

Holiday let advice



When you're running a holiday let business you need to be able to turn your hand to anything. You'll be surprised at how many transferrable skills you already have, says *Glynis Shaw*

Running holiday lets involves a number of varied skills, and when you look at them as an analysed list, they may seem rather daunting. However, if you just pause to consider your life and work experience in the broadest context, then you will probably realise that you have acquired more skills than you thought. Also, if you are a couple, each person may have different and complementary skills, thereby encompassing a broader spectrum.

Remember too that you don't have to possess all these skills before you embark on running a holiday let. Most owners of our holiday lets say they have actually enjoyed learning new skills as they went along – either fast, under the pressure of necessity, or more slowly and deliberately. So acquiring the necessary skills is likely to be accomplished through a combination of formal training and learning on the job.

PROPERTY SEARCH

The business of finding a property in France, setting up a holiday let and managing bookings will proceed much more smoothly if you plan in advance. When it comes to finding the property, certainly do research on areas and locations, but also be aware of over-planning. It is wise to go property searching with a wish list that would suit guests – a parking space, a garden for families, a kitchen large enough for a table and a small shop in walking distance.

We hear so many stories from owners in France that start along the lines of "We'd been systematically searching for months and then serendipity stepped in, one coincidence lead to another and we took one look and fell in love, just knew it was meant to be." So perhaps we should add the skill of trusting your intuition when it really counts!

BUSINESS SKILLS

Anyone who has run a business before will have transferable skills to make projections, create a business plan, handle budgets and

manage finances. However, when deciding how to set up and register as a business specifically in France, you'll still need to consult a French accountant or an other expert to make sure you are clear and protected in issues such as inheritance, domicility and taxation.

Running a business in France is simplified by the option of setting up as a *micro-entreprise*. This is essentially a form of self-employment and has the advantage of greatly simplified obligations as far as taxation and bookkeeping are concerned.

When in France, it's wise to also develop the skill of patience in dealing with red tape and maintaining a positive outlook. Bureaucracy may prompt some exasperation but always keep in mind what you also love about the French way of life.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

You are in the hospitality business, so people skills and great customer service are essential. Be friendly and open to having people around and helping to make their holiday the best possible experience. Keep putting yourself in the place of your guests and remember how important their holiday is to them. Be willing to go the extra mile. Clear communication, tolerance and flexibility will help you keep any challenges in proportion.

Sensitivity is also very important when interaction is required. Some guests love to mix and hope their children will make friends, while others want to maintain their privacy and peace. Your skill lies in sensing which is applicable when you first meet your guests.

One owner says that his best idea was to have Saturday arrival, Sunday as a quiet day for settling in and on Monday hold a welcome evening where guests meet over a communal meal and get in the holiday mood.

ONGOING MAINTENANCE

Practical DIY skills are very helpful. However, construction, plumbing and electrical work is best carried out by a qualified tradesperson. A



knowledge of these trades will be useful when looking at quotes. If you want to keep your costs down, doing your own gardening, painting and decorating will help.

One of our owners had only done a bit of basic DIY when he moved to France, but he quickly learned more skills as he could see that the costs of annual maintenance would spiral if he did not do the work himself. If you really are unsuited or physically unable, look into the possibility of offering a friend or relative a holiday in return for their skills.

FRENCH LANGUAGE SKILLS

Building work usually involves buying materials at French stores and builders' merchants, which demands a fast learning curve in the use of specialist French terms!

Getting to grips with the French language is the best way of making your journey to

becoming a successful business enjoyable and straightforward. Many owners of holiday lets say that learning to speak the French language, at least to a conversational level, enriches their lives in the country and the local community – it's definitely good for business. Speaking French means you can assist guests, deal with tradespeople and integrate with the community; combining a business move with an enhanced quality of life.

To improve your skills, join a class in the UK or France, take an immersion course or try other methods of learning online (www.michelthomas.com or www.bbc.co.uk/languages/french). Even if your accent never seems like a native one, try to drop your self-consciousness and fear of mistakes, grasp the nettle and give your skills a go. It's not accuracy but effective communication that is key! Locals will appreciate your efforts – learning the language

will be time well spent. A knowledge of the language will also help enormously when filling in essential paperwork.

EYE FOR INTERIOR DESIGN

Furnishing and presenting your property demands a good eye for interior design, so that rooms look pleasant, welcoming and bright but are not cluttered or too personal. Check out local buildings open to the public for French flair, get inspiration from *brocantes* or browse magazines and websites and visit stores that have room settings. Visual skills are also useful for planning the garden and adding colourful touches close to the house.

When it comes to marketing, good photographs are vital, and digital photography has made this much easier for even those with the most basic photography skills, as you can experiment and adjust. Get to know how a

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room looks through the camera lens and use movable accessories to get the best look.

Create an interior that suits your desired client base and one that is easy to clean.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Marketing your property is the key to success and it requires good communication. Know who makes up your target market, give them clear and enticing information and good support in holiday planning. Don't assume that your customers have any knowledge of the area - provide information even if it seems very obvious. You would be wise to be aware of the marketing that your competitors do and ensure you are one step ahead.

In your online advertisements or website you need to describe the property and the attractions and potential of the local area with clarity, economy and enthusiasm, which will be infectious to potential guests. Posting your advert and monitoring enquiries also needs basic computer skills.

When holidaymakers enquire by phone or email, communicate in an efficient yet friendly manner, and again be clear with information such as travel options. When on-site, adopt a friendly tone in any instruction notes left in the house, and in personal interaction, always be polite, cheerful and positive. Never, ever be tempted to share your troubles with guests! **LF**

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