

Clients Cornered

In 2003, Mike & Sue Douglas (www.le-murier.com) moved from South Africa to the Aveyron to run a delightful country hotel. Fifteen months on, we've "Cornered" them to find out about their first season in the hotel business.

Our first year at *Le Mûrier de Viels* has been a year of ups and downs - with a few disappointments, numerous happy surprises and an enormous amount of sheer hard work.

Before we could even open for our first season, however, we needed to upgrade the hotel rooms, sort out the garden (which was a complete wilderness) and make our own house habitable! As you might imagine, this meant a winter of physical work and quite a bit of extra cash... All the major jobs were done by extremely reliable and efficient local artisans, but due to the scarcity of skilled specialists here - and the increasing number of ex-pats arriving in this area - you do have to be patient and wait your turn, which can be quite frustrating when you have a deadline to meet.

At the same time, we had to start generating advance bookings for the hotel. We tried advertising in UK periodicals, but these were not very cost effective. Guide books and website links now seem to be the best methods for us, along with keeping "in" with the local tourist offices. In addition, new low-cost Ryanair flights into Rodez have hugely increased visitor numbers to this area.

Once our season started, we found that 70% of our guests were French (they really are a delight to host - they're always considerate and courteous and leave their rooms clean and tidy). We'd been speaking as much French as we could before opening, but correct "hotel business" phrases had to be learnt on-the-job! Also, we're always careful to greet everyone in French, but if their English is much better than our French, we tend to switch to English - much to *everyone's* relief!

To promote *Le Mûrier* to passing tourists (a major source of business for us), we have five signs on approaching roads. They have proved absolutely vital, mainly because they mention our two major selling-points - the swimming pool and the restaurant. The summers are hot and humid here, so the pool has been greatly appreciated by guests who prefer to relax and sunbathe, rather than go exploring. The restaurant (residents only) has also been busy. We serve *régional* dishes, along with a selection of Thai, South African and English specialities. We also offer a very substantial breakfast with fruit platters, which have proved very popular with everyone.

Limiting the restaurant to residents-only meant that we could run the business without any extra help last season. This year, however, we need someone to take on some of the daily workload and shall have the laundry washed commercially. We could try to save money by not employing anyone else, but maintaining a high level of service every single day of the season is exhausting.

Related to this, we now realise that having a totally independent private house at *Le Mûrier* is a particularly excellent asset. Although we didn't fully appreciate what a plus point this was going to be, we are now relieved that we can escape from the hotel at the end of each day. We strongly suspect that most people going into the hospitality business tend to underestimate the importance of privacy for their family - just as we did fifteen months ago.

Having now experienced all the seasons at *Le Mûrier*, we know that it is primarily a summer hotel - and the very low level of business in the winter has made us decide to close from October to March. Coming from South Africa, we have to admit that we find the winter months very bleak and uninviting here - something that we had not really expected or prepared ourselves for. Five months "off" for renovating, decorating and recharging the batteries could be worse, though!

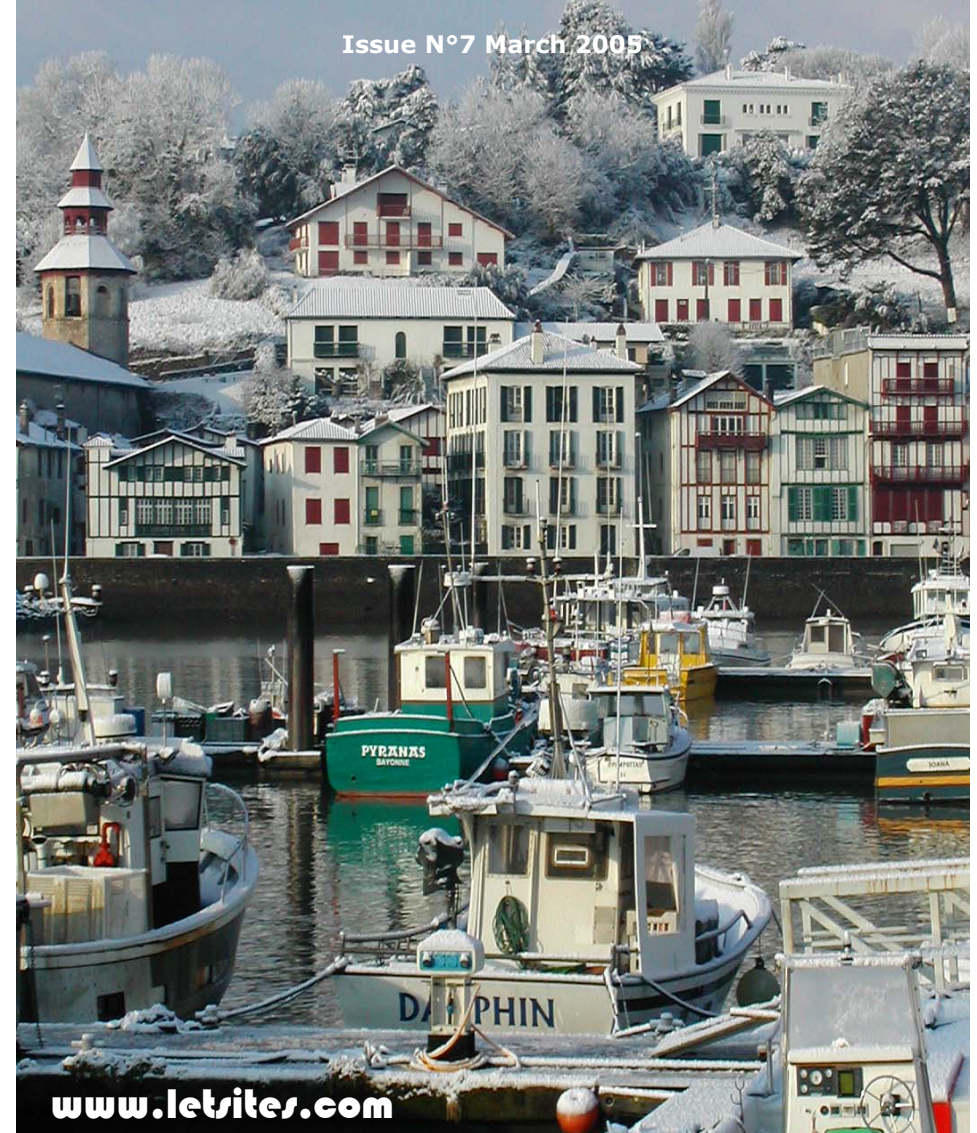
Finally, after a recent visit to South Africa, we may be about to change direction again. We think that trying to re-adjust to European weather after 35 years in the all-year-round sunshine is just too difficult. So, in case *you* happen to fancy a new challenge, we now hope to sell the business on and head back to the southern hemisphere for a bit more sun! It has been fun, though...



Sue & Mike Douglas

Letsites Newsletter

Issue N°7 March 2005



www.letsites.com

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

The LetSites Newsletter - March 2005

Welcome to the first LetSites Newsletter of 2005! After a generally slow start for bookings in January, we hope that they're now going well for everybody and that you're all looking forward to a very busy season.

In this issue of the Newsletter, we have news about changes being made to the "Getting Here" page on all LetSites websites. We also have details of our forthcoming Marketing Poll which will be on line and accessible to all clients from mid-March.

The Little Devils spot this time is a "Bluffer's Guide" to viruses, worms and Trojan Horses, and aims to demystify the differences between them. And finally, our Cornered Clients on the back page are Mike & Sue Douglas from the Aveyron.

If you would like to see any specific features included in a future Newsletter, please contact emma@letsites.com



Those Annoying Little Devils

People often use the terms virus, worm and Trojan Horse more or less interchangeably. But they are not at all the same thing - and knowing the difference between them might help you to protect your computer more effectively against their damaging effects...

- **Viruses:** A virus is a malicious computer program designed to replicate and spread itself to as many computers as possible. The damage caused can range from a "joke", to the total destruction of your files and even physical damage to your computer. Almost all viruses are attached to an executable file and are harmless until you "let them out" by opening the infected file. The spread of a virus from computer to computer is almost always the result of a human action carried out unwittingly, such as sharing infected files or forwarding emails with infected attachments. ***In almost every case, a virus can only harm your computer or spread itself to other computers with your help.***
- **Worms:** A worm is a special type of virus which can spread without any human help. A worm scours your hard disk for the addresses of other computer users (such as in your email Address Book), then makes multiple copies of itself and sends those via your internet connection (but without your knowledge) to the names it has found. It then does the same with their Address Books, and so on. Most worms will not harm your computer at all - their purpose is rather to bring down computer networks under the weight of the traffic created by sending out what can quickly become millions of email messages.
- **Trojan Horse:** A Trojan Horse appears to be a legitimate piece of software but can damage your computer when you run it. It may be a "freeware" program that you have downloaded because it looked useful, or a joke passed on by a friend. As well as harming your computer, some Trojans open a "back door" to allow malicious users to access your personal information. Unlike viruses, Trojans do not spread themselves to other computers directly.



What can you do?

- **If you don't know where it came from, don't open it!**
- **Install an anti-virus program** (we recommend Norton - www.symantec.com)
- **Keep bang up-to-date** with Windows, Word, Outlook, your anti-virus program...
- **Install a firewall** such as Norton or Zone Alarm (www.zonelabs.com) and/or turn on your Windows XP firewall.

Next issue: Adware, Spyware and how **not** to try to get rid of it.

The "Getting Here" Page



Some clients may have noticed that the commune location map on the "Getting Here" page of their website has been changed. We are now using MapQuest (www.mapquest.fr) for maps rather than Maporama primarily because the MapQuest maps are far more detailed and easier to read at a local level.

This will be phased in gradually for existing sites since each commune has to be done manually, but new sites will have MapQuest maps automatically.

The itineraries, however, will still come from Maporama (www.maporama.com)



The LetSites Marketing Poll



In May 2004, we held an online poll to find out where you've been advertising your property. We asked you about the brochures, magazines and websites you use, and also asked for your views about how effective you feel your publicity is overall.

Following the success of this first poll, a second poll relating to advertising media and marketing will be on line from mid-March. As before, all LetSites clients will receive an email informing them that the poll is open - and you will then have until midnight on 31 March to register your views. The summarised results should be available by the end of April - but, as with the first poll, the results will only be available to those who have participated.

In this second poll, we shall be asking you where you are advertising for the 2005 season and whether this advertising is generating ample enquiries and bookings for your business. We shall also be asking you how you made your decisions about where to advertise - was it price, prestige or panic? And do you have any (anonymous) advertising-related comments, advice or warnings to share with other LetSites clients? If so, we'd like to hear them! (By the way, even if you're not advertising for the 2005 season, we'd still like to hear your views.)

We do hope that everyone will want to take part again - the more responses we can gather, the more meaningful the results. Later on in the year, we shall be running another poll to find out about all those optional little extras you offer your clients - are they cost-effective and good for client relations - or just not worth the hassle?

STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS!

Since appearing as our Cornered Clients in September's Newsletter, David & Nydia Moss have also been featured in the October issue of French Property News. The article mentions their landscape gardener son, Christopher, whose business website (also designed by LuzMedia) can be visited at www.chrismossgardens.com

If you have an interesting story and would like a bit of extra publicity for your business, do get in touch with us.

