

Clients Cornered

Donna & Jay (www.gitesinangles.co.uk) set up their gîte business in the Vendée in 2003. Although only ten minutes from long sandy beaches, they decided that a swimming pool was going to be essential for their business - here's why...

Our Vendée farmhouse and outbuildings were perfect for converting into two large 4-bedroom gîtes and we had just the right amount of flat land alongside to allocate to a swimming pool - a facility we felt was going to be absolutely vital to attract holidaymakers.



The pool before...

We planned to construct the pool in May 2004 when our first gîte would be finished and the weather would be better. We were opening in July 2004, so we had just two months to complete the pool, landscape it and fence it.

Being ten minutes from the coast, you could argue that we didn't actually need a pool for our business, but we saw two big advantages. Firstly, what most people dream of doing on their holiday is chilling out by the pool - and secondly, you can charge a much higher rental.

We agreed that it had to be family-friendly with lots of shallow water for toddlers and young children to play in, but also large enough to accommodate up to 20 adults. We decided on a pool measuring 12m x 6m, with extra-wide steps in the shallow end for toddlers to play on. The depth of the water in the shallow end is 1.05m and the deep end is 1.55m.

Having settled on what sort of pool we wanted, we asked local friends for recommendations for pool construction companies. Local companies are a good place to start - they're much easier to get hold of and to badger if there's ever a problem (essential in high season), and they're also more likely to do a good job because they know you live just round the corner!

After receiving several quotes, we indeed chose a local company - and having seen several of the pools they'd constructed and spoken to the owners about the company's workmanship and time schedules, we knew we'd made the right decision. The company proposed a pool constructed with a concrete basin and a liner and a sterilising system which uses salt water (electricity passes through a cell in the water circuit to produce natural chlorine). Having a salt water pool is kinder to the skin than chlorine, which is important with toddlers and babies using the pool. A cost of 32,000€ was agreed and the final bill was not a centime more. And it took just three weeks to build - from the moment the first digger arrived to the last drop of water going into the pool!

The pool company offered various extras - such as paved areas and landscaping - but we decided to reduce the costs by doing most of the "extras" ourselves. We constructed the decking and safety fencing around the pool ourselves at a cost of 8,000€ (150m² of decking and 26 x 2m panels of fence plus a gate), which was a fraction of the cost quoted to us by the pool company. We also decided to install a pool heating system to extend our main season. We considered using solar panels, but ultimately they are far too weather-dependent. The heating system cost 7,000€.

If you visit our website, you'll see why we're so pleased. Mind you, we feel we can't really use the pool ourselves during the season. There are also extra responsibilities to consider, and to avoid any liability, our pool rules have to be rigorously enforced. For example, to limit the chances of alcohol-related accidents, we cover the pool and padlock the gate to the pool area from 8pm in the evening to 10am the next morning. The pool also has to be kept immaculately clean - not easy with up to 20 adults using the pool every day during the summer and all that sun cream washing off in the water! We use a manual sweeper and net each morning and evening to get rid of most of the dirt and use a Polaris robot cleaner to clean the bottom of the pool overnight. Once a week, we back-wash the filter to get rid of dirt in the system and clean right around the waterline.

So if you're considering constructing a pool, weigh up the pros and cons, set yourself a budget, get recommendations from locals with pools, shop around for detailed quotes, check the pool company's insurance and credentials, agree a timescale - and make sure you've organised the landscaping and safety fencing well in advance. Go on, take the plunge...!



... and after!



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

The LetSites Newsletter - September 2005

Welcome to the September Newsletter - and we hope that 2005 has been another successful season for all of you!

As promised, this Newsletter includes the first in a new series of articles exploring the world (and underworld!) of search engines. There's also news of the next online survey which is going to be quizzing you about "optional extras". And our Cornered Clients this time are Donna & Jay from the Vendée who offer some useful and practical advice about constructing a swimming pool for your business.

Some dates for your diary...

The publication dates for the 2006 holiday brochures are currently:

Chez Nous: printed during November - available early December (website updated first half of December)

Owners in France: printed late October - available early November (website updated end of October)

Bonnes Vacances: NO 2006 BROCHURE - website only - the ads for the 2006 season will appear from September onwards

2006 Tariff & Availability: Don't forget to update your tariff for the 2006 season before the brochures come out. Just send us your new prices and the dates of each tariff band. As soon as we've added the tariff to your site, you can log in to update your 2006 Availability Chart. By the way, if you already know dates & prices for your 2007 season (or even 2008!), those can be added to the website whenever you like.



