

Clients Cornered

Back in 1999, **Sandra & Rod Jackman** (www.lagaleriecatous.com) began a three-year search to find the ideal place to set up a gîte and bed & breakfast business in France. Five years on, and with two successful holiday seasons completed, their business is now exclusively for bed & breakfast. Here's why...



Sandra & Rod (or is it?)

When Rod & I decided we wanted a new challenge in our lives, we began a long search into the unknown. Once we'd agreed that France was the ideal location, we spent the next few years looking at all sorts of châteaux, houses, farms, barns and gîte complexes right across the country. We soon learnt that "In good condition" and "Habitable" was actually estate agent speak for "It hasn't fallen down yet!"

During our travels, we booked into everything from five-star hotels to gîtes and chambres d'hôtes. It was all an excellent lesson - we soon saw how you make guests feel welcome - or not! But wherever we stayed, we often felt that there was something lacking or not quite perfect. We made a decision that we should aim to bridge that gap and ensure that our guests wanted to come back again and again for that little extra *je ne sais quoi!*

We finally found a house close to Cahors in the beautiful Lot valley. It had great potential - two buildings ideal for gîtes, as well as room for chambres d'hôtes in the main house. After our first holiday season, however, we realised that so many of our own B&B guests were planning to move to the area to set up gîte businesses, the market was becoming saturated. After much discussion, we decided that we should forget about gîtes and convert our outbuildings into yet more chambres d'hôtes for B&B. One major advantage for B&B guests is that they can start and end their holidays on whichever day suits them best - and they can get much cheaper flights by travelling mid-week.

By concentrating on offering just B&B, we felt we could be more innovative with our meals and catering for the second season. We decided that, as well as offering breakfasts, we should also offer evening meals. Rod is a fantastic cook and is now the resident chef! He particularly loves cooking regional specialities with fresh, local ingredients - always served with Cahors wine, of course. And judging by the comments our guests have made this year, his cooking is one of the most important reasons they give for wanting to come back again!

"We had such a great time with you in the Lot. In particular, we loved your "Grand Banquets" - we've never eaten so much beautifully presented food in our lives!" (Kasey, Naomi, Nola, Tom, Peter and Tamara)... "We have to say, the evening meal you prepared for us was by far the best meal we've had for some time. Excellent! If only you were closer" (Lucy & George)... "We have made up our minds that the Lot is for us. Our next viewing trip will now be arranged around La Galerie and Rod's cooking (which we're still talking about!)" (Mel & Lorraine)

Another idea we had was to offer our guests the chance to self-cater. To do this, we built a large summer kitchen next to the swimming pool, with a covered dining area and a barbecue. This has definitely helped to extend the length of most of our bookings for one simple reason - our guests don't have to spend extra money on eating in restaurants every night (and neither do they have to pay for full board).

So now it's time to think about the 2005 summer season and what extra-little-somethings we'll be offering this time. Our most recent (and most exciting) additional luxury is a hot tub which we imported from America. Our guests love it, but poor Rod has had to take a crash course in hot tub plumbing and maintenance! Why do these things always go wrong at the weekends...? But those nightmare stories will have to wait for another time!

We'd like to wish fellow LetSites clients a very merry Christmas and a fantastic 2005!

LetSites Newsletter

Issue N°6 December 2004



www.letsites.com

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

The LetSites Newsletter - December 2004

Welcome to the final Newsletter of 2004 and we'd like to wish all LetSites clients a relaxing Christmas and a wonderful, prosperous New Year!

The promised follow-up Advertising Poll should be on line in January. You will be able to use the poll to pass on any general comments you have about your advertising, as well as which adverts are generating good quality enquiries and bookings for you.

This issue's Annoying Little Devil is spam - how does it find you and how can you avoid getting even more of it? Finally, our Cornered Clients on the back page are Sandra & Rod Jackman who run a Bed & Breakfast business in the Lot Valley.

If you'd like something featured in a future Newsletter, contact emma@letsites.com

Fosse Septique Regulations

If your property is not connected to mains drainage, your *mairie* is now obliged to ensure that your waste water disposal (normally via a *fosse septique*) complies with the law. The legal standards, which are for environmental and pollution control, were drawn up in 1992 and must be in place for all private properties by the end of 2005.



