

Seasonal shutdown?

Don't let winter get you down, you might be surprised how much is still going on, writes **Helen Aurelius-Haddock**

I write this with the last rays of glorious October sunshine streaming through my windows. It's hard to believe that soon the clocks will go back and the dark evenings will return once again. We call it 'The Dark Time' in the Haddock household.

Everyone is busying themselves with the inevitable Christmas preparations. During the festive season we're never short of things to do – Christmas fairs, vineyard 'portes ouvertes' and the usual smattering of school spectacles with the obligatory costumes to run up at the last minute.

We get so wrapped up with the frenzy of the Yuletide festivities that we often don't notice other things going on around us. Many businesses are seasonal and winter is their time to take a rest and wait out the cold until the first sun of spring returns. Likewise, other events tend to wind down and, before you know it, pretty much everything around is shuttered up in rural France.

So, what to do?

It's a sure bet that few of us will see friends and relatives using up their precious annual holiday on a chilly February break and in these difficult times, money has to be carefully managed. Flights tend to dry up from provincial airports, offering fewer chances for spur of the moment visits from loved ones.

However, it's vital that we don't let the quieter months jaundice our view of our new home. At all costs, we shouldn't become isolated and shut off. It is time to adopt and adapt. As Christmas seems to eat into pretty much all of November and December these days, what with the build-up and organisation to get on with, it would be wise counsel to make plans for the turn of the year, namely January and February.

Make sure you maintain regular contact with your circle of friends, both British and

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French. Although we tend to be full of resolve to burn off Christmas excess, there is no harm in keeping up coffee mornings and the odd lunch with friends – the markets still have a lot on offer at this time of year, so a trip out to ensure your food is at its freshest will fill up a dreary February morning and get you out and about.

Likewise, many restaurants, while closed earlier during weekday evenings, still open their doors for the working population at lunchtime. Food prices are so much more reasonable at midday, so a meal out can be both entertaining and thrifty. Moreover, getting out in the daylight hours is important when we blockade ourselves in after dark behind shuttered windows and cosy up to a roaring fire.

New Year's resolve

January is the month of resolutions so why not take up a class or two? Most towns (even the smallest) will have a *centre socio-culturel*, offering all manner of classes and workshops to the general public. Language-learning classes aside, this is a first-class opportunity to improve your speaking and understanding of the French language, while learning a new skill at the same time.

Don't assume that if you are based in the countryside, there is little or nothing going on – *au contraire!* When making enquiries for friends and family, I only



The shutters may be closed but there's still plenty going on

failed to find two classes – flamenco and fencing – pretty much everything else is on offer from hip-hop dancing to yoga. Prices are generally reasonable, and can be reduced depending on your circumstances.

If your children have flown the nest, the local APE (Association Parents-Elèves) is always grateful for a spare pair of hands when organising their events, which are not just confined to performances by Guignol. They offer great entertainment for all ages – karaoke, songs and stories with wine, lotto (some serious prizes) and travelling theatre are just a few events I attended last winter.

If you're single, local walking groups are popular in most villages, as are craft circles and luncheon clubs – held weekly in the case of our small village. Additionally, there are teams of line-dancers the length and breadth of France, stamping to the country and western beat with their cowboy boots and Stetsons (not mandatory). For couples, tea dances are popular, perhaps allowing you to take to the floor for the first time in years. All great fun and much of it on your doorstep.

Winter surfing

One of your best allies during the winter is surely your computer and internet connection. It can be a true

lifeline, opening up a myriad of opportunities if you know where to look.

There are a good number of websites that cater for expat Brits living in France. They allow instant access to a wider network of activities, events and people who are looking to use their time wisely. They can be a font of knowledge as well, for problems with setting up a business, education issues and sourcing pretty much any service from your local fish and chip van to an English-speaking midwife!

I recently put up a cyclist who is raising money for the British Heart Foundation while he cycled around France – all down to him putting up a note on www.angloinfo.com. The possibilities are endless to make new friends, connections and get well and truly stuck in to local events that take your fancy.

Finally, I would like to mention a new group set up earlier in 2009. Called Ladies In France Together, its name is pretty self-explanatory; the group was originally set up for women living in Deux-Sèvres, however, such was its success that it has been expanded to cover the whole of France, with its own website and of