

# Clients Cornered

*Nigel & Pauline Colman ([www.colmanscottages.com](http://www.colmanscottages.com)) are constructing a purpose-built holiday cottage for people with disabilities.*

Pauline and I have owned our property in France for over 13 years. After a short search in 1993, we bought Le Haut Fresnay in Normandy - an abandoned farmhouse with several outbuildings and set in six acres of grounds. Our initial aim was to create a large holiday home for ourselves, along with two holiday cottages to rent out. But renovating our properties long-distance from Yorkshire involved an immense amount of organization and time, so when the opportunity arose for us to take early retirement from our jobs, we jumped at the chance and moved to France in 1996.



We were soon enjoying running our holiday rental business and found that we could pretty much guarantee annual lettings of about 30 weeks per cottage. Normandy continues to be a very popular holiday destination for UK holidaymakers all year round because of its proximity to the Channel ports - and because people do not come here for two weeks of Mediterranean sunshine!

Once our rental business was firmly established, we decided to invest in a third holiday cottage (La Folie) in a neighbouring village a couple of miles away from Le Haut Fresnay. Over the years, however, we've come to realise that the extra time taken on changeover day to service a third cottage which is not on site is just too much of a commitment. For this reason, we have decided to sell La Folie but shall be investing the capital in a brand new house at Le Haut Fresnay - a purpose-built holiday cottage for people with disabilities.

What gave us the idea was the increasing number of enquiries we have had from clients with disabilities who often telephone to ask whether our cottages are suitable and fulfil their requirements; some, of course, then decide not to book because an ordinary house simply won't do. For obvious reasons, the needs of disabled people on holiday are not always adequately provided for in self-catering accommodation - but with a house built from scratch, we would have the opportunity to cater more specifically for these clients, as well as creating a lovely holiday home for them in wonderful surroundings.

When we started our project, we knew relatively little about designing accommodation for disabled people and have been through a steep learning curve. Thanks to the internet, we have been able to consult a wide range of sources and have developed some excellent contacts with organisations for the disabled. A valuable source of advice has been the Disabled Holiday Directory: [www.disabledholidaydirectory.co.uk](http://www.disabledholidaydirectory.co.uk) (a website run by a wheelchair user which advertises holidays for disabled people). Naturally, our French architect has consulted the published European norms and we have also been advised by a wheelchair user whose "day job" is assessing the accessibility of public buildings in Northumbria.

Our team of French artisans seem highly enthusiastic about our project and have made some excellent suggestions, such as checking that the window sills would be low enough to allow someone in a wheelchair to see out. The construction of the house is now well advanced but there are still opportunities to modify the internal layout slightly before everything does become - literally - set in concrete!

We are hoping to welcome our first guests to the new house (La Frenaie) in the late spring of 2007. Between now and then, we shall be busy setting up a new LetSites website for the property and placing adverts for next year's season. If time gets short, we shall delay the completion of the first floor which is additional accommodation specifically for able-bodied people.

And at the moment, our biggest headache is wondering how we can make the house appeal to both disabled and non-disabled clients. For financial reasons, we aren't restrict ourselves to just disabled holidaymakers because we don't yet know the level of demand we shall have, so we are trying to incorporate as many multi-purpose facilities as possible.

The designing, building and marketing of La Frenaie is a totally new venture for us, so we're trying hard to get it right first time. Any comments or advice from other LetSites clients would be extremely welcome, in particular ideas about the layout of the accommodation, the provision of facilities or where to advertise. And if anyone has enquiries from disabled clients whom they are unable to accommodate, we should be most grateful if you would give them our details!

# LetSites Newsletter

Issue N°11 July 2006

[www.letsites.com](http://www.letsites.com)

*If you'd like to be "cornered" in a future issue, please contact [emma@letsites.com](mailto:emma@letsites.com)*

## The LetSites Newsletter - July 2006

Welcome to the July 2006 LetSites Newsletter! We'd like to start by saying an enormous thank you to everyone who took part in the Marketing Poll during May - the results have already generated a great deal of positive feedback from you.

Once again, it's time to submit your 2007 brochure adverts - the deadlines and discounts are summarised below. On the back page, we've cornered Nigel & Pauline Colman from Normandy. If you would like something featured in a future Newsletter, do get in touch: [emma@letsites.com](mailto:emma@letsites.com)

### The dates for your 2007 brochure advertising deadlines are...

**Chez Nous:** the final deadline for the printed brochure is 18th August. You now have the choice about where to advertise - just in the brochure, just on the Chez Nous website or both. As before, an additional charge of £30 is made for a link to your own website. Loyalty discounts are being offered to advertisers who have been advertising with Chez Nous for more than three years (from 1% up to 5%). The 2007 brochure is due to be printed in early November.

**Owners in France:** the final deadline for the printed brochure is 1st August. You can advertise for one or two years in the brochure+website, or just the brochure. There are loyalty discounts for existing advertisers. A link to your website is free. The 2007 brochure is due out in late October.

**By the way:** if you have friends or neighbours who have been thinking about having a website for their holiday property, now is the time to remind them about LetSites! There's still time for them to organise a website address to include in their 2007 advertising - and you'll also earn 20% off your next hosting renewal for each signup...

**Update your website for 2007:** If you haven't sent us your 2007 tariff yet, simply email us your prices with the dates of the different tariff bands.

