



La Maison Alex Newsletter

October 2019

DR GRAHAM & SANDRA BROWN

Background

We like to update our rentals statistics at the start of each Newsletter and here we are at the end of the 2019 summer season having had another very successful and very hot summer in Castelnau de Guers

The updated (possibly boring) statistics which serve to underline both the popularity of La Maison Alex and illustrate that we as proprietors have gained a lot of experience and hopefully learnt what our guests like and dislike from the feedback you have given us over the years.

- **we have now been hosting guests since 2007 so the 2020 season will be our 14th season**
- **we have had 114 guests so far**
- **8 guests have made repeat bookings wit 2 guests having stayed with us 4 times**
- **our guests have primarily been from the UK but also from France, Ireland, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Canada, Channel Islands and incredibly, Australia**
- **we have had overwhelmingly positive feedback from all our guests and have only ever had 2 very minor complaints in 13 years**

Our motivation for hosting guests is to make use of the villa when we are not using it. La Maison Alex is our holiday home and we spend a month there in May/June and autumn. We are not a registered business and our motivation is not to make substantial profit but to recover most, if not all of the cost of ownership.

Where we have made a trading excess we have endeavoured to reinvest in the property and our regular guests will have observed some significant changes, we hope for the better, over the past few years.

We have, for example, completely refurbished the kitchen and the living room and, conscious that summer guests will spend a lot of their time outside in the glorious weather, we have landscaped and improved the garden and added a hot tub and we have added new roller shutters to all windows and doors to improve security. Our approximate reinvestment in the property in the last 4 years has been significant.

In 2019 we completely refurbished and refurnished the middle bedroom, upgrading the bed to a king size.

Our reinvestment strategy has been to focus on the most regularly used parts of the villa – so the outside space, the kitchen and living room have received significant investment. The new electric roller shutters were in response to a break-in in 2015. The old French style wooden shutters are notoriously easy to forcibly open and in spring 2016 we started a programme of shutter replacement which is now complete making the villa very secure and more energy efficient.

Refurbished Middle Bedroom

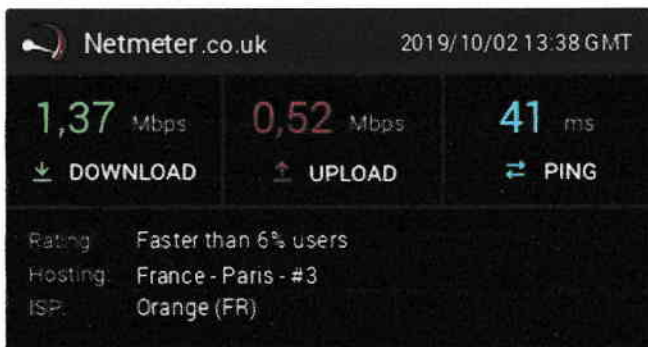
The middle bedroom which we have advertised as a double bedroom was completely refurbished in spring 2019. It had become somewhat tired and in need of an update. The photos below are the before and after 2 weeks of hard work. The new king size bed and mattress making the room very comfortable.



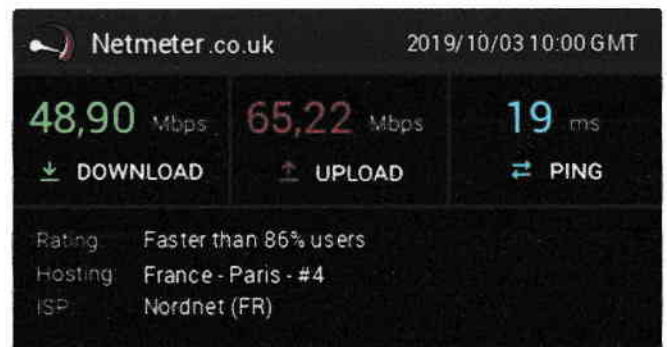
Upgraded Internet

In early October the internet in the villa was upgraded from ADSL with Orange to optical fibre with Nordnet. The difference has been remarkable with incredible increases in speed for both download and upload. The before and after are shown below.

