

# Variations on a theme

Did you know?

In 1955, the National Federation of Gîtes de France was founded and the first guide, containing 146 gîtes, was published

**Faith Warn** meets three Brits who have combined gîte rentals with their love of art, exercise and IT to create a successful business

## Art and hospitality

From the time she was a student in agricultural college, Alison Smith (below) had a dream. She wanted to run a smallholding and serve fresh food to people gathered convivially around her table. A few years later, now with teenage children, she studied art, design and illustration, gained a teaching qualification and a job at a Leicestershire secondary school. Now the dream grew to include inspiring creativity in those who don't feel themselves to be artistic.

Then a visit to a friend in Normandy spurred Alison into action and, a few hectic months later, she was back with her dog Fudge as the proud owner of four farmhouse gîtes – the two-bedroom Le Pressoir and three one-bedroom properties – all oozing traditional country charm. The complex is at La Foucaudière, a restored 300-year-old Normandy farmhouse between Flers in Orne and Vire in Calvados.

Set in rolling countryside close to the coast, Le Pressoir and its companion gîtes offer an oasis of calm. It's the perfect setting, says Alison, for her courses in print and feltmaking. 'The excitement of creating here is that we gather visual information from our surroundings – photographs, flowers, the colours of nature – and use them in print. You don't have to be brilliant at drawing. There are many ways to make an image that goes to print and the quirky and unusual are often the most effective.'

Feltnaking, too, is achievable and satisfying for those who think they have no artistic talent. 'It's all about colour,' explains Alison, 'and although an abstract method, the end result is practical for making bags and scarves as well as framing on the wall.'

At Alison's courses, guests develop their artistic skills in a relaxed atmosphere. Her approach is flexible and her experience allows her to tailor tuition to individual needs. She guides participants to develop their own ideas into a personal piece of work using the printmaking, mixed media and textiles techniques.

This year, Alison is also offering day courses open

to residents and anyone visiting the area. Her Tuesday-morning workshops introduce printmaking techniques and run during July and August at a cost of €20 (£17.90) a session. Art for Kids on a Wednesday morning gives 2 hours of creative fun for €10 (£8.95).

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When not teaching art or servicing the gîtes, Alison is busy producing food from her garden. In general, guests can be as private or sociable as they choose – but one evening last summer summed it all up for Alison. 'All the gîtes were full, British families and French people were sitting together round a big table under the stars, someone played guitar, everyone was singing and I thought – my dream is coming true.'





David and Nina Oakman

### Gym workouts and reflexology

Nina Oakman is a woman who likes to be on the move. A keen runner and cyclist, lover of the countryside and being outdoors, she was never going to be tied to a desk. Little

surprise, then, that in her professional life she chose to qualify in aerobics instruction and personal fitness – and followed that with training in reflexology.

After pursuing her active lifestyle in Tanzania for 20 years, Nina, together with husband David, moved back to Britain. But Oxford's dreaming spires left her restless and craving for wide open spaces. In 2005, the couple hired a car in Nice. 'As we drove over the thirteenth-century bridge in Najac,' says Nina, 'I knew this was where we would be. It's a *bastide* town with history and atmosphere – and the countryside around is glorious. I'm reminded of the Scottish borders.'

Soon after, the couple purchased Pont Jalbert, a lovely old French farmhouse with original beams and exposed stone walling close to the village of La Fouillade, Aveyron. Living in the converted barn in the grounds, they renovated the farmhouse, furnished it as a luxury self-catering gîte to accommodate up to ten people, landscaped the garden and installed a swimming pool.

For many people, that would have been the end of the enterprise, but the dynamic Nina went on to build a professional, state-of-the-art gym, choosing a wide combination of top quality aerobic equipment to her own specification and a sound system with a selection of workout music. Now, it is available for guests to use free of charge as part of their holiday, with advice and instruction from Nina for those who want it.

'All types of guests use the gym,' explains Nina, 'from people in their 60s to parents of small children and youngsters. If someone gets switched on, it's great to help them produce results. I remember a publican who stayed here – he went home after a week looking like his younger brother.'

Nina will also accompany visitors who want to cycle, walk or run in the area – or simply provide them with maps and advice on routes.

But it's not all action at Pont Jalbert. As a fully qualified reflexologist, Nina also offers reflexology treatment, with fees by the session, along with foot massage and back and neck massage to help people wind down fast and de-stress. This emphasises for her the complete relaxation that she likes guests to feel. 'Everything about the farmhouse is top quality and with so much available on site, perhaps I shouldn't be surprised at how happy our visitors are and how little they seem to go out!'

### Website skills

Five years ago, Martin Woods lived with his wife Allison Carnichael and two sons in Gillingham, Kent and worked in London as a business manager. Before that, he had been a trainer in IT and management skills.

Now the family lives in the village of Couiza in Aude, close to Carcassonne, where they run *Mode d'Artiste gîtes* – three apartments in Couiza and a separate three-bedroom house in Laval near Quillan. What motivated their move? 'The sunny climate of southern France, the beauty of the area and a desire for ourselves and, more particularly, our two boys – who are home educated – to learn French.'

The spacious apartments and house are well equipped and furnished in a bright, modern style with lush outdoor terraces. Allison's skills in art and graphic design are reflected in the vibrant colours and original contemporary paintings. Given Martin's background, it seemed obvious to him to install computers and broadband internet access in his properties so that visitors can stay in touch, play games, do research or writing. ▶

## Drawing the crowds

Glynis Shaw of French Connections gives five top tips for using your skills to run successful activity holidays

- Do your research in advance and tailor what you can offer to best suit the market
- Establish the cost of set-up including all bills and taxes and make sure you can afford not to struggle on a shoestring
- Make full use of your passion, take a professional approach and hone your communications skills
- Have a fallback position. Be prepared to be flexible and innovative if at first you don't succeed
- Give guests a sense of achievement. If they get a lot out of it, they'll tell their friends

**This page:** Pont Jalbert in Aveyron is home for David and Nina Oakman and their many guests

## Fact file

All properties can be found at [www.frenchconnections.co.uk](http://www.frenchconnections.co.uk)

La Foucauderie: ID 150011  
 Pont Jalbert: ID 103662  
 Mode d'Artiste: ID 5271

As well as developing the holiday lets, Martin has made use of his IT skills in France. He has created several websites and continues to develop this work. He formed a website design business and found that he has a natural flair for search engine optimisation, known as SEO for short – the process of creating websites that appear high on the list of results with search engines like Google or Yahoo.

'I had also enjoyed the training role and found that I had an easy rapport with participants, so I decided to offer an SEO training course to our visitors so that they could benefit by developing their own successful websites.' Participants in the holiday courses get a 10 per cent discount on their gîte

accommodation and a substantial SEO and keyword analysis report emailed to them in advance. 'If you have the technical knowledge to create a simple website, you can easily understand and implement the report,' adds Martin, reassuringly.

In Cousiza, Martin then gives participants 4 hours of face-to-face, one-on-one search engine optimisation training, discussing the report in detail and



demonstrating how different aspects of SEO work. Examples are shown of how to create websites that appear high on search engines, using methods that are proven to be effective.

The holiday courses at Mode d'Artiste offer visitors more than the chance to develop a hobby or interest; Martin is passing on professional skills with potentially profitable applications. As he explains: 'I have a deep affinity with the old adage "Teach a man to fish and you feed him for life."' ❖



*Alison and Martin*