounded by beautiful countryside and coast – and to top it all, a 20-minute car ride away are the cross-Channel ferries at Le Havre. All this makes it ideal as a place to live and as a year-round holiday base, short break destination or weekend stopover.

"It is not surprising that Honfleur is the eighth most visited town in France, coming just after St-Tropez. When the house is not booked for weekly lets, I offer bed and breakfast, and it's such a pleasure to be in contact with so many people, so many nationalities, and, in the end, so many friends."

Les Chats sleeps 13, from €1,200/week (ID 105304)