

Cold comforts



Glynis Shaw offers useful advice on preparing your French holiday home for use during the winter months

Winter is approaching and the pleasure of hopping over to spend time at your holiday home in France must be put on hold as the property is closed down for the colder months. But is that really true? Why wait for the blooming of spring to make use of the property in which you have invested time, money and emotion, and where you love to savour the joys of France? With some forethought and organisation, you could make the house both safe and secure, and ready for winter visits.

Externally, practical tasks to prepare for winter remain the same regardless of whether you will be using the property or not. Of course you will need to put the swimming pool into winter mode, protect any delicate plants with sacking and clear the gutters to prevent them from blocking. It's also a good idea to insulate external pipes, cover the water meter and drain any outside taps – and you may need to check the roof for loose or broken tiles; and fill and render any cracks in the external walls.

When it comes to preparing inside the property, this needs to be based on an understanding of the winter climate in your area. For instance, if frequent, dramatic thunder

storms occur, you might disconnect electricity, internet and phones. If it is safe for power to be on, you may be tempted to leave lights on timers when absent. This can certainly be appropriate for, say, a town apartment, but most country properties are pretty isolated, and it is better to close a house with shutters. They do indicate absence but are more secure. External security lights with movement sensors are worthwhile.

Another important security precaution is to let your neighbours, and the local *mairie*, know that you will be away but returning – and possibly ask the *gendarmerie* to keep an eye on things. Also, arrange for somebody to collect and send on your post. It's a good idea to make sure utility bills come to your address in the UK or are paid by direct debit in order to avoid any oversights.

Of course, you will have to pay for phone and internet availability even when the house is not in use, but I would advise against trying to put a stop on the line once it is up and running, as it can take ages to reinstate, especially in rural places.

You will want to keep the property aired and reasonably warm, so bleed the radiators and consider setting the central heating to



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for holidays in summer, perhaps you have somebody who could visit regularly to check all is well and prepare it for your own visits. A caretaker who minds the property in your absence does not necessarily need be the same person who does change-over duties like cleaning and welcoming guests.

To find a suitable person, you could make enquiries at the local *mairie* for people who might be interested in looking after the property in your absence. Also, look out for local clubs or village societies to join. They are a good network for being put in touch with local caretakers. If there is a large local expat community, people are often offering this type of service.

Obviously this will incur a cost – and if you are going to keep the property ready for your own visits, you might also consider advertising it as a let to recoup some of the outlay. The Christmas-New Year period is ideal as it attracts a premium rate and many letting sites have special pages devoted to the festive fortnight. At this time of year, holidaymakers generally like warmth, comfort and accessibility to towns and places of interest.

Another way to keep the property up and running during your absence and potentially create income is to arrange a house-sitter or, better yet, a long winter let. If you know there is a period of a month or more when you will not be there, you could attract a long winter let any time between the beginning of November and the end of March. This may appeal to house-hunters, those seeking some winter sun or simply like-minded people who are also in search of a slice of French life. www.frenchconnections.co.uk

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come on for a short time each day – ideally around the time that you would be likely to arrive at the house when travelling over for a visit. Store linen and towels in a dry, well-aired place and put electric blankets on the beds so they can be switched on at arrival. Do remember to leave the doors of the washing machine and dishwasher wide open to avoid smells developing – and leave plentiful supplies of washing powder, toilet rolls, dishwasher tablets and so on.

If you were closing the property for the entire winter, you would empty the fridge and freezer, but as you are planning to make visits, you will need food, so it may be practical to

leave them on if your area is not subject to major power cuts. A full freezer stays cold for longer and hence food is better protected against short outages, with the usual food safety precautions in place.

In any event, you can leave a larder stocked with tinned food and even dry food if it is in a cool, dry, airy place. It should also be secure if your property is in a rural area where field mice might find their way in during your absence. In my experience, a well-stocked wine rack is also a welcome facility on arrival!

Planning is important in terms of timing your arrival to use the property. Ideally, arrive in daylight at a time that coincides with local

shops being open, so that you can stock up on fresh food. This is practical whether you drive all the way from the UK, fly and pick up a hire car or leave your own second car at the property – even if it means over-nighting on the way down.

It will be much easier and more pleasant if, on arrival, you are fresh rather than tired, have a stock of food and can open the property in daylight, and check on any unexpected events or urgent jobs to cope with. You can also heat and air the property before bedtime.

Of course, you may prefer to find somebody who can open and prepare the property in advance of your arrival. If you let the property

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