

# Here comes the bride

**Glynis Shaw** digs out her best hat and heads off into the French countryside to find out what makes the perfect wedding venue and how you can help make a couple's big day special

The wedding industry was worth around £8 billion in the UK last year. With an average spend of between £20,000 and £30,000 on each event, the opportunities for couples to tailor a big day in their own unique style have never been greater.

Venues such as manors, country houses and castles are in demand for their privacy, romance and beautiful settings – and many couples are willing to travel with their family and friends for a 'destination wedding'.

Romantic France, with its beautiful countryside, great food and wine and easy accessibility, is an obvious contender as a destination but what does it take to successfully host weddings at your property in France?

The market for large, formal weddings (typically with 50-150 guests) is extremely competitive and demands a high level of professionalism, which will lead to a distinct specialism.

## INFORMALITY IS KEY

If you own a large country house holiday rental property where your main bookings are groups of, say,

15 to 20, then you are already likely to be hosting the occasional anniversary or birthday celebration. So, the addition of a few informal weddings during the season could be manageable, demanding similar skills and input, although there might perhaps be more work and greater complexity.

The key here is informality and it's best to aim for the simplicity and romance of a '*mariage champêtre*', where the bride, groom and guests are focused more on relaxation and fun, letting their rural French adventure unfold, than on ensuring that every detail is nailed down.

The big difference between weddings and corporate events – or even family holidays – is the much higher level of emotion involved! You will need to listen to the couple's requirements and empathise well. It's good to offer them an advance out-of-season visit for a night or two to check out your place and the area and discuss details face to face. You could make a charge that is refunded if they book the event.

In addition to accommodation costs, you can charge a fee for

planning and arranging the wedding, based on your time, plus any costs such as transport. Be prepared to find extra accommodation locally if the number of guests exceeds the capacity of your own property.

Even the simplest wedding needs thorough planning. Be very clear whether you or the couple are responsible for sourcing and booking each of the elements of the ceremony, reception and any associated events included in our checklist (see right). After the initial visit, keep in touch regularly.

Most couples who hold a ceremony in France have already had a legal marriage at a registry office in the UK and are looking for a blessing with a suitable celebrant on their big day at your place. This is the best plan as a legal marriage in France is complex, with residency requirements.

## WEBSITE SERVICES

Many couples choose France because they want to enjoy authentic French food and wine, so the wedding meal is crucial and it's probably best to get in a local caterer who you know to be really good and who will cook, serve and clear up, leaving you free to attend to the details of the day and respond to any queries.

Remember that marketing your wedding service is important so include both information and photos in your online listing and your own website, if you have one, and place entries in your host website services directory and activity holiday pages. At your property, leave prominent information for all guests to see and pass on. ■

Glynis Shaw is joint managing director of French Connections [www.frenchconnections.co.uk](http://www.frenchconnections.co.uk)



Garden wedding reception at Le Moulin des Agrilles



The sumptuous bridal bedroom



The garden's a scenic backdrop for photographs



Josette sources local flowers for the reception



Garden wedding reception at Le Moulin des Agrilles



Le Moulin des Agrilles

## CASE STUDY: INFORMAL WEDDINGS AT A CHARENTE-MARITIME COUNTRY HOUSE

During the last 11 years, Josette and Rod Cooke have offered comfortable, luxury self-catering accommodation at Le Moulin des Agrilles, an attractive *maison de maître* set in seven acres on the edge of Lorignac, a small village near Royan in Charente-Maritime. With eight bedrooms sleeping up to 16 and a cottage for four, the property can sleep 20 and further accommodation is easily available locally so it regularly attracts big groups and celebrations – including weddings.

“We host weddings with the emphasis on fun and informality,” explains Josette. “This is a country house, not a château, and our couples appreciate the relaxed atmosphere where they can truly spend time with their family and friends, making their wedding last 24 or even 48 hours.”

Josette invites prospective couples over to stay free of charge in her adjoining small cottage, which sleeps an extra four people, feeling that making the trip demonstrates their commitment. She then takes them around to see the area and the various sources for all the wedding elements, firmly believing that the most demanding and important is the celebrant. She puts the couple in touch with the regional head of the Anglican church and they then usually arrange for a local retired Anglican vicar to host the blessing service in a nearby simple Catholic church by the harbour at Port Maubert.



Rod and Josette Cooke

“Most couples get legally married at a UK registry office and come over here immediately afterwards, staying for a week. Other guests tend to come and go during the week, so good organisation is crucial and flow charts are much in use! I provide meals for family and guests whenever they are wanted but I always get in a caterer for the wedding meal – and I always have a backup supply of wine available, just in case it runs out.”

Josette has discovered exactly where to go for all the wedding elements, including the market for flowers if the bride wants to do her own table decorations. She knows a range of local musicians and bands that can keep people dancing through the night and they are booked according to the couple’s musical taste. Even the previous owner of the house has been happy to provide transport in his two vintage Citroën cars.

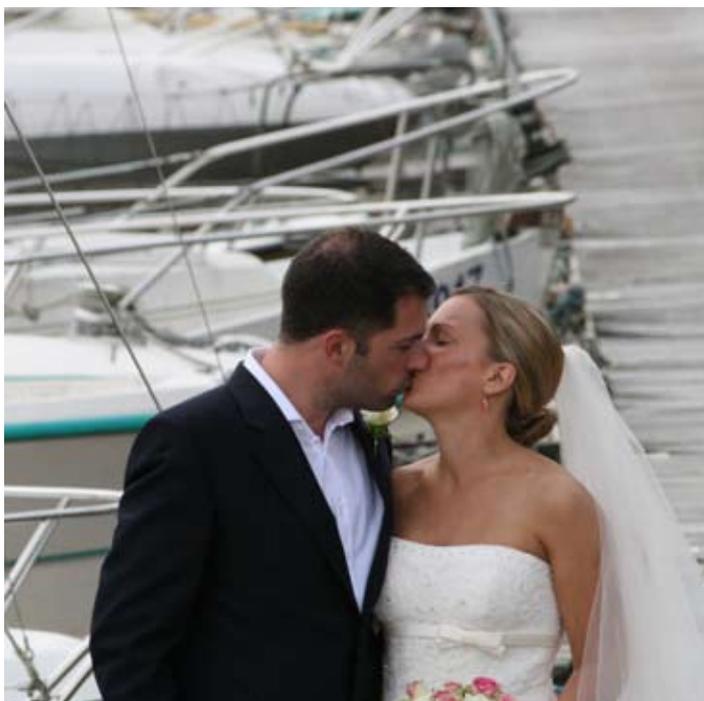
After the blessing service, the guests return to Le Moulin des Agrilles and the couple emerge from the house to waiting guests in the garden for photos and mingling. Later, the meal is eaten in the house or, ideally, the garden or a marquee. Extra tables and chairs are hired locally if necessary and lighting is placed in the trees and candles on the tables for a rustic romantic feel, setting the scene for the fun to continue through the night.

During the wedding party’s stay, they enjoy the swimming pool, tennis court and *boules* and Josette often sets up mini-golf and arranges a wine-tasting. There is a children’s play area and the house has plenty of equipment to cater for small children and babies, all adding to guests’ comfort and relaxation.

“Couples really appreciate the fact that holding their wedding at Le Moulin helps both families and their friends to get to know each other well and have a host of happy memories. And the connection can continue. One couple who got married here recently returned for a holiday with their baby.” ID 3191 on [www.frenchconnections.co.uk](http://www.frenchconnections.co.uk)

### WEDDING CHECKLIST

- Celebrant – usually a local Catholic or Anglican priest
- Appropriate venue for the ceremony – local church or your garden perhaps
- Transport for couple and guests to and from church
- Flowers for bouquets and buttonholes
- Photographer – either local or brought with couple
- Photographic locations with attractive backdrops and suitable light
- Food and drink for the wedding breakfast
- Table decorations, flowers, lighting and other decorations for the room, outdoor space or marquee
- Musicians or recorded music
- Wedding cake
- Meals that may be required by the wedding party during their stay
- Activities and outings for the wedding party
- Flowers for the bridal bedroom
- Co-ordination of guest arrival times
- Extra local accommodation for parties that exceed your capacity



A photo opportunity at Port Maubert