



The Handyman France Annual Awards for 2017

Welcome to the **Handyman France Annual Awards**. This is where we take a tongue-in-cheek look at the achievements of those countries sending the most memorable tourists to France in 2017. In order to qualify for an award, guests need to excel in areas such as cleanliness; dirtiness; helpfulness; awkwardness; and any other qualities that are notable, or that could go under the general heading of egregiousness.

Identities are, as ever, concealed to protect the guilty.

Every year we pay homage to the consistent 1.5% of all guests who prove to be, shall we say, difficult. This 1.5% proves the **Handyman France 1st Law of Holiday Rentals**, which states that - *'If a guest can, a guest will. Break it, bend it, bugger it up, lose it, destroy it, complain about it.'* This percentage never varies, and we've never figured out why this is. Of course, the 98.5% disproves that law, but it's much more fun to focus on the minority!

This year's awards ceremony will be a lavish affair. We're thinking of hiring a major venue - perhaps even the cafeteria in the Leclerc supermarket in Carcassonne. (Why not? We once saw a wedding reception being held there.) We've already had a reply from one country's ambassador, though His Excellency doesn't seem to realise that in English, 'off' is the second word.

We're also lining up a list of celebrities to present the awards. Note, I said *a list*, not A-List. In view of one reason the Irish family won the *Steptoe Award*, to present it we have the Emerald Isle's longest serving lavatory attendant from the Bogside. We hope he will bring a breath of fresh air to the proceedings. (The Awards list for 2016 didn't include the annual *Steptoe Award* as no properties were left in a particularly bad state. We wondered if this was a fluke or a sign of things to come. It was a fluke. This year there were no fewer than four contenders.)

Nothing in the following text is anything other than true, no matter how unreal it may seem. (*"The difference between fiction and reality? Fiction has to make sense."* - Tom Clancy)

This year's entries are -

- Australia
- Belgium
- Canada
- France
- Germany
- Ireland
- Spain
- UAE
- UK
- USA

It's good to see the return of some countries who have been missing for the last year or two.

The Coldplay 'Lost' Award (Coldplay is a popular beat combo - apparently) goes to American tourists who emailed to warn they'd be late as they had stopped off for a meal. I wondered about how bad the service can be in the restaurant. This was on the Sunday afternoon. They were due to arrive on Thursday. I phoned her. She was adamant that they were booked in to arrive that day. We were unable to contact the owners to establish if we had the wrong dates, so after some frantic rescheduling we were on site ready for them. They did not arrive. I rang them again. They were in Ireland.

The Charles Penrose 'Laughing Policeman' Award was last won in 2013 by Germany, but this year goes to UK. The intended humour of the '*Fingerpoken Verboten*' sign in the pool pump room was fully appreciated by the guests, and gave rise to a string of emails in pidgin German, most of which I suspect weren't really understood by either of us. The irony of the last recipient being German, and the reason for this year's award, hasn't been lost on us.

The same family also win the **Stan Butler (Busman's Holiday) Award**. The internet had only been connected a few weeks before they arrived, and was not performing particularly well. His job in IT meant he understood what was wrong much more than I did (my IT knowledge amounts to 2/3 of the square root of zero), or come to that the service provider. He fixed it before he left. I wouldn't be surprised if the wifi signal now reaches the suburbs of Berlin.

Not to be outdone by a double-winning UK family, the US wades in with a quadruple winner, plus a very special lifetime achievement award. Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear...

- Starting with **The Albert Einstein Award** - when they phoned me prior to arriving, the conversation went like this - me, "Hello"; guest, "Geoff?"; me, "Yes"; guest - garbled French with a terrible accent and several English words thrown in. Me, "I'm guessing your first language is English. Perhaps English would be easier?"; guest, "Who are you?"; me, "Geoff"; guest, "Why have you answered the phone?" The conversation at the house wasn't much better.
- **The Moody Blues 'Go Now' Award** - twenty minutes *after* the check-out* time, the leader decided to go for shower. (* Am I alone in thinking that Ronnie Barker's '*chuck-out*' in his *Pismonunciation* sketch makes more sense?)
- They nearly won the *Steptoe Award*, but were marginally beaten by Ireland. However, as such close runners up, they qualify for a special **Christina Aguilera 'Dirty' Award** (I don't know what her singing is like, but her spelling is dreadful). Within half an hour of arriving, the kitchen resembled a bomb site. The house was utterly filthy when they left. Huge stains on the dining room table cloth. Grease everywhere in the kitchen, so thick it could have been scraped off. Dirty cups and plates were in every bedroom.
- **The Carole Bayer Sager 'You're Moving Out Today' Award** - all the fans for the entire house were moved into one bedroom. Anything that wasn't nailed down had been moved. It took an hour just to put things back where they should be.
- All of which qualifies them for a **Lifetime Achievement Award for Hindrance to Gîte Management**. This kind of behaviour must surely have taken a lifetime to develop. How do they survive from one day to the next?

