

Clients Cornered

Pippa & George Richmond-Brown (www.masdesudre.com) offer some advice about who to turn to for help if your French property suffers a house fire...

George and I first moved abroad in the 1980s to live on a small Greek island. But in 1990, we fell in love with a neglected *maison de maître* (Mas de Sudre) in the Tarn. Built alongside an 18th-century farmhouse, Mas de Sudre had been started in 1912 but had never been properly finished. The house had only been lived in briefly during the 1950s and had never been connected to an electricity supply or to mains water. It also needed to have a new roof and be completely rewired and replumbed before we could move in. Over the next year or so, we converted our outbuildings into holiday accommodation for paying guests and created one large gîte, two studios and four Bed & Breakfast bedrooms.



Our holiday business was soon up and running and flourishing... until disaster struck in 2004. George and I were having a short break in northern France when we received a phone call from a friend who told us that our house was on fire. Being hundreds of miles away and unable to do anything about the situation, we felt absolutely devastated. Upon our return, we discovered that a third of the house had been destroyed (although thankfully none of the original internal features had been lost) - and that we would need another new roof. The cause of the fire was traced back to a relatively new electric water heater which had been fitted when the house had been rewired.

Faced with the charred remains of part of our house, we felt very despondent. Our holiday business would have to close for several months, which would have serious implications for our income. We also knew that, as in the UK, making an insurance claim was going to mean acres and acres of paperwork!

For immediate help, we contacted our insurance company who explained the claims procedure to us. It seemed our first challenge would be to appoint an expert to represent us. This was quite easy, in fact, because several experts called at our house the day after the fire and we just chose one of them. From then on, it was our expert who dealt with our insurance company, not us. The expert's job is to represent the insured party against the insurance company (the cost of which is included in the house insurance) and they try to get as much money as possible for you from the insurance company. But the insurance company also appoints an expert whose job is to *limit* the amount paid out to you! Since both experts work on a percentage, discussions can get heated!

Once the claims procedure was under way, our most immediate problem was our holiday business. We contacted all our clients, refunded their payments and, tried to find them alternative accommodation in the area. Although our loss of income was not covered by the insurance policy, our accommodation costs were - and so we were advised to "book" our own (undamaged) gîte for a year. The rental payments paid out by the insurance company therefore became our income.

The claim was finally agreed after five long months of negotiations between us, the experts and the insurance company. Once the amount of money to be paid out to us was finalized, it was up to us to find local artisans willing to carry out the building works within the budgets allocated for each task. Having already renovated the house once, we were fortunate enough to have made many local contacts and so were able to organize a team of workmen to start work quite quickly once we were given the go-ahead.

Each task - such as replacing the roof - was given a dedicated budget. The insurance company paid us 80-90% of the cost of each task in advance. In other words, they retained 10-20% of each budget until the final bill could be presented to them. At this point, the insurance company examined the bill and inspected the completed building work it related to. Once they were satisfied that everything was in order, they paid us each outstanding amount so that we could settle each of the final bills. Finally we could open again for business.

Coping with a disaster is certainly more challenging when you live abroad, but we found everyone to be extremely helpful and supportive - especially our insurance company. We wouldn't say that it was a good experience to go through, but it could certainly have been a lot worse...!

If you'd like to be "cornered" in a future issue, please contact emma@letsites.com



www.letsites.com

The LetSites Newsletter - December 2006

Welcome to the December LetSites Newsletter! In this final issue of 2006, we have some very important information for pool owners concerning water hygiene regulations. This issue's search engine article is about advertising on holiday listings websites - and our Cornered Clients are George & Pippa Richmond-Brown from the Tarn.

If you would like a particular gîte-related topic to be featured or discussed in a future Newsletter, please do get in touch: emma@letsites.com

2007 (and 2008!) Tariffs and Availability Charts

Most of you have already asked us to add your 2007 tariff and availability charts to your site. If you haven't yet done, please let us have both your new prices and the dates of each tariff band by **mid-December at the latest**.

As you know, you can also let us have your **2008** prices and dates whenever you like - there's no need to wait until the end of 2007...

More Pool Rules

As highlighted in an article written by Mary Hall in November's *French Property News*, all LetSites clients with a pool should be aware that there are rules and regulations relating to the quality of water in their swimming pool.

Currently, any swimming pool used by more than one family is classed as a "public" pool. As yet, no clear distinction has been made between an individual property owner and a family paying to stay in a property with exclusive use of the pool. However, if your pool is shared by more than one party of paying guests, or is shared by you plus paying guests, your pool is subject to the DDASS rules and regulations and is classed as "public".

Depending on the size of your pool and the number of people sharing it, you may have to install a foot bath or a shower - and may even have to alter the speed at which the water passes through the filtration system during a 24-hour period. Chemicals may have to be added automatically and the pool manager must keep a **daily** record of the precise amounts of chemicals and/or water added to the pool each day.

