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PROPERTY
PROFESSIONAL
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DRIVING OUT THE COWBOYS

OPP's top 20 movers and shakers
call for bad practices to stop now



The real Bulgaria

Facts, not
fiction, in this
CEE favourite

Selling off the map

Botswana, Libya,
Lapland and
the Philippines

Inside: OPPLive 06 supplement

YOUR COMPLETE GUIDE TO THE ONLY EVENT FOR THE TRADE – SEMINAR
PROGRAMME, TIPS TO MEET BUSINESS PARTNERS AND TESTIMONIALS

FRANCE STATS AT A GLANCE

Population: 60,656,178
 Overseas visitors in 2005: 75.3 million
 Currency: Euro
 UK visitors in 2005: 11,059,000
 GDP forecast for 2006: 2 per cent
 House price inflation 2005: 10 per cent
 Average agents' commission: 6-8 per cent
 Legal fees: up to 10 per cent

generation, hoping to get a piece of the French property pie. To break into this long-established market place will take more than good luck. FPN's Schrader remarks: "From the British buyers' perspective, things are a little more difficult, mirroring the slower conditions at home. There's a lower level of confidence in the UK, and this has caused a drop in the sales of French property to British buyers." So who is new on the block, and how do they differentiate themselves?

UP AND COMING

Assetz France founder Stuart Law says he was the first to bring French leaseback to the UK investor community on a commercial basis in 2002, and he makes similar claims about introducing packaged buy-to-let with pre-tenanted property.

Law's company is part of the Assetz Group, an investment specialist offering UK and overseas property, buying assistance, finance and after-sales service. Assetz France is UK-based, runs a small but fully bilingual team, and has direct relationships with key developers and suppliers in France. Law agrees with his competitors that new-build is by far the most noticeable trend in French property sales to foreign buyers, who seem to be forsaking the charm of character properties for the practicality of "lock-up-and-leave" products.

Law says: "Apartments in the southern coastal areas are becoming particularly popular among Brits who don't want to spend their long weekend visits mowing the lawn and doing DIY," and Assetz France is very much hanging its hat on new-build. Consequently, the company's after-sales team is twice the size of its sales team, as the typical off-plan purchase can take up to 18 months from the signing of the initial contract to handover, and Assetz offers its clients a long term service contract, recognizing the value of maintaining the client relationship long after the purchase is completed. In common with some of the old guard, Assetz is keen on seminars, hosting free monthly open days and £55 investment training courses in London, Manchester and Birmingham. Law explains that most of his company's business comes via these events, which attract those who have already chosen France as their destination but who want to crunch numbers before signing on the dotted line. Assetz has a presence at property investor shows, but avoids French property shows: "they just don't work for us", says Law.

ALTERNATIVE ACTION

For Crème de Languedoc co-founder Alex Charles, winning the French property game is all about zigging when others are zagging. He explains: "VEF, Latitudes and others have boldly gone where no man went before, but these days, everyone is jumping on the French property bandwagon, and the market is swamped with agents and intermediaries, many of whom are struggling to keep their heads above water." Charles' company Crème de Languedoc was launched in 2005, at a point when the market was well and truly mature: in order to survive,

"Other companies offer property, and that's it. Period. Crème de Languedoc aims to tap into the fact that property buying is a journey, both literally and emotionally."

Alex Charles, Crème de Languedoc co-founder.



Alex Charles & Greg Taylor

Charles and his partner Greg Taylor opted to specialise: the company covers only one region of France (Languedoc, a property hot spot for Brits), in line with the current trend in website strategy that suggests offering greater depth of content makes for an "authority" site, and gives buyers and vendors more relevant products and sales leads. The company is buyer-centric (vendors are obliged to provide far more property details than the norm), and being based online, operating costs are kept to a bare minimum. The site, www.creme-de-languedoc.com, has tools to help clients (agents or private individuals) market their rentals or properties for sale, including downloadable leaflets, a property value calculator and an interactive area finder.

Charles explains his vision for his set-up: "Other companies offer property, and that's it. Period. Crème de Languedoc aims to tap into the fact that French property buying is a journey, both literally and emotionally. There's a huge 'Plan Your Visit' section to help househunters find flights, car hire and places to stay while they're on their viewing trips. Crème de Languedoc recognises that for many people, buying a place in France is not just about property, they're buying into the lifestyle, so we give them masses of detailed tourist information, we suggest days out, great wining and dining options, must-see sights, tell them what's on and where, or how to find the best beaches. It's all about tapping into the French dream."

Open days and seminars, shows and briefings, books and websites: there are plenty of marketing tools, but what are the secrets of success? Dick Schrader has the last word: "Agents have to have a high level of professionalism. Whether they cover just a small part of France or many regions, they need to be knowledgeable about the buying process and the areas they represent. To compete with the established players, new entrants will have to offer the very best service possible – many of the complaints we hear at FPN are from potential buyers who aren't getting the information they asked for, or whose calls aren't returned. Agents need to be passionate and have a really comprehensive background in the products they offer; it's probably unwise to try and be all things to all men."

ALL SOURCES

- * www.newsroom.barclays.co.uk
- **World Tourism Organisation report, 2005 and Maison de la France, February 2006

"Although we are totally convinced that the French market will remain strong and steady, we do not necessarily see major future growth."
 founder
 Liz Oliver,
 Francophiles



The days when Brits only wanted traditional homes in the Dordogne and Brittany are 'long gone'. VEF says demand for new-builds is up while Asset

for securing press coverage; another booklet, called "Exploring France and its properties", is due this month.

She believes that getting in front of prospects is key. "The more face-to-face contact we can have, the more successful we can be," she says, hence her decision to significantly increase the number of seminars held in 2006.

Latitudes is another heavy-hitter in the French real estate game. Set up in 1988 by Penny Zoldan, the London-based company comprises a team of 10 negotiators plus admin support, and claims to be the largest UK-based operator selling only French property. Latitudes works with a network of 250 licensed French agents and the larger French developers, all of whom are visited and vetted by Zoldan in person: "The local French agents know their areas inside out, and they are certainly best qualified to show Latitudes clients around, so we make appointments with them and no extra charges are made.

Liz Oliver has a long history of selling French homes. She set up Francophiles in 1988, and today she works with a network of 70 French agents covering the whole country ("the days when the Brits only wanted to buy in the Dordogne, Provence and Brittany are long gone", she remarks), as well as taking on property mandates direct from owners.

COMMISSIONS

The company has recently opened a sister branch in south Brittany. "It's an area where we sell particularly well, so it's worth our while setting up there," explains Liz. It also has plans to open more Francophiles offices, "but not franchises", she stresses, with Charente earmarked as the next location.

Interestingly, Francophiles has branched out beyond France. "Although we are totally convinced that the French market will remain strong and steady, we do not necessarily see major future