

Clients Cornered

For the first Newsletter of 2004, we thought we'd "corner" Sally and Kirk Ritchie (www.vevevalley.com) to find out how they've enjoyed their very first Christmas in their new French home. They're using part of their house for Bed and Breakfast guests and have an adjoining cottage for self-catering holidays.



Kirk and I arrived at "Combenègre" - our new home in the Tarn - in July 2003, and it was just our luck to move house during one of the hottest summers ever! We were accompanied by 18-year-old daughter, Annie, 15-year-old son, Ed, and dogs, Freddie & Bertie.

After a frenetic four months entertaining friends and family and preparing all the holiday accommodation, we were looking forward to a relaxing first Christmas in France. Seeing how laid-back the locals were about preparing for the festivities was amazing. When we lived in the Cotswolds, the shops were crammed with Christmas decorations from September, and everywhere said: "Book now for Christmas". But Gaillac, our nearest town, had no visible signs until the beginning of December - bliss!

Our French festivities started properly on 12th December with Annie's return from her UK school - much to the annoyance of Ed, whose French school didn't finish until the 19th. Annie's first job was to join Kirk on the quad bike looking for the perfect Christmas tree. Success was guaranteed since "Combenègre" means "valley of the dark pines", so they had quite a few to choose from! Searching the unfamiliar local shops for Christmas presents, however, was proving to be difficult and stressful. Worse still, the local butcher could only supply us with an apology for a turkey weighing 4 kilos, which included the head! The butcher's explanation (delivered with a Gallic shrug) was that the heat of the summer had stunted their growth...

Every year, the English and French communities around Castelnau-de-Montmiral celebrate Christmas together with a service of nine carols and lessons. This year, I had the dubious honour of reading the first lesson - in English, thank heavens! Afterwards, a very merry time was had by all in the local Salle des Fêtes, with plenty of red wine and mince pies. Christmas was here at last!

Meanwhile, having prepared the cottage and festooned it with decorations, our first-ever paying guests arrived on the 20th. They're hoping to move over here soon, so we spent several evenings chatting about life in the Tarn - and enjoying the odd glass of local wine, of course!

Christmas Day was very special to us. We were worried that our teenagers would find it boring with the "rentals" (as we're known), but they loved it! It was the first Christmas we've spent with just the four of us - and only the second time in twenty years of marriage we haven't been working (as hoteliers, we always spent Christmas looking after other people). There was much excitement opening the presents to see what we'd each found to buy locally... with great satisfaction all round! We had a demon game of Monopoly after lunch and we even managed to catch the Queen's Speech on satellite TV!

Although the French don't celebrate Boxing Day, we did. Some friends joined us for a walk around the commune and vineyards. The clear blue sky and views of the snow-capped Pyrénées made us remember why we'd come to France - space, fresh air and tranquillity. And as for New Year's Eve... over 20 of us of all ages were so busy enjoying ourselves, we actually missed the French New Year and ended up singing Auld Lang Syne at midnight GMT instead!

So that, in a nutshell, is how we'll remember our first French festivities - very happy, surrounded by like-minded people and welcomed with open arms by our local community. We urge those of you who haven't yet taken the plunge to move here permanently to think seriously about doing so - preferably in time for next Christmas!



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

The LetSites Newsletter – February 2004

Welcome to the first Newsletter of 2004! We're delighted to start the New Year with several great bits of news: **www.letsites.com** now has a brand new "look"; our first Dutch version of a LetSites website has gone online (see below); and Roger & Sarah Newman-Coburn were featured in the January issue of "French Property News".

As mentioned in the last Newsletter, the new swimming pool safety regulations have now been published. Rental properties must comply with the new law by 1st May 2004 - we've set out the main points below.

Our "cornered" clients this time are Sally & Kirk Ritchie from the Tarn - if you, too, would like to contribute to a future Newsletter, please contact: **emma@letsites.com**

Bonnes vacances en France?

Did you know that in 2003 **Spain** was the most popular holiday destination for British tourists? Since the late 1980s, France has consistently been the top destination for the British. But over the last five years, there has been a downward trend: last year just 12.1 million Brits visited France compared with 12.5 million visiting Spain.

With the advent of cheap flights to Europe, British tourists are taking more short breaks to places other than France, notably Spain and Italy. To counter the trend, the French Tourist Office is now re-branding France as a short-break destination, too.

The good news, though, is that the people who prefer Spain tend to be the under-25s and the retired. In other words, the higher-spending 25-45-year-olds still favour France - just the sort of people who book independent, self-catering holidays...

Tell me all about... multilingual websites



It's often hard work attracting British holidaymakers out of season - so why not consider trying to attract visitors from other countries to widen your target market?



The French Basque Country, for example, attracts mainly French and Spanish visitors - as does the Mediterranean - but Dutch holidaymakers tend to prefer the areas around the Dordogne and the Lot. With this in mind, Sandra and Rod Jackman in the Lot Valley have recently gone trilingual. By adding Dutch to the existing English and French versions of their website, they hope to attract Dutch tourists to their luxury gîte and Bed &

Breakfast business. To see it in action, visit their site at **www.lagaleriecatous.com** and click the Dutch flag!

We currently offer translations into French, Spanish, Dutch - and Basque! We make a charge for the translation itself and for the additional hosting - but if it opens up a whole new market for your business, you may decide the extra investment is worth it!



New Year - New Look for LetSites!



You may already have noticed that the LetSites website (**www.letsites.com**) has had a facelift!

The Welcome Page now incorporates photos depicting typical French holiday scenes - and what could be better than photos from our clients' websites? We aim to include a photo from every site (with your permission, of course) - although you might end up having to sit there a long time waiting for your own shot to come along!

By the way, the Client Login button is now in the menu at the bottom of the screen.

The Official Swimming Pool Safety Regulations

The legal requirements for swimming pool security have finally been confirmed. What follows is just a summary, but LetSites clients can get access to the official document (*Journal Officiel : 20th December 2003*) via the link on the LetSites Control Panel.

All new pools must have an approved safety device fitted. All existing pools at rental properties must comply with the law by 1st May 2004. (Private, non-rented properties must comply by 1st January 2006.) Failure to comply could mean a fine of 45,000 euros.

AFNOR have approved four types of device:

- Safety Barriers (Fences) - NF P90-306
- Pool Alarms - NF P90-307
- Safety Covers - NF P90-308
- Pool Shelters/Abris - NF P90-309

To stay within the law, the safety devices must be **used properly at all times** i.e. barriers, covers and shelters must be in a locked position and alarms must be switched on.

La Commission de la Sécurité de Consommateurs strongly recommends the use of barriers because they provide permanent security. You should choose safety devices which suit your situation - alarms, for example, have a maximum operating distance, so is your pool near enough to the house? And are you on-site to make sure that the devices are being used properly?

As well as complying with the law, you should check with your insurance company to ensure that your chosen safety device meets **their** policy requirements.



STOP PRESS!



Fresh from being "cornered" in the last LetSites Newsletter, Roger & Sarah from Mas de Trugal were featured in an article in January's issue of *French Property News*!

You can read the article on the LetSites website - just click the "what the press say" button.