Old ADSL internet speeds



New Fibre internet speeds



Without getting too technical, the great advantage of this is that video streaming is now much more successful and multiple users can simultaneously download data easily. With ADSL we could stream some TV programmes (those not covered by Freesat) on, for example SkyGo, but sport was often ruined by buffering or picture distortion. With fibre, watching streamed sport is perfect.

Laundry Area

The laundry area downstairs has never been particularly inviting and being in the cellar there is not much one can do to improve it. However, we have tried to make it a bit better by carpeting the area and we have also put some gripper material on the concrete steps to improve safety.



Charity Donation

We have also donated some of the modest trading excess to charity and have, for example 'Twinned' the villa toilets with a public toilet in Nepal – this is a scheme whereby one's donation helps improve toilet facilities in countries where sanitation is poor.

As holiday home owners it pricks the conscience when you see homeless people on the streets of the centre of Manchester which is the closest city to our UK home. In past years we have donated some of the summer rental income to Shelter but recently we have identified a more deserving cause. In 2019 we decided to support Mustard Tree which is based in Manchester and tries to turn lives around with Freedom Projects. We have donated about half of the surplus we made on this summer's rentals to this charity and we hope that it makes a difference. Mustard Tree *"helps people to change their lives, secure better accommodation and economic wellbeing. Our focus is on tackling both the causes and consequences of poverty and homelessness"*. The money we have donated should fund at least one person to undertake a 'life transforming' Mustard Tree Freedom Project. See more detail on www.mustardtree.org.uk



Places to Visit

Marseillan is a great place to visit and in 2019 the project to upgrade the harbor area was completed. We were lucky enough to attend the fireworks celebration of its completion in June. It's a classic horseshoe harbour with great seafood restaurants on the harbourside. A good day out is to go to the street market on Tuesday morning and then try one of the harbour restaurants for lunch. It's only a 15 minute drive from La Maison Alex and if walking is your thing you can walk round the paths of the Basin de Thau nearby.



Local Restaurants

We do not pretend that we would be able offer a good food guide but we would like to recommend two local restaurants. Firstly, *La Table d'Emilie* in Marseillan (a short drive away). This is great restaurant, possibly our favourite, and is a little more expensive than others but very good value. See website www.latabledemilie.eatbu.com



Florensac is a short 10 minute drive from La Maison Alex. The restaurant *Table de Florensac* is run by Brigitte and Laurent Balat, Brigitte runs the service side and speaks English. They took over the restaurant in 2015 and they provide high quality food at a very reasonable price. Their 3-course menu is €28.90 and comes highly recommended. See website www.latabledeflorensac.fr



Politics in the UK and France

At the time of writing (31/10/19), Brexit has again been deferred to 31 Jan 2020 and a general election is now in progress.

With respect to Brexit, the main issue will be that after 31 Jan 2019 (assuming this new deadline is more real than the previous deadlines) we will no longer be a member of the EU so we will probably not enjoy the current open access to France. From what we have seen so far, we will have to apply online for an ETIAS rather than a visa but this doesn't come in until 2021 (maybe later). You will need to do this for each of your party members, each of which will have to have a passport and you will need to enter their personal details and country of residency and pay for each visa by debit card. The cost will 7€ per application but those over 70 and under 18 are exempt from the payment. The good news is that it will last 3 years or until your passport expires if that is sooner and it is valid for all EU countries. More details can be found on the website: <https://www.etiasvisa.com/>

The situation on the use of a UK driving licence and flights to Europe from the UK and vice versa, at the time of writing (31/10/19), is not yet clear and the subject of much scaremongering but we are assured by the Ministry for Transport, that this will be sorted shortly.



The French situation with regards 'gilets jaunes' protests seems to have lessened in intensity compared to earlier this year. However, there are still much reduced numbers of people protesting on the streets of the major cities such as Toulouse and Montpellier on Saturdays but the protests are no longer violent. Acte 50 was on the 27 October 2019. It remains prudent to avoid the larger cities on Saturdays. The 12 month anniversary of the movement is 16-17 November 2019 so stay

well away from city centres on that weekend.