Twinkle twinkle little star

Glynis Shaw spreads a bit of festive cheer with a preview of France's spectacular Christmas markets

Christmas, New Year and the winter months beyond can be profitable for property owners in France, informative for anyone thinking of relocating and enjoyable for Francophiles who love to visit.

To those for whom France is a favourite destination for summer holidays, a visit over the festive season will offer new delights to be discovered. Christmas is less commercial in France than in Britain, with a more joyous feel and less emphasis on big spending, especially for children. Decorations tend to be imaginative and tasteful and many shops offer gift-wrapping for free. Although the holiday itself is confined to just a few days, there are plenty of seasonal events that extend over several weeks. On Christmas Eve, city cathedrals and country churches are aglow with dozens of candles and filled with the sounds of carols and hymns at midnight mass– an uplifting tradition that visitors are welcome to share. On the same evening, families gather for the *Reveillon de Noël*, a late-night feast, and every region has its own specialities for this massive Christmas meal.

Christmas markets originated and developed to supply housewives with the necessary ingredients for their festive dishes

To market, to market

There is a big emphasis on cultural events at this time of year, including concerts, art exhibitions and dance, and many community events such as festivals and parades, to be enjoyed by all-comers. But among the greatest seasonal attractions all over France are the Christmas markets. Traditionally, housewives in rural France would spend much of the two weeks before Christmas preparing and baking typical local festive dishes. The markets originated and developed in order to supply them with all the ingredients they needed.

These days, Christmas markets have a broader scope but are still loaded with atmosphere – and visiting one can be a heady, sensuous experience. Savour smells, sights and sounds and get immersed in the language as you weave in and out of enticing stalls laden with one-off handcrafted gifts and delectable foodstuffs for delicious Christmas recipes. You can also find unusual candles, decorations, cards and ornaments for the Christmas tree.

Many of the larger festivals and Christmas markets are held in major towns and cities, the top four of which are Paris, Lille, Strasbourg and Avignon. All these – and many more – destinations are very accessible by train. Eurostar goes direct to Calais, Lille and Paris and Eurostar Connections link with TGV trains to another 61 towns and cities. Stopovers in Paris or Lille are allowed, making it possible to take in some sightseeing *en route* to other destinations. (French Connections combines rail travel with hotels and apartments for city breaks.)

For those who prefer to visit France after Christmas, travel, hotels and property rentals are cheaper in January and February – and so is shopping, if you catch the January sales. Some restaurants close for the first two weeks of the year but there is still plenty going on and opportunities for sightseeing, culture and outdoor activities.

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Even well outside traditional winter sports areas, sightseeing can be combined with skiing. Last year, winter visitors to our house in the Lot, near Cahors,

Make sure you research what events take place in your area throughout the winter

were surprised to find that they could get to the ski resorts in the Massif Central in just three hours by car.

When you're dreaming of relocating to France, winter is a good testing time. If you like a place in winter, there's a good chance you'll love it in the summer. Rent a self-catering holiday property and you'll get a feel for real French life – or better yet, have a week each in two properties in different locations. It's a great chance to get to know people, gather information and make new friends. Invite the neighbours – both British and French – for *aperitifs* from around six or seven in the evening. Whether you are a host or guest, do eat something first – if the party goes with a swing, it could extend to several hours in my experience!

Owners of holiday rental property in France should use these winter festivities to promote their property and attract bookings for the peak Christmas and New Year period (and for January and February, when bargains can be offered). If you are planning to let out your property over the winter period, it's usually best to list your property on a site with a dedicated section for winter lets.

> ***"Owners of holiday rental property should use these winter festivities to promote their property"***

Wherever you promote your rental property, it pays to take the trouble to research and describe all the seasonal attractions of your region and how to reach them, including festivities, culture and those irresistible Christmas markets. ❑

For more details of the Christmas markets mentioned here and others across France, along with train travel and seasonal property rentals visit: www.frenchconnections.co.uk

Christmas markets around France

LILLE

Place Rihour, 19 November to 30 December

The largest Christmas market in Northern France has been a tradition for centuries and is now a popular destination for British visitors because of the Eurostar link. Entertainments include a funfair, concerts and exhibitions and, of course, Father Christmas, who is available throughout the festival to be photographed with children. Over 50 stalls offer a vast range of local produce and original gifts. There is a spectacular event on the Saturday before Christmas, when Father Christmas 'falls' from the Chamber of Commerce's 80-metre-high Belfry.

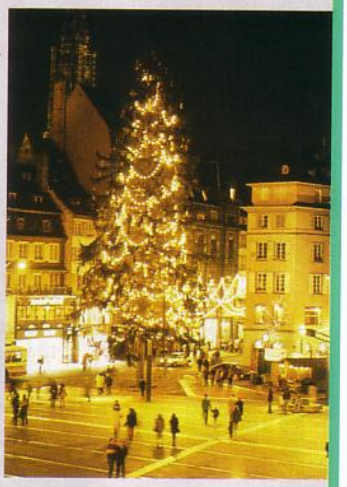
AVIGNON

Place de l'Horloge and Crillon square, 29 November to 30 December

This grand Christmas Market offers a wide variety of produce and gifts. There's also plenty of entertainment for all the family to enjoy, including traditional folk dances and costumes, games and parades.

Another must-see in Avignon at this time of year is the *Chemin des Crèches*, a very pretty walk through animated and illuminated nativity scenes. At the Palais du Roure, the seat for Provençal traditions, a collection of *santon* figures is set up and a Christmas table is prepared, to show the traditions of the Christmas Eve meal. A vast Provençal *crèche* is lovingly created in the lobby of the town hall, prepared by a master *santon* maker, showing all the characters and trades from a characteristic Provençal village. Finally, an ice-skating rink on the Place Pie is open to all from 3 December to 1 January.

STRASBOURG



Place Broglie and Rue de la Comedie, 29 November to 31 December 2008

The Alsace region is home to 35 Christmas markets, from Colmar to Mulhouse via Strasbourg. With a 430-year tradition, this is the oldest Christmas market in France and its setting – in front of Strasbourg's landmark Gothic cathedral – is breathtaking. Known as *Christkindelsmärik*, the market has a definite flavour of the Alsace region, strongly influenced by nearby Germany. Stalls sell *bredele* (Christmas biscuits), local produce, Christmas decorations and local handicrafts. The picturesque *la Petite France* neighbourhood is straight out of a fairytale, with black and white timber-framed buildings alongide the river. Here there are Christmas shops and a gingerbread bakery.

PARIS

France's capital features several Christmas markets. Most start in late November or early December and offer a stunning spectacle as well as a range of festive produce, craft items, decorations and presents.

- La Defense market is particularly impressive and boasts an ice rink which entices visitors to take to the ice or simply to watch.
- Les Halles is a famous traditional market in the city centre. With an array of gifts from chocolates to more unusual art and craft items, it attracts people from across France who enjoy doing their Christmas shopping here.
- Montparnasse is a market situated near the shopping centre in Maine Montparnasse.
- Place St-Sulpice features a merry-go-round that invites you to take a whirl on colourful *manèges de Noël* wooden horses.
- Noisy le Grand offers fun for adults and children alike with horse drawn carriage rides, sparkling decorations, hand crafted wooden toys and traditional glassware.