Most important of all, however, is the fact that pools using **salt water systems** do not comply with the regulations. According to the DDASS, you cannot get a high enough production of chlorine from a salt chlorinator. This means that anyone using salt will have to install an automatic control for adding the additional chlorine necessary to bring the levels up to those required. Systems using copper sulphate are also not suitable. It appears that salt water pools are gradually being phased out anyway, not least because they are seen as harmful to the environment. It is already illegal to discharge the salt water from a "public" pool straight onto land or into a water course - and a future EU Directive is likely to make this illegal for all salt water pools, whether private or public.

Inspections from the DDASS can occur at any time. They will not only take samples of the pool water, but will also check that your paperwork is up-to-date. They may even assess your pool security arrangements at the same time.

In order to keep LetSites clients as informed as possible, we have installed a link to a swimming pool company ("Property Services in France") who have a summarised version of the DDASS regulations (in English) on their website, along with further details of all the current requirements.

The link can be found on the Control Panel when you log into www.letsites.com. In addition, it might also be a good idea to contact your local DDASS to ask their advice about your pool's conformity - it's far better to have their help and co-operation from the outset, rather than have to go through all the trauma of a full investigation...



Coming Soon...

Over the next couple of months, all LetSites websites will be incorporating some additional features, such as Google-powered maps on the Local Area and Getting Here pages, door-to-door itineraries and a new slideshow. We shall also be launching two brand new styles - **Eliza** and **Flora**. More details in the next issue!

Piggyback into the Top Twenty



This issue's search engine article is about advertising on holiday listings websites. As explained in previous Newsletters, it is highly unlikely that your own website will appear on the first page of a search, especially if a surfer is only using general terms such as "holiday self-catering france". What comes up in response to such searches tend to be holiday listings websites. So, by advertising on these listings websites, you can effectively hitch a ride to that elusive first page.



Holiday listings websites have evolved enormously over the last ten years and continue to do so. The better sites are now regarded as the online equivalent of a printed brochure and are increasingly replacing their paper counterparts. The online market has become highly competitive making the choice of where to advertise a simply daunting decision. So how might you go about choosing a good website to advertise on?

- **Look on the search engines:** put in some search terms as if you were a typical holidaymaker searching for your sort of property. Bear in mind that most surfers put in very general terms - and since these are the people you are after, you need to behave exactly like them. Make a note of the listings websites appearing on the first page, then go through exactly the same process (using the same search terms) a few days later to see which are still on the first page.
- **Look out for advertising:** if you've narrowed down your choice of websites to a shortlist, check to see whether you can find any conventional print advertising for them (in the Sunday papers, for example). You must feel confident that they're actually spending money on advertising their website to holidaymakers. If they're not, then all they're doing is taking your money for an advert and hoping people will find them on the search engines.
- **Take part in the annual LetSites Advertising Survey in March:** those who participate in the survey get to see which listings sites other LetSites clients are advertising on, along with reading their comments about the number of enquiries/bookings their adverts generate. The level of service received from different listings website is also commented upon.
- **Check for direct clickable links:** some listings websites now charge for you to have a clickable link to your website - and some will not even allow you to mention your own website. A clickable link is essential, so do check their policy before you sign up.

Once you have decided who to advertise with, how can you be sure that you're getting value for money? First and foremost, make sure that you quiz your visitors about how they found you. You can then work out the total income which each of your adverts has generated for you. A cheaper advert is not necessarily good value, especially if it only produces occasional, low-value bookings.

Another useful source of information is to look at the number of "click-throughs" to your own website. This is possible if you have the LetSites statistics package installed. If you have not and would like to see an example, go to www.letsites.com > client login > log in as "guest" > click on "Statistics".

Once you have the statistics in front of you, go to the left-hand menu and click on "Referring Sites" listed under "Referrers". Listed on the main panel should be all the website pages (such as cheznous.com) and which have a link to your site which has been clicked on during the current month. The number of "click throughs" generated from that particular page's link is also shown alongside the page address. This information should give you an idea of how many people are finding your site from external websites, and may well help you decide whether to carry on advertising on a particular listings website - or perhaps to cancel your advert altogether.

As with anything on the internet, some of the listings websites have been set up just to take money from adverts and care little about generating bookings for you. You've got nothing to lose if you try free or heavily discounted offers (except a possible increase in spam!), but you must monitor whether any enquiries/bookings are generated by them before handing over any money.

Finally, there seem to be a growing number of listings websites who advertise your property for free but take a commission from any booking made via their website. Since these websites are genuinely interested in generating firm bookings for you (so that they get paid), they may well try harder to advertise their own website to potential holidaymakers, thus generating more visits to your own property details/website. If you've had any experience with advertising on commission-only websites, do let us know how you get on. And are they the future of online advertising...?

Next issue: AdWords - the theory and the reality!