

For Rent

LIVE LIKE A LOCAL WHEN YOU TRAVEL ABROAD.

By Kathleen Guthrie

Used to imagine our backyard playhouse was a log cabin on the western frontier, where I made mud pies and lived out *Little House on the Prairie* fantasies. These days, my idea of playing house is considerably more sophisticated, and my vision of a home away from home is a cottage along the Côte d'Azur. The French would call my cottage a *gîte* (pronounced *zheet*), or "holiday home."

"The benefits of renting a home on your vacation," says Ed Kushins of HomeExchange.com, "are that it's more comfortable than staying in a hotel, and you get to experience living there as a local." Options abound, from poolside villas, to luxurious châteaux, to trendy Parisian apartments. Visit www.gite.com to start dreaming, and follow these tips to make sure your vacation is *très magnifique*:

1. Location, site, endroit. Start by searching for an area that has activities you want to pursue, such as wine tasting, hiking, or touring historical landmarks. When you've identified a neighborhood, or have the address of a rental property, look it up on a site such as www.maps.yahoo.com. You'll get a sense of proximity to train stations, metro stops, and attractions. Guidebooks will list nearby restaurants, marketplaces, and shops, which may give an indication of how safe (or unsafe) that area might be.

Another thing to consider is how you will get there (Rental car? Arranged pickup service from the airport?) and how you'll get around once you're there. Research your options and book well in advance.

2. Ask about amenities. Will all linens be provided? What about towels for the beach? Are there extra charges for cleaning services or Internet access? Ask which utilities are covered. Telephone usage, for example, may be restricted to local calls, requiring the purchase of a telephone card at a local newsstand or market. In some cases, your deposit may be held until basic utility charges are deducted. Get the terms in writing.

3. Contact references. First-time renters Pilar Dowell and her girlfriends were uneasy about leasing a *piéd-à-terre* based on an Internet listing. Fortunately the company, Paris Perfect (www.parisperfect.com or 415-287-3397 in the

US), posted references. "We called or e-mailed several people who had stayed in the exact same apartment we wanted, and they confirmed that the rooms were even better than the photos shown on the Web site," she says. "I was also very impressed to learn how secure the building was." She reports that hearing how the management company was reliable helped seal the deal. *Paris Perfect currently lists 38 apartments available for a minimum one-week stay.*

4. Consider a house swap. You can possibly save thousands of dollars with a home exchange. "It's great for a family," says Kushins, since hotel accommodations can be cramped, as well as expensive, and require you to eat meals out. For a \$99.95 annual fee, members from around the world connect to swap homes for weekends or extended stays. "We have over 3,400 listings in France, and we're getting 10 to 20 new listings [in France] every day," Kushins reports, meaning there are many opportunities for finding a match. Plus, a "Notify Me" feature alerts you when a new listing is added from an area you've specified.

Digsville.com (another home exchange site) displayed 68 listings in France on a recent search, from a stone mill house in the countryside of Mougins to a 3 bedroom/3 bath apartment in Cannes; both owners sought exchanges in the US. Browsing is free; a one-year membership is \$44.95. Check out their "U-Rate" rating system where exchangers can report positive and negative experiences. And "read the listing very carefully for special conditions," advises a posted tip. "A person with allergies may want to stay in a dander-free home."

5. Comprehensive travel insurance is a must. There's always the chance your flight could be delayed or—in light of recent industry upheavals—the airline itself could fold. The last thing you want to be dwelling on while you're stuck at the airport is the loss of your nonrefundable deposit for lodgings. Contact American Express's Global Travel Shield (800-332-4899 or www.globaltravelshield.com/CTN) or Access America (800-729-6021 or www.etravelprotection.com) to learn what is covered in the case of a cancelled or interrupted trip. ■