Happily, we can return, albeit briefly, to some good news. Namely, the much coveted **Head Office Seal of Approval** ('Head Office' being wossername, you know, the wife). It is awarded by her personally to those leaving the property exceptionally clean and tidy. This year she's spoilt for choice, with no fewer than four contenders. Whilst two UK groups came very close to lifting the trophy, it is shared between - a) a Belgian family because despite having two kids under school age, and leaving the property at six-thirty in the morning, the house was spotlessly clean; and b) a French family who departed at four in the morning and still managed to leave the house impeccable (or if you prefer, in French, '*impeccable*'). If they can do it...

...why not these winners? **The Steptoe Award** is for the dirtiest guests. It goes to Ireland. The family of four seemed OK at the meet and greet, but the house was a tip when they left. It took eight man-hours to clear up. Dirty dishes in the cupboards; empty booze bottles everywhere; both waste bins overflowing, despite the collection day being the day before they left; urine stains on a mattress protector; filthy toilets (with faecal* stains on the rim - at the front. How does anyone do that?); the list goes on. Among the worst we've ever seen.

* In no fewer than four properties, three different nationalities managed to leave their mark, so to speak, in this way. Is there some sort of epidemic that we're unaware of? Or is sitting side-saddle trending on *Faecebook* (sic)?

There was another close contender for the *Head Office Seal of Approval* with a British family who had stripped all the beds, placed all the linen ready for laundering and left the house very clean and tidy. However, when the sofa's fitted cover was removed along with the tightly fitting seat cushions, there was a spoon underneath. I doubt we will ever figure out quite how or why anyone managed put it there. Another spoon was found amongst the bedding. Yet another was found underneath one of the beds. You've guessed it – the **Mr Spoons Award** for this family.

The Derek and Clive (“I'm going to complain”) Award goes to UK. After five days of poor weather, they started complaining about all sorts. But if the kitchen really was dirty on arrival, for instance, wouldn't they have noticed it within an hour or two? After five days, it's impossible to prove anything either way. Were they hoping for a refund to offset the additional costs incurred for day-trips because of the weather, I wonder? Or maybe they were trying to preserve their damage deposit because they thought they had broken the awning – which they had not (I suspect they were turning the handle the wrong way).

The Vapors 'Turning Japanese' Award (The Vapors was an 'English new wave and power pop band' c.1980 – does anyone know what that actually means?) – an Englishman who had trouble getting comfortable because the bed-frame was getting in the way solved the problem by removing the aforementioned bed-frame and putting the mattress on the floor. He also admitted it wasn't so far to fall if wine got the better of him. I'm not sure which is the real reason.

We're thinking about having DNA tests done to help establish which country should receive the **Yeti (or Bigfoot) Award**. Whilst **Handyman France** is accustomed to finding odd things in swimming pool filtration systems (sweet wrappers, lolly-pop sticks, toys (including a plastic frying pan), small animals (especially frogs of the amphibious type), elastic bands, hair-clips, hankies, shoes, socks etc), an enormous toenail clipping measuring a full 32mm (or 1.25” in old money) across is unusual. The rental house had mostly UK visitors, but not exclusively. It's unlikely that Nepal will be declared the winner though. (Yes, I know it's sad that I actually measured it. But I like to be thorough. OK?)



Congratulations to the good old US of A! Six awards in one year. Though with just one group accounting for five of them, Britain's four separate winners, totalling five awards, show that Team GB is holding its' own.

It is always worth repeating that 98.5% of guests present no problems whatsoever, and fall within the 'normal' spectrum (whatever that means). The awards such as *Steptoe*, *Einstein*, *Derek and Clive* etc. are shared between a tiny minority of just 1.5% of all the people we meet. Whilst national stereotypes do exist, in our experience the Yanks are the least demanding and most courteous; the French are the most demanding; the Belgians are the cleanest; the British, sadly, are generally the dirtiest despite this year's results; Australians are either the most laid-back or the most miserable; and Germans have a much better sense of humour than they are credited with. But as human nature transcends national boundaries and languages, there are plenty of exceptions to all of these. Remember that *all sweeping statements are untrue!*

In a year when the human race seems to be facing unprecedented problems, it's comforting to realise that human nature hasn't changed one iota.

And as Frank Zappa observed, 'There is more stupidity in the universe than hydrogen – and it has a longer shelf-life'.