### Same Time Next Year?

The peak season is now in full swing and most of France is enjoying hot, sunny weather. 99% of your gite clients will have fantastic memories of their holiday with you and many will go away promising to recommend you to their friends and family. With any luck, many will also book with you again for 2007. As the Poll results confirmed, loyal gite clients are invaluable to your business... so why not encourage client loyalty with e-postcards or an online Visitors' Book on your website?

You can use e-postcards to wish them a good trip before their holiday - or as a "Thank you for coming" after their holiday. Or why not suggest that they send some to friends while they are chez vous? You could even send them an e-postcard once they're safely home to remind them to add to your online Visitors' Book!

Asking for feedback is an excellent way of gauging how satisfied clients are. Comments are added on line via your website (you can, of course, edit out "weather moans" and typos before anything is displayed!). You'll also see who's tempted to book for next year.

If you would like us to install a Visitors' Book or e-postcards on your website, just let us know. To see them both in action, go to [www.tarn-breaks.com](http://www.tarn-breaks.com). The Visitors' Book is on the Hosts page; for the e-postcards, just click to enlarge any photo and you'll see the e-postcard link.

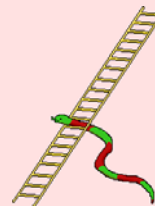


### STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS!

Marcella & Andrew Kirk ([www.gites-letilleul.co.uk](http://www.gites-letilleul.co.uk)) and Donna Beishon ([www.gitesinangles.co.uk](http://www.gitesinangles.co.uk)) were featured in an article in January's *French Property News*. The article set out the pros and cons of having a swimming pool and discussed whether a pool is absolutely essential for ensuring the success of a holiday rental business. If you would like to read the article, go to [www.letsites.com](http://www.letsites.com) and click on "What the Press Say".



## Snakes & Ladders



In the last issue of the Newsletter, we looked at how search engines gather their information about websites. This time, we look at how search engines produce the list of results when a surfer types in some search terms.



Once your website has been crawled, the search engine stores each of the pages visited in its index. At the very least, the index contains the address of the page and the words, phrases and topics which are related to that page - i.e. for which that page is relevant, or a good match.

When a surfer types in some search terms, the search engine uses a complex process to decide which pages to include in the results and in what order. Google, for example, uses two methods in tandem: text-matching and page-ranking.

- Text-matching uses a sophisticated computer program which takes the search terms typed in by the surfer and finds pages in the index which are both important and relevant to those particular search terms. The program looks at much more than just the number of times a relevant word or phrase appears on a given page - it examines all aspects of the page's content (and of the pages linking to it) to determine if the page/site is a good match for the query.
- Page-ranking uses an algorithm to calculate how "important" a page or site is in terms of other sites linking to it. The links which are important are *inward* links - i.e. links from other sites to yours. And the links must be "genuine" - i.e. not just dozens of irrelevant reciprocal links which are there purely to impress the search engines. In fact, the search engines are far from impressed: if Google suspect that the links are not genuine, they may decide to de-list your website. But if your inward links are highly relevant, your website will be ranked more highly.

The main list which is created from the search engine's index is called an "organic" list. This means that websites are listed there on their own merits - i.e. they have not paid (and, indeed, cannot pay) to appear. The sites are listed (and ordered) entirely automatically by matching the search terms to the index and by taking into account their ranking overall.

Because search engines' text-matching and page-ranking methods are top secret (and change frequently), nobody outside the search engine company can know for sure why certain websites end up being more highly ranked than others. Despite what the pub bores (and unscrupulous web agencies) will tell you, search engine positioning is, quite frankly, largely a matter of luck.

Corporate website owners often employ search engine optimisation (SEO) consultants to "tweak" their site, and this can improve its position in the results. But because the search engines are constantly changing their algorithms, the results are never permanent. The consultant will need to monitor and tweak the site continually to achieve the desired results. For a small private website this will seldom be economic: to appear consistently high in the results you would expect to be paying an SEO consultant somewhere between 500€ and 1000€ a month.

Part of a consultant's job is to help to "optimise" your website in terms of its structure and content. The rules for optimisation, however, are constantly changing to keep up with changes in the search engines. Ten years ago, meta tags and domain names were of primary importance. Today, search engines pay little or no attention to either. The latest hot advice from the pub bore is to constantly change the content of the website. But while regularly updated sites may be visited by search engine spiders more often, if the content is still essentially about the same thing, changes made for change's sake will have no effect whatsoever on the site's relevance or ranking.

There is also the lottery of guessing which words a surfer will type in to a search engine in the first place. You can find out which words were used by people who do find you - but there is no way of knowing what someone who *didn't* find you typed in. The words a surfer chooses are critical. For example, "gite holiday france" has Chez Nous at the top of the list (a moment ago, anyway!), but for "gite holiday dordogne" they first appear at n° 142 (on page 15)! The best an SEO consultant can do, therefore, is to get your site high on the list for a few specific words and phrases.

In practice, there are only two ways of getting on the first page of a search engine's results: advertising on listings sites which themselves appear consistently high up on the list - or paying to appear in the "sponsored links" (such as Google's AdWords) which appear next to the list of results on every page. In the next two issues of the Newsletter, we'll discuss these advertising strategies in more detail. We shall also show you how you can monitor your internet advertising using the LetSites statistics package.

*Next issue: Internet advertising and monitoring its effectiveness*