

Winter warmers

Christmas can be a lucrative period for holiday homeowners, as long as they plan ahead for the festive season, says **Glynis Shaw**

This year, many holidaymakers booked their summer holidays much later than usual. The same pattern may occur in the run-up to the festive season, as those thinking of hopping across the Channel firm up their trip only at the last minute. But owners of French rental properties can't afford to assume trends in this unpredictable market. It may seem early to be planning now, but if you're hoping to attract bookings for Christmas or New Year, it's important to be pro-active and keep ahead of the game.

It pays to know and understand your market – so why do people choose to spend Christmas or New Year in France, what do they expect and how can you best market your property to them?

One reason for heading across the Channel is to experience *la différence*. Noël is still a traditional affair in France, with evidence of both ancient pagan and Christian customs in markets, church services, nativity scenes and local rituals. Food, too, is different. The main meal of *le réveillon* is served on Christmas Eve following midnight Mass, and regional dishes vary. In Paris, oysters and *pâté de foie gras* are served, in Alsace, goose is a popular selection, while in Burgundy, turkey is served with chestnuts. For pudding, 'Christ cakes' – sugar cookies representing the Christ child – and larger cakes, usually shaped like a yule log, are dished up.

All over France, shoes are placed in front of the fireplace on Christmas Eve so Père Noël can fill them with gifts. Decorations in streets and homes are chic, with classic red bows and white lights much in evidence. In general, the emphasis is greatly on family and the whole affair seems bigger on style than spend when compared with the season in



Pictures of cosy Christmas scenes and snowy scapes, such as those used by La Castel's owners, will help pull in guests over the festive period



Britain. This has the advantage of making it rather less expensive!

Celebrations are also shorter, starting on Christmas Eve and all over by Boxing Day, with life returning quickly to normal. This arrangement has great appeal both to visitors who want a quiet time with little fuss and those who like to get out and about once the main event is over. However, during the crucial few days, virtually all shops and restaurants close down, so that self-catering accommodation can mean exactly that.

Dreaming of an easy Christmas

But it's also true that a major motivation for going away at this time is to escape much of the hard work at home and avoid the great rush of preparations. To resolve this apparent dilemma, an increasing number



of property owners are not only providing accommodation but going a step further to offer the whole Christmas package, so that guests arrive to find the house decorated and the fridge bulging with food and drink.

Jon Barnsley really pushes the boat out at Le Castel, a chateau guesthouse plus gîte set in four acres of secluded parkland near Normandy's cathedral city Coutances. For most of the year, guests can rent anything from one room on a bed and breakfast basis to the whole house for a party, wedding

or family holiday and then choose between fully catered, part catered or self catering. For the festive season, bookings are taken only for parties of six to 14 and guests almost always opt for full or part catering.

"The chateau is elaborately decorated before guests arrive", explains Jon. "We put up a three-metre high Christmas tree and dress the staircase and fireplaces with foliage from the garden. It's like going back in time to 1870 when the house was built and just perfect for Victorian party games like

Murder in the Dark and Sardines. We also make sure the château is cosy, with central heating and roaring log fires.

"We like to be adaptable and usually have discussions with our guests in advance about whether they would like goose or turkey for Christmas dinner. We usually end up with a happy mix of French and English cuisine. It works perfectly, as our guests love to have everything done for them – especially mothers, who are deeply relieved that they haven't got to cook."

Most Christmas bookings at Le Castel are made by parties of extended family, often including three generations, whereas New Year bookings are generally separate and comprise groups of friends. Last year 14 Russians celebrated together and New Year was seen in with a spectacular fireworks display.

Of course, for many property owners it's not practical to offer such a comprehensive package, but the principles of customer service and care can be applied to even the smallest gîte. It's still a good idea to liaise with guests in advance and do whatever is possible to help them. In even the simplest property, this might mean decorating the house, ordering food – including regional specialities that you can suggest – getting in logs and ensuring home comforts. Small touches that make a big impression are adding bowls of good quality Christmas mix pot pourri, leaving the makings of mulled wine with a recipe in the kitchen, putting down an extra rug and ensuring that duvets and blankets are sufficiently cosy.

It's also important to manage the expectations of guests by letting them know shopping customs, such as early Christmas Eve closing and the free gift wrapping so often available. Restaurant opening times are vital to assist planning and avoid disappointment. Make a real effort to find out from your tourist office everything that's going on in the area, especially local traditions and seasonal events. Provide guests with details of fêtes, festivals and Christmas markets along with church services, concerts, cultural events and classes. Include both spectator and participatory sports – and don't imagine that if you're not in a skiing area, you have nothing to offer.

Remember, too, that some

“ Noël in France is still a traditional affair, with the emphasis on family ”


visitors may actually want total peace and quiet or to escape the trappings of Christmas altogether. With so much spacious, uncrowded countryside, France can offer just this. This is where rural properties can pick up business – but do be honest about how much or little is going on in the area at this time of year. The emphasis here might be on scenery, nature and country walks.

Whatever facilities, extras and selling points your property offers, you need to be sure to market them well and get your listing noticed. Check whether the website through which you advertise has a special section devoted to Christmas and the New Year. At French Connections, we advise that it is worth paying a small extra to be listed in the specific seasonal section and so target enquiries for this market, stand out from the crowd and be quickly and easily found.

Revise the details in your property listing to emphasise the seasonal opportunities. List the extras that you can provide, with the emphasis on making it easy for guests, stating clearly where there is extra cost. Don't forget to mention local events and relevant dates, emphasise winter activities like walks, sledging or skating and detail indoor places of interest like museums, castles and churches or attractive town centres.

It's also worth posting any reviews from satisfied customers, as these definitely influence browsers. As do seasonal photographs – Christmas decorations, snow scenes, frosted twigs, a winter sunset. Convey the special mood of the place and make browsers really want to be there at a joyous time of year. □

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