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Get an accountant and ditch cupboard doors – one couple on how they run their French holiday let

Rupert Springfield and his husband, Franck van der Hooft, are not only living the dream, they're earning a living doing it.

"We probably work harder now than we did when we had jobs," Springfield admits. "But we have very little stress. We spend a lot of time outdoors. When we walk the dog we never come across anyone else. It's so peaceful and unspoilt. We are so grateful to have been able to buy a wonderful home with the budget we had, but also have a business that earns us a good income."

Springfield, 46, grew up in Wiltshire, but relocated to the Dordogne in 2015; the department ranks second only to Paris in terms of expat numbers in France. He and Van der Hooft, who is Dutch, had been living in Amsterdam since 2000, but by 2013 had tired of city life and were looking for a career change – Springfield worked in charity fundraising and Van der Hooft in live entertainment production.

"We'd always thought of doing something in hospitality. We were on holiday in the Dordogne and two things hit us," Springfield says. "How affordable properties are, and how much the gîte owners were earning. There was also the amazing weather and food. And anywhere you drive there is a stunning forest or a 'Disney' château. We realised if we started a business there would be a tourist market there already."

They spent two years house-hunting for the perfect gîte, and viewed 69 properties,

but couldn't find what they wanted on their budget. On the verge of giving up, they found a "sleeping beauty" – a classic Dordogne farmhouse with several outbuildings that had been uninhabited for decades and subsequently abandoned after an attempt at renovation in the 1990s.

"When we first drove up to the house we climbed a winding road through a forest," recalls Van der Hooft, 56. "All of a sudden there was an expanse of sky and fields. It was 'Oh my God'. We had been disappointed 69 times before. We thought if this could be it, it would be heaven."

The couple bought it for €427,000, after selling their flat in Amsterdam for €335,000. They had set aside €300,000 to renovate the gîte, the cottage and several outbuildings – one was turned into a summer kitchen for the guests overlooking the swimming pool, others into games rooms; the tobacco-drying barn was converted into a two-bedroom home for the couple. "We didn't know one end of a screwdriver from the other when we started," Springfield says. "But we had brilliant builders who worked six days a week, 12 hours a day and lived on site, and managed to do everything in eight months. They were on time and on budget. Which meant we could open in June 2016 for the big summer months."

Their two gîtes, Le Mas (five bedrooms) and Le Mazet (one bedroom), have been going strong ever since, with 66 per cent repeat bookings. Now the couple are offering to pass on their knowledge. They have opened Gîte Guru, a consultancy that helps expats to set up a gîte or fine-tune an existing one, advising on everything from what type of property to buy and the pros and cons of different booking websites to business plans, dealing with guests and interior design. Here are some of their top tips.



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BE AU FAIT WITH THE POST-BREXIT RULES

Brexit may have killed the dream of moving to France for many Brits, but it's still possible. Under the new rules, if you want to live there for more than 90 days in 180, you must get a long-stay visa before you move. Springfield recommends welcometofrance.com and the Visa Wizard, which will help you to determine which visa you need and how to get one. "The French are very active in supporting you through the process. They want you to come still."

The extra bureaucracy may in a strange way force would-be gîte owners to plan the business better, according to Springfield. "If you're opening a gîte, and you want the long-stay visa, you now have to demonstrate its economic viability. You have to include a written presentation and business plan and a multi-annual budget, which we can help with."

Once you arrive in France you should

apply for a residency permit from your department prefecture – times vary by location, but you should receive it within a few months of applying. Once you obtain it you are eligible for French healthcare (a Carte Vitale). See the expat website frenchentree.com for details.

CRUNCH THE NUMBERS

The most crucial thing gîte owners need is an accountant to help them register the business. "We pay our accountant €600 a year and he is worth his weight in gold," Springfield says. "He said, 'Tell me everything about your finances, mortgage, your expectations for business, if you have a pension. He took all that info and said you must register this type of business. Accountants can also advise whether you qualify for the micro-entrepreneur scheme, in which you only pay tax on 29 per cent of your revenue.'"

To find an accountant who is au fait



GITE UP AND GO



DORDOGNE €750,000

Five kilometres from the market town of Ribérac, the property is a house split into two gîtes, plus a cottage. There are two pools and a spa. frenchestateagents.com



BRITTANY €755,000

An eight-bedroom stone manor with a sauna near Lorient. It also has a three-bedroom apartment and a two-bedroom house. sextantproperties.com



DORDOGNE €672,000

A 19th-century former mill with nine bedrooms, divided into three apartments, in Saint-Aulaye. sextantproperties.com



"You don't want your own bedroom overlooking the guest pool – you won't be able to open your windows in the summer."

Outside space is as important as the rooms inside. "You've got to have areas where they can lie in sun or shade, play games, eat, drink aperitifs. It's no good putting out two sunloungers with no parasol. All guests want to be outside when they are on holiday, even in bad weather."

CHOOSE FURNISHINGS AND FITTINGS CAREFULLY

Many gîtes are "filled with mismatched or tatty furniture from Granny's attic or brocantes [flea markets] or inherited on purchase," Springfield says. "If we say it's a dumping ground when we walk in, then the holidaymaker will feel the same. Take the time to create an aspirational space and you'll do very well." Good design

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needn't cost the earth, either. When you have a business number in France, many shops and designers offer a trade discount for gîtes, some by as much as 50 per cent. "And because our budget was tight, Franck spent four months scouring the internet to get the best deals. Baths came from Germany, taps from England."

Also ask yourself, how easy is the furniture to clean? The couple have a big wooden kitchen table with Perspex dining chairs, a polished concrete worktop and all hard floors – no carpets. There are huge walk-in showers with no glass doors. "Glass shower doors are a nightmare to clean limescale from," Van der Hooft says.

OWN YOUR USP

Every gîte should be full in July and August, Springfield says. "The challenge is filling it the weeks either side of that. Everyone is overly optimistic about the length of the season. We manage to do six months, April to October, but you have to be realistic. If you can't fill April, that's another €10,000 you won't be earning that year. Your USP is crucial."

There are 2,024 classified gîtes in the Dordogne. Of these, 32 per cent have been classified one and two star, 53 per cent are three star (so lots of competition), 13 per cent are four star and 1 per cent are five star. "If you get a five-star rating, that sets you apart from everyone else. If you're three star and a guest ticks three star, you'll be hidden away in hundreds of results on booking.com. If you're five star and a guest ticks five star, you'll appear in a handful of results and be seen. The rating is based on amenities and comforts. When an inspector comes, he'll ask you 200 questions."

Le Mas and Le Mazet have in total six en suite bedrooms – a rarity in the Dordogne. Guests are offered a morning delivery of fresh croissants and baguettes, and access to yoga and Pilates instructors. To qualify as a five star, beds must have four pillows, toppers, full-length mirrors, light switches next to the bed, double plugs next to the sink for shaver and hairdryer, a heated pool and websites in different languages.

Their primary USP, though, is the view. "We were convinced a view would be what people would look for on holiday," Springfield says. "You work really hard. You have five precious weeks off. You don't want to be stuck in a place that is worse than your own house."

"We often go out on the property and look around," Van der Hooft says. "We see the fields, the houses baking in the sun and the deer and we pinch ourselves."

giteguru.fr; lemasdordogne.com

