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## The Handyman France Idiots' Guide to Setting Up a Gîte

*Please note that no guidance is offered regarding tax or registration. These are matters for the experts.*

So you have your house, and no matter how grand or tiny it is, you're proud of it. You decide to rent it to holidaymakers. And why not? Advertise. Take the bookings. And let the money roll in. Easy...

If only it was. There are many things that need to be done before you can even advertise. This guide should help you with not only the obvious, but also the subtle and perhaps even the bizarre.

**Is your house legal?** There are some legal points that are obscure almost to the point of absurdity. For instance, whilst your electrical system may be perfectly legitimate for private use, the requirements for rented properties vary somewhat. If you have a pool, are adequate safety measures in place that are *recognised in French law*? Do you have smoke detectors? How about CO detectors if you have a log fire or gas boiler etc.? Just because you're only renting the house in summer and no one will use the log fire, it doesn't mean you are exempt. The law is nearly always a blunt instrument. Either you need something or you don't.

Now that it's legal, **what does it look like?** White walls and ceilings are in some ways practical, but they show every mark. If white bedding is also used, your house starts to look like an explosion in a bleach factory. If the house is modern with large patio doors etc., you can safely go over the top with colours and make it look fabulous. Bright bedding, say, that guests wouldn't dream of having at home can be just right on holiday. But avoid plain colours – it shows every tiny stain. If the house is older, particularly if stone built, then more traditional colours and styles are needed. Don't buy the cheapest of anything. Nor the most expensive, because...



...the *Handyman France 1<sup>st</sup> law of holiday rentals* states that if a guest can, a guest will. Lose it; abuse it; bend it; break it; destroy it; steal it; fiddle with it. Much of the following is dedicated to the dark art of either preventing the 1<sup>st</sup> law from applying, or at the very least overcoming its' effects. It is therefore essential that you have a **damage deposit** from your guests. And as cleared funds in your account, not a cheque to be returned after they've left. Cheques can be stopped or bounced.

Do you have a **property manager** in place to deal with problems can can arise? Blocked pipes; electrical appliance failures; storm damage; leaking taps; etc.

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**How much bedding, towels, crockery etc. do you need?** As a rule of thumb, three items of linen for each body that the house can accommodate. One on; one in the wash; and a spare. In the event that, say, a pillow case is ruined and needs to be replaced, don't kid yourself that anyone will have time on a busy Saturday in the summer to go play hunt the thimble for one or two pillow cases to match those already in use. Have the spares ready in a secure storage area. Enough crockery/cutlery for a couple more than the maximum number in case they invite friends for a meal. If you have single beds that can push together to make doubles, remember to take this into account when calculating the amount of bedding needed. Wine glasses, cups, plates etc. are subject to accidental breakages – be sure to have sufficient so that a shortage of dinner plates doesn't become a crisis. Do you want to provide pool/beach towels?

Aside from the blindingly obvious equipment (beds; cooker; fridge; etc.) thought is needed for the less obvious. Provided there's somewhere to use it, a BBQ. Try not to have it in the garage when guests arrive. Believe it or not, **Handyman France** had to explain to one Russian family that the BBQ had to be used *outside*. Bottles of all purpose cleaner; toilet ducks; scouring pads; vacuum cleaner; mop and bucket – the list is endless. Candles/torches in case of a power cut. Tea and coffee. Toilet rolls. Bin bags. Oven gloves. Loungers. Patio chairs/table. A welcoming bottle of wine perhaps?



**We strongly advise against providing parasols.** The wind can go from zero to borderline hurricane in a nanosecond, and guests don't always close them when they go out. Having advertised your property as having them, when they're destroyed you have little option but to keep replacing them.

As well as tourist information, a guest handbook with vital information about the property is useful. How to operate the pool cover; the location of the fuse board and main stopcock; emergency numbers; etc.

You will need a **secure storage** area for spare linen etc. If guests have access, they will use it. All of it! Ideally, it should be big enough to have a system for storage, rather than everything just piled up. Vast amounts of time can be lost on changeover days looking for that elusive duvet cover. The pool pump room should also be off-limits to prevent guests resetting the timer etc. Perhaps the garage should also be secure if it contains personal/valuable property.

However, **make certain that the fuse-board etc. is easily accessible.**

The most challenging element of the whole operation is often making sure that the whole property will be ready when each guest arrives. The **house cleaning and laundry** is quite different to that which is done in your own home. Not many people clean the entire house and do all the laundry in

one day, certainly not to a strict deadline. Unless you will be doing it all yourself, you'll need to find someone to do it for you. And the pool cleaning. And the garden maintenance.

Be careful of what **Handyman France** refers to as the *little-woman-in-the-village syndrome*. It's not only illegal to pay a neighbour cash for the cleaning etc., there's also the risk that there's a lack of commitment that will mean you will be let down. Repeatedly, we receive calls from people whose cleaner has decided, mid-season, that she no longer wants to do the job. Cash-in-hand workers are also uninsured – when anything goes wrong, who picks up the bill? It's worth paying the extra for a registered business to do the work.

Are you going to have your guests met and greeted (or is it met and gret?). Let's settle for **M&G!** Whilst this may seem an unnecessary expense, it can pay dividends. Not only does it provide for a happy arrival, essential information can be passed on – where the water stopcock is; fuse-board; first aid kit; how to operate the pool safety equipment; rubbish collection days and where to leave the bins; etc. The greeter will also get an idea of how well behaved the guests are likely to be, thus flagging up in advance if difficulties can be expected.

Meeting and greeting does not, however, guarantee trouble free guests. Despite the subject being explained to one group, they still left two overflowing rubbish bins *inside* the house on a changeover day. Not only that, it was the collection day, but by the time we arrived it was too late.

There are other encounters that are worth telling as well...

**Handyman France** once encountered a family who used white paint from the garage to paint over blood stains on a sheet. You really couldn't make it up, could you... Never, ever underestimate peoples' ability to be stupid. Over the years, **Handyman France** has encountered many people who, frankly, shouldn't be allowed out on their own. A group of 12 adults, none of whom could figure out how to turn on a shower; one man who needed to be visited twice to be shown how to open and close a window; a woman who couldn't figure out the dishwasher because it was, in fact, the fridge; a guest who complained, bitterly, that it was too hot and sunny and she was getting sunburn; the list is seemingly endless.



However, these are the exceptions, albeit that there seems to be a lot of them. Each year, it's a **consistent 1.5% of all guests who cause problems**. The overwhelming majority are perfectly reasonable, well-adjusted people who simply want to relax for a week or two, and will take care of your property.

If properly equipped and managed, your house should return a modest profit. At the very worst it should generate enough revenue to offset the cost of ownership. Don't think that you can run it as a hobby though. Establish a clear business footing, with clear rules for everyone involved.

Bon renting!