

PAST TIMES

With anniversaries of both World Wars taking place this year, **Glynis Shaw** shares some advice on how you can offer the best service possible to your guests

France is marking two war anniversaries this year: the centenary of the start of World War I in 1914 and the 70th anniversary of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy during World War II.

Memories of these events have, with time, become poignant history and, prompted to some extent by films and media coverage, they are capturing the attention of visitors interested in seeing battle sites, memorials and military cemeteries and attending ceremonies of remembrance this summer and autumn.

Memory tourism

The French government has been carefully presenting the concept of 'memory tourism', but organised battlefield tours are not for everyone, especially the more independently minded traveller. Many people prefer to plan their own visit to the historic battlefields of France, taking in the sites that interest them most or making a special trip to visit the war grave of a fallen relative.

These independent travellers are most likely to rent a self-catering holiday property or *chambres d'hôtes* and to combine the emotion of the former battlefields with more upbeat activities, sports and sightseeing in the area; in other words, to take a holiday that has the



The landing beach at Arromanches, at the heart of the D-Day beaches

military and historical aspect at its heart but not its exclusive purpose.

There is no doubt that the anniversaries are drawing people to the relevant areas of France in 2014, but the concept of memory tourism

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offers property owners an opportunity beyond this year. Current generations still feel inspired to visit those areas of tragedy, many of them nowadays filled with calm and serenity, in order to learn from the past and pay our respects to the fallen. B&B/gite owners can offer incentives, and information for combining visits to memorial sites with a good holiday.

Some owners in relevant areas offer a discount to guests who have served in the military themselves, or who are going to look for the grave or information about a deceased relative who took part in the military



A child at the Franco-British Thiepval Memorial

©Atout France/CDT Calvados

History lessons

Could you be doing more to learn the history of your region and attract

The Somme

The moving and evocative battlefields of the Somme are where Kitchener's army attempted the long-awaited 'big push' in July 1916, but instead walked into the teeth of well-prepared German defences. The Somme was also the scene of the opening German counter-offensive of March 1918. There are numerous sites to visit in the area including preserved trenches, museums, war graves, and of course the famous Thiepval monument to the missing.

The Verdun battlefield

Verdun in eastern France is the scene of one of the most tragic and futile battles of World War I. Chosen by German generals to draw the French into a battle of attrition, Verdun proved incredibly costly to both sides.

Visitors can see the famous forts of Verdun and experience the full enormity of this major battle.

Normandy battlefields

On 6 June 1944, American, British and Canadian forces landed on the Normandy beaches, as part of Operation Overlord, and then fought a grim battle to break out of their beachhead and eventually liberate Paris.

Visitors can see the invasion beaches themselves, local museums, American and Commonwealth war cemeteries and special sites of military interest, such as the German battery at Pointe du Hoc and Pegasus Bridge on the Orne Canal near Caen.

Reims

Few cities were visited by as much destruction as was Reims during World War I. The fire at the cathedral on 19 September 1914, combined with 1,051 days of bombardment, led to the city being awarded the *Légion d'honneur* in 1919.

operations. Others, who live on site and take an interest in local history, actively help guests to go out and get information about their relatives or personally take them to a specific location associated with the family history, or even to the *mairie* to look at local records.

This type of incentive and assistance is best promoted in a fairly low-key way because owners want to attract all types of holidaymakers, rather than risk putting off those who have no interest in military history. Of course, many guests simply want relaxation and all the usual appeal of a holiday in France.

A good way to get the message across is to mention in your online listing, among the local attractions, a short summary of the nearby historic military sites and their significance. This will tell prospective guests that you have relevant awareness and knowledge and will encourage them to enquire further. You could also put together a page for your own website, if relevant, and a more detailed information pack to be available at the property for those who show an interest. Owners find that guests tend to mention their quest or interest at the time of enquiring or booking.

Bear in mind that guests do not necessarily want to stay in the heart of the battlefield areas. They are happy to travel to visit them and to be based in an attractive location close to restaurants and other activities. The most obvious areas for memory tourism are Picardy, including the Somme and Oise, and Normandy. But, while these are the best known, they are not the only locations. ■

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Case study one

Picardy period

'La Falaise' is a Belle Époque period house that can accommodate up to eight people as a holiday rental. It is located in the coastal medieval town of St-Valéry-sur-Somme in Picardy, accessible to World War I sites, and managed by Alastair Irving-Buchanan.

"Some years ago, local tourism steered away from over-association with the World War I tragedy of the Somme as it was not seen as a positive image," he remembers. "Now, with time, it has become history and the younger generations are coming to discover it more."

Alastair offers a 10% discount on bookings for guests who have a military background,

whether they have themselves been in the services, are following up on family war time stories, or visiting the grave of a father or grandfather. "We don't over-publicise this as we need to cater for the general holiday market, but visitors usually mention the military connection when they first enquire."

"Even then, the military aspect is only part of their holiday. They clearly prefer to be based close to restaurants, the sea and other attractions, and don't mind travelling to the sites for that poignant experience."

La Falaise is ID 159394 at
www.frenchconnections.co.uk

*The Thiepval Memorial
remembers 72,191 missing
men who died in the battles
of the Somme with no
known grave*



memory tourism?

Ardennes

Ardennes is the only French department to have been wholly occupied during World War I and still has many places of commemoration and memorial sites.

From the defeat of France in Sedan in 1870 to the famous German breakthrough of 1940, the French Ardennes was, due to its location, at the heart of Europe's biggest conflicts.

The Vosges

In the spectacular setting of the Massif des Vosges, Germans and French fought it out between 1914 and 1918 in a mountain war. The close proximity of the enemy lines, the trenches, the sapping, the shelters, everything here was governed by the climate and terrain.

Today, hiking paths follow the course of an impressive concrete barrier some 100km long.



Case study two ◀

Normandy landing

It was 11 years ago that Tony and Jill Stansfield moved to their 19th-century farmhouse, 'Le Grand Pont', close to the village of Estry in Calvados, and set up two B&B rooms for guests. Tony was already a military history enthusiast and writer, but even he was surprised to discover how much activity had taken place inland after D-Day in 1944, close to their location.

"For the military enthusiast, Normandy offers a rich choice of monuments, war graves and battle sites as well as the D-Day Landing beaches on the north coast," he explains. "Almost all the towns and villages of Calvados feature in the histories of 1944."

In his online listing he gives details of local battles, flagging up his knowledge to prospective visitors, which he hopes might encourage them to book.

"Our guests who are looking for military history are a mix of veterans and their relatives. I have a big military library and collection of militaria and am happy to share research and information. Sometimes visitors want to know more about a relative and I go out with them to help. One guest had a photo of a tank soldier surrounded by French girls at the liberation of La Bocage, and I managed to put her in touch with a local lady who was one of the girls in the picture."

Le Grand Pont farmhouse is ID 4977 at www.frenchconnections.co.uk

