

Secrets of success

Glynis Shaw compares notes on a selection of popular holiday lets in France to find out what makes them stand out from all the competition

There are thousands of self-catering properties in France so what makes some more successful than others? Could it be location, price, facilities and marketing strategies, or a combination of these and other factors? We selected 12 of the most successful holiday lets of the nearly 5,000 listed on the French Connections website and analysed a whole range of criteria to see whether trends emerged – the secrets of letting success.

If you are thinking of buying a letting property, the results of this survey may help you to focus on what holidaymakers are looking for. If you already own a property, then obviously you can't change its location, but you might find some pointers for extra facilities you could provide or active marketing techniques you could employ to ensure greater success.

REGION

Four of our selected properties turn out to be in Dordogne or on the Charente-Dordogne border, three are in Tarn-et-Garonne and two are in the Hérault department



Le Camus is a child-friendly gîte holiday rental in Brittany, which is easy to drive to

of Languedoc-Roussillon. One is in Côtes-d'Armor in Brittany, another in Aveyron and a third is in Lot-et-Garonne. These are all known to be popular destinations but the concentration in the west and south-west is really noticeable

– as is the fact that few are close to the sea. It seems that holidaymakers want warm weather but not necessarily on the coast – and many may choose a location that allows them to drive rather than fly.

All 12 of the properties also have attractive outdoor lounging and dining areas with a barbecue

LOCATION

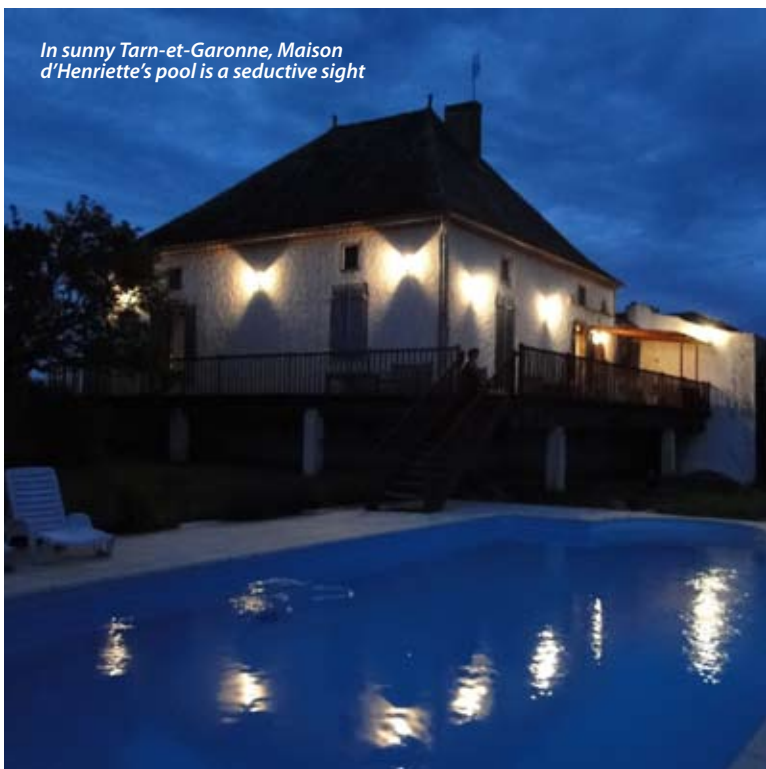
Every single one of our properties is in a quiet rural location, surrounded by countryside and nature, so they offer privacy, tranquillity and beautiful surroundings. But none of them could be described as remote because, without exception, they are within walking distance or a very short drive of a village that has at least a few amenities such as a baker, bar, restaurant or weekly market. They are also all easily accessible to bigger towns offering holidaymakers the opportunity to eat out, shop, mix with French people, speak the language and take in places of interest.

PROPERTY TYPE

This is where our analysis became really interesting as all 12 properties turned out to be period stone houses – no fewer than eight of them former farmhouses. Nine are individual houses, while one has two gîtes and two have three gîtes. All 12 have been sympathetically converted to retain an abundance of interior character with features such as exposed beams, stone walls and tiled floors. They have been furnished and equipped to a high-quality standard, in a style that combines period tradition with simple modern lines and up-to-the-minute comforts.

