

Warm welcome



Careful preparation will ensure that letting out your second home gets off to a flying start. *Glynis Shaw* offers some essential advice

If you plan to offer holiday lets at your beloved second home, you may be feeling both enthusiastic and a little apprehensive. This is a big change to make and, as is true of any venture, the transition will be much smoother if you make sure that you are well prepared with a clear plan and realistic expectations in three key areas: financial, practical and emotional.

FINANCIAL PLANNING

Most owners take the decision to let their property in order to generate an amount of income, so finances are paramount, and it is important to be professional and businesslike in your planning. You can try taking an amateurish approach – but don't expect people to book for a second time.

Ask yourself: do you simply want to cover expenses, or do you want to make a surplus? Start your financial planning by researching how much rent you could feasibly get per week. Be realistic in comparing your property with others on the market, taking into account kerb appeal, location, facilities and overall quality. Then work out how many letting weeks you need to achieve your target. You might set expectations at three levels:

- 1 The number of weeks you need in order to make a 'must-have' return
- 2 The number of weeks you need in order to generate a 'nice to have' amount
- 3 The number of weeks you need in order to provide the icing on the cake

My tip on pricing is to keep it simple. Holidaymakers do not like being faced with complicated extras for laundry, cleaning or bed linen, so work out your costs and set a single inclusive price for the week.

Seasonal variations are, of course, expected, with top rates usually charged for the month of August and over the Christmas period. But you may also graduate prices with a second



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rate for June-July and September, and then a further third, lower rate for spring and autumn. If you're thinking about offering longer winter lets of a period of a month or more, then these are usually charged by the month.

PRACTICAL PREPARATION

When it comes to practical preparations, take a good look round and assess the property as though seeing it for the first time as a holidaymaker. Remember that guests want to feel that they can make the place their own for the duration of their stay, and they expect good quality at excellent value.

Make sure that the kitchen is well equipped with plenty of cutlery and crockery and that the oven is sparkingly clean. In the bedrooms, make sure that you provide quality mattresses with nice bed linen and extra

touches such as lamps and a full-length mirror.

In living areas, the aim is to provide comfort, personality and colour, but make sure the space doesn't look busy or cluttered – remove items that are too personal or may be an accident risk. For leisure, English-language television channels are important, and a CD and DVD player, as well as some books and games, are often a welcome addition. Internet access is also very important, as guests like to hook up to Wi-Fi with phones and tablets.

If there is a garden, provide some games or toys, and if you have a swimming pool, equip it with loungers and water toys. Ensure as well that the swimming pool complies with French regulations for maintenance and safety.

The next practical preparation is marketing, which it makes sense to do online. In time, you might want to create your own website, but



it's quicker, more practical and effective to advertise on an established listing site.

Advertising is extremely important, so do plan and budget realistically for your marketing. Include photography, long-term hosting on your chosen website, phone calls to customers, contingencies for promotions like special offers and last-minute deals to fill any empty weeks, and any welcoming extras like wine when your guests arrive.

When planning your advert, try to consider the expectations of the holidaymaker. Of course, everyone makes their own individual interpretation, which means five people could read your page and each expect something different from the property. So be very clear in your statements and description, and aim to give information that is interesting, informative and enthusiastic at the same time, and yet cannot be misconstrued.

It's also good to browse and compare with the competition. What else comes up when you search for, say, a three-bedroom house in the Dordogne, or a seaside apartment in Normandy? Check how your price and description compare with other properties, and think about how you can make your own more visible. Your lead photo and thumbnail description are crucial in drawing people in to discover more – and then they really want to

have the property sold to them, with further stunning photographs alongside an honest but enticing description.

EMOTIONAL PREPARATION

Some owners find it easy to be detached in viewing their property as a business, while for others the change can be quite emotional. How do you cope with the thought of strangers sleeping in your bed and delving into your kitchen cupboards? You can handle this through both action and attitude.

Take action by doing simple things, such as keeping separate mattress toppers, pillows and bed linen for your exclusive use. Put away your most precious ornaments and photos, and possibly even cooking bowls and vases. Make sure you have a good local cleaner and, if you are going to visit, ensure that the house has been cleaned and any glitches fixed after guests depart, and before your own arrival if you want to use the property.

Try to accept positively the reality of letting, by deciding that you are now in the hospitality business and it's fine for other people to be there at certain times. If you love your property, you can gain satisfaction from the idea of sharing that enjoyment with others and receiving some financial benefit. The vast

majority of guests will respond by showing respect for your home.

Do also pass on to visitors your enthusiasm for the area by including – in your advert and at the property – details of local attractions and events, such as beaches, markets, festivals and historic buildings. When guests arrive, they will be pleased to find maps of the area and information or recommendations for nearby restaurants, cafés and bars that you can pass on as tried and tested.

Finally, it may feel like a big step to enter the letting business, but rest assured that there is still a market for self-catering property in France, with good quality facilities and great value. Make the presentation of your property good, conscientiously monitor and reply to enquiries, and you could do well in your first year. After that, then you can work on repeat bookings and recommendations for success in the longer term. **LF**

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