At Your Service!

The forthcoming LetSites survey is all about the extra services you offer your clients during their stay. It will be available online from 1 October until midnight on 14 October. This survey was suggested by Helene Coxhead - to thank you, Helene, we'll be installing e-postcards on your site.

As more and more British people decide to rent out their French properties, the holiday rental market has become completely saturated in the most popular areas of France. As a consequence, property owners have had to continually think of new and more clever ways to differentiate themselves from the competition over the last few years.

Achieving this, however, is often easier said than done!

Should you offer meals? Should you provide free internet access? Should you have a children's play area - but what about all the safety issues? And if you don't live on site, how do you offer your clients that "little bit extra"? Or perhaps you feel that providing "optional extras" just aren't worth the extra hassle... Whatever your thoughts, we want to know!

By the way, at the end of the poll we'll be asking you for 2005 anecdotes. Did you have any disasters or disastrous clients during the summer? Or perhaps you had some nice surprises? Go on, make us laugh - or even cry!



Needles & Haystacks

Ten years ago, few people had access to the internet, so the idea of searching for a holiday on line was relatively new. In 1995, *Chez Nous* set up a website as an experiment and asked advertisers if they would like to be included. Although we had no internet access back then, we decided to volunteer. The experiment was a dismal failure. Out of 100 advertisers, only six letting weeks were sold via the *Chez Nous* site for the entire 1996 season. And three of those six were for our gîtes in the Pyrénées!

We were fascinated to know how the Dutch family who booked our gîte for three weeks had found us. They told us they'd used a search engine (it must have been Yahoo! - Google didn't yet exist) and typed in: "sea mountains pool gite". Our ad on the *Chez Nous* website was *the only result* that came up. Type that in to Google today and you get 173,000 results. Why? Well, that's what this series of articles will explore.

Since 1995, the internet has changed beyond all recognition and continues to evolve at an amazing rate. It started out with lofty, altruistic aims of making ordinary people everywhere better informed and more communicative with each other. The whole philosophy was about free exchange of information in a non-commercial environment. But big business has since made it a fiercely competitive, commercial marketplace.

In 1995, using a search engine to search for a holiday was easy because the number of relevant web pages was quite small. Today, the internet is vast and searching for a suitable holiday is like looking for a needle in a haystack. As the number of pages on the internet continues to mushroom, the search engines are constantly having to evolve more sophisticated methods of rating them. We'll look at how search engines work in the next issue. To prepare the ground, let's start with some definitions:

- **search engine** (e.g. Google) = computer programs which search their database of web pages for specified **search terms** & return a list of **relevant** pages
- **directory** = a list of web pages organised by topic - compiled automatically by its own search engine **spiders** (e.g. Yahoo!) or prepared manually by human editors (e.g. DMOZ/Open Directory)
- **spiders** (alias robots, bots, crawlers...) = computer programs which crawl around the net entirely automatically by following links - any new page found is stored, analysed, then added to that **search engine's** database of web pages
- **search terms** = the word(s) typed in by the surfer (e.g. "sea mountains pool gite")
- **results** = a list of pages identified as **relevant** matches for a set of **search terms**
- **relevance** = a score given by a search engine to a given web page to indicate how good a match it is for a given set of **search terms** - the criteria used by each search engine *differ widely*, they *change constantly* and are kept *highly secret*
- **meta tags** = details hidden in the code behind a web page - invisible to the viewer but visible to **search engines** and **browsers** - e.g. author, description, keywords...
- **browser** (e.g. Internet Explorer) a program running on your computer which turns the code behind web pages into text, images and sounds on your computer screen

Next issue: How Search Engines & Spiders Work



STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS! STOP PRESS!

Since being Cornered in June's Newsletter, Helen & Keith Archibald have been offering catering advice to *French Property News* readers! Their article from July's *FPN* is now on the LetSites website.

Also, David & Nydia Moss and their son, Chris Moss (www.chrismossgardens.com), were featured on the *French Entree* website in August.