If you are buying or renovating an older house, it is definitely worth checking with the *mairie* to see how the regulations might affect you. It is also wise to make conformity to the standards part of any future house purchase contract. If you have a new house, it should have been built with a system which already complies.

Most home owners, however, just need to wait for the *mairie* to get in touch with them. Mind you, of the 4.5 million installations in France, 3.5 million don't comply, so you might have a long wait. And if your commune is quite small, you could find the *maire* himself knocking on your door clutching a *fosse septique* questionnaire!

Changes to P&O Ferry Routes

One of the question marks about the 2005 season is how the proposed cuts in P&O's ferry services might affect French holiday bookings - especially in Brittany and Normandy.

The plan is to close four of P&O's western Channel routes (with the exception of Portsmouth-Bilbao). Although two of P&O's ships are to be chartered out to Brittany Ferries, the reduced competition could result in increased ferry fares at the very least.

It is impossible to predict all the outcomes at this stage - but with cheap flights to France on the increase, more and more self-catering holidaymakers want to benefit from lower travel costs. This is, of course, good news for those holiday property owners



near convenient airports, but those same owners have to be prepared to supply a whole new range of additional items which are too bulky, fragile or heavy to pack in airline luggage - that's everything from towels and hairdryers to pool toys and PlayStations.

Please do let us know if you think your bookings are affected by the P&O plans this year - one easy way to send us any feedback will be to note your comments or concerns in the follow-up Advertising Poll in the New Year. We look forward to reading your views and reporting back to everyone.

Those Annoying Little Devils



This month's *Little Devils* looks at some of the methods used by spammers to get hold of your email address. You can't make yourself invisible, but there are several things you can do (or stop doing) to make yourself less of a target...



How do they find you?

- **Harvester Bots:** These are robot computer programs that work just like the crawlers used by search engines. They "read" the text on a web page and search for things that look like email addresses (i.e. strings of letters and numbers with a "@" in the middle and something like ".com" at the end). Then they follow any links on the page to find new pages to look at, and so on *ad infinitum*.
Remedies? Consider using just your domain name wherever your details appear on the internet: visitors would then have to come to your site to find your email address.
- **Sale of Mailing Lists:** There is a buoyant market in mailing lists - especially when they are in a single sector (such as holiday property owners). Every time you sign up for something on the web, your name will be added to a list somewhere. Reputable companies keep these lists completely private - but others sell them to spammers. **Remedies?** Don't sign up for things willy-nilly; don't use your business email address unless you have to - use a "disposable" address (Hotmail, AltaVista...) instead - if it starts getting spam, just replace it.
- **Viruses:** Many viruses contain programs which search for address books on an infected computer and then either spam those addresses directly or else pass them back to a central database. **Remedies?** Install a reputable anti-virus program (we recommend Norton - www.symantec.com), keep it bang up-to-date and scan everything at least once a week; install a firewall such as Norton or Zone Alarm (www.zonelabs.com) and/or turn on your Windows XP firewall.
- **Dictionary Attacks:** Spammers use computer programs to send emails to millions of made-up addresses based on popular strings of characters, some of which will turn out to be real. Often, these messages either ask automatically for an Outlook "delivery receipt" or else contain an "unsubscribe" link. If either of these produces a response, the spammer knows it is a real live email address in current use. **Remedies?** Never reply to spam; never click an "unsubscribe" link unless you remember subscribing; set Outlook to refuse all delivery receipts.

Next issue: Viruses, worms, Trojan horses... How do they differ? How do they work?

STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS!



Since featuring as the "Cornered" Clients in February's Newsletter, Kirk & Sally Ritchie have been busy ghost-busting in the Tarn! And in addition to running their gite and B&B business, their brand new house-hunting service was featured in the August issue of *French Property News* - you can read their article on the LetSites

website - just click on "what the press say".

If you have an interesting story which you think might make a good press article, do let us know (emma@letsites.com). And don't forget that *FPN* are looking for beautiful French houses to feature, too...

