

Juggling act

For some Brits in France, the challenges of managing their own property is not enough. **Glynis Shaw** explains how managing multiple French properties can be a rewarding business enterprise



Most owners of holiday lets in France run a single property. It may be an individual house or a community of gîtes, but they settle happily for managing their own domain and no more. For others, it's rather different. They too may have started with a single personal enterprise but over time that has mushroomed into a business

The multiple property manager plans marketing strategies and places advertising, handling the enquiries that come in

offering a successful marketing and management service for multiple properties in their area. How does this work for them and what is involved?

Essentially there are two models for working with multiple properties. The first involves getting guests to the property and letting the owner take over from there. The second goes further in also taking on management of the property and guest arrivals, so the owner need not be involved in the physical process.

In both ways of working, the multiple property manager plans marketing and places advertising, handles enquiries when they come in, manages and logs bookings and sends out a contract to the guest, setting out terms and conditions. The hands-off manager will then notify an owner when to expect guest arrivals and whether there are special requests or bookings for meals. From here, each owner takes care of key holding and access, greeting guests, responding to any emergencies and the cleaning and maintenance of the property.

This system works well when owners are present on site or have services set up before appointing a manager for their marketing. The guest pays the owner, who passes on a commission to the manager when final pre-payment is received.

Managers who list their properties with French Connections tell me that commission rates tend to be between 10 and 17% and vary according to the rental price of the property. The same work is involved in marketing every let, so where the property is smaller and cheaper, the percentage is likely to be accordingly higher.

The second model of working extends beyond marketing to taking responsibility for arranging all or most services including key holding, laundry, cleaning and maintenance. If guests are not greeted on arrival, then a visit is made during their stay to make personal contact and ensure satisfaction. This system works well where owners are absent or new to letting and reluctant to get involved in running the business. A higher commission is charged but managers report that they can generate their own commission through the higher rents justified by high standards of presentation and service.

Both approaches involve an initial visit to the owner to view the property and – if it is ready to let – to take photos and notes and agree a weekly rate. Managers will use their experience to advise new owners on what will make their property suitable and successful for letting. This could mean recommending anything from extra facilities like play equipment or English TV to a complete update of interior decor. Most agree that guests are becoming more discerning and expect increasingly high standards of finish and facilities.

Even if a manager runs their own website or creates an individual site for the owner, they will often still place advertisements on one or more online listings site that has a trusted name, an established high visitor rate and a regular investment in marketing, simply because they find that this is the best way to generate enquiries. Usually managers can make economies of scale by negotiating reduced rates for multiple listings.

Managers of multiple properties recognise the

Case study: Managing properties in Vendée

In early 2006, itchy feet took Annette and Jason Khan from their home in Jersey to The France Show in London. The couple wanted to pursue a long-held dream.

"By April we were viewing houses in Vendée," remembers Annette. "We soon found one that was too good to miss. We opened for holiday lets the following Easter."

The property at Lairoux, near Luçon, offered two gîtes in addition to the Khans' own accommodation but they soon found that the rental return was not enough to live on and Jason had to go back to work.

Then a friend finished renovating a five-bedroom house nearby and asked the Khans if they would take on marketing the property.

With Annette's background in sales and marketing, the couple grabbed the opportunity. "Our first year of management was in 2009 and things have snowballed fast through word of mouth" explains Annette. "As other owners saw that our service was working, they asked us to take on their properties too."

Annette and Jason handle marketing and bookings and leave guest management to the owners. "We sell holidays in properties that we would be happy with ourselves and guests are not disappointed."

The Khans have five properties listed at www.frenchconnections.co.uk including their own Maison Lairoux ID 106311



crucial importance of photographs in browsers' decision making and display as many as possible in listings. They also file photos to use as quick reference when asked detailed questions about a property by a prospective guest. Thorough

knowledge about each property ensures that enquiries can be converted to bookings without any interruption to the process.

Anyone considering taking on property management will need to register their business with

the French authorities and then be well organised. Meticulous record keeping is essential to stay on top of all arrangements with owners and guests. Spread sheets, an up-to-the-minute calendar and regularly backed-up computer files will avoid costly errors.

An efficient service also demands that guest enquiries are responded to quickly and fully –

ideally within about an hour of receiving them. If one property on the books is full, then the manager can suggest another of similar size, thus earning more bookings and ensuring customer satisfaction. Good service and attractive properties also generate a high level of repeat bookings.

Owners who move to France to run their own lets and then expand into management often start by being asked to take on holiday properties owned by their local friends and neighbours. Most say that business comes largely through recommendations.

How is the market looking for the coming season? Both managers featured in our case studies say that they are getting a good rate of enquiries not only for the peak season ahead but also the spring and autumn months. They are optimistic that the French holiday letting market for 2011 will be better than in the last couple of years. ♦

Glynis Shaw is joint MD of French Connections holiday rentals and property sales online www.frenchconnections.co.uk

If one property on the books is full, the manager is in a position to suggest another of similar size, increasing bookings further

Case study: A management service in Brittany



Judith Cottingham went to live in St-Malo in Brittany in 1983, having married a local man. When she later found herself the single

parent of a year-old daughter, she was pitched into French life and work at estate agents managing long-term rentals.

"I was beginning to think that I could do this work on my own account when a family friend asked me to manage holiday lets at their property. Eventually, I went into business for myself in 2005," explains Judith.

She has built up a mix of English and French clients, mainly through personal referrals, and now manages some 12 or 13 properties. In addition to handling marketing and bookings, Judith offers a complete management service.

"Contact is very important – with both guests and owners – and many holidaymakers return to my properties year after year."

Judith believes that presentation and high service are equally important and has her own team of cleaners and a laundry operation.

All this keeps her very busy, especially as guests become more discerning, but she is optimistic about the future. "All my properties are close to the coast and a French survey has just named St-Malo as a top destination for tourists, so I am very confident people will keep coming here."

Judith Cottingham has nine properties listed at www.frenchconnections.co.uk, including her first, La Ville Thomas, ID 4359