SIZE AND PRICE

The majority of our popular properties are aimed at typical families, sleeping between four and six people. Four of them can accommodate larger family parties and groups, one for eight people, one 10, one 14 and one 15. Prices all seem to represent good value for the quality and facilities on offer, ranging in low season from the cheapest at £150 for six people per week to the most expensive at £1,500 for 14 people per week and in high season from £450 for six to £3,700 for 14 per week. It's also interesting to note that the average price per guest at full capacity in high season across all



In sunny Tarn-et-Garonne, Maison d'Henriette's pool is a seductive sight

SWIMMING POOL

Having noted that the successful properties are mostly some distance from the sea, you would expect a swimming pool to be important – and you would be right. Ten of the properties have their own swimming pool in a private garden and most are for the exclusive use of guests who are staying, while some are shared with the owner or a few other guests. Of the two houses that have no pool, one is close to a river, lakes and beaches, and the other is on the doorstep of a lake with a swimming beach. All the properties also have attractive outdoor lounging and dining areas with a barbecue and plentiful outdoor furniture.



Pont Jalbert is in a tranquil Aveyron setting but is within easy reach of towns such as Najac and Cahors



La Belle Etoile in Charente is well-equipped with pool and Wi-Fi



Mas Laquet in Lot-et-Garonne is a gorgeous old farmhouse with wooden beams and rustic charm

properties/units is £160 per week or around £23 a night. Everyone wants good value for money in the present economic climate and, for this price, guests are enjoying far more space, privacy and luxury than they would in a hotel of similar price in most popular European holiday countries.

OTHER FACILITIES

Having been renovated or converted within the last few years, most of the properties have quite new kitchens and bathrooms and all have modern fittings that offer more than the basic requirements. In addition to the basic cooker and washing machine, there are microwaves and dishwashers, even tumble dryers, and the bedrooms have such extras as a hairdryer.

For entertainment, there are games, DVD player, TV with English satellite stations and Wi-Fi internet connection so guests can use their own laptop. Most also have heating and some have a wood-burner in the lounge. A specific extra at one property is a fully-equipped gym with training advice available, another offers home-grown organic vegetables and cooked meals to order at nominal cost; one has a paddock for older children's play and another provides river fishing.

Most of the owners are living on-site or close by or their property is run by a local manager

so guests have the reassurance of knowing that their queries can be answered and their needs met.

MARKETING

All these successful owners are very proactive with their

marketing on the website and make regular use of techniques for getting their property noticed, attracting early bookings and selling any remaining weeks of the season. The first method they use is special offers, giving a

discount or incentive for, say, Easter or summer bookings in the early weeks of the year and then making offers for any unsold weeks as the year goes on. Special offers are listed in a dedicated section of the website and highlighted in search results and on the property's page, so they are really noticed by site visitors.

The second method is using 'featured property' slots, which means that a photo and description of the house are featured either on the site home page or in our regular newsletters, so they are quite hard to miss! Thirdly, these owners often have guestbook comments displayed on their page so that potential holidaymakers can instantly see honest, vetted user reviews and gain extra confidence to book. ■

ONLINE PRESENTATION

The successful owners have created attractive and informative online pages for their property advertisement. Firstly, they make full use of large format photographs.

While just two display five or six photographs, the other 10 display anything from 12 to 32 images, showing the house exterior, the pool and garden, the main rooms, views from the house and of local places of interest or natural beauty. In this way, they give potential guests a full picture of the accommodation, entertainment and holiday opportunities.

They also give an appealing written description of the property and its features and the character and amenities of the nearest village and town. Typical examples of pleasing language used by Sean May, the owner of Laborie Cottages in the Dordogne, for instance, are: "The salt-water filtration system we use is more environmentally friendly and much kinder on your skin and eyes than traditional chemical methods." And: "Laborie is located in the famous Dordogne valley, a beautiful French landscape of rolling hills, cliffs, forests, medieval hill villages and delightful towns."



The Laborie farmhouse and cottages in Dordogne are displayed with many photos of the house, garden and surrounding area

Glynis Shaw is joint MD of French Connections. The properties that took part in the survey can all be viewed on www.frenchconnections.co.uk and are Laborie Holiday Cottages, Dordogne; La Belle Etoile, Charente/Dordogne; La Metairie Haute, Dordogne; Le Four à Sel, Dordogne; Cante Gril, Tarn-et-Garonne; Maison d'Henriette, Tarn-et-Garonne; Sérénité, Tarn-et-Garonne; Le Pressoir, Hérault; Les Trois Oliviers, Hérault; Le Grand Camus, Côtes-d'Armor; Pont Jalbert, Aveyron and Mas Lacquet, Lot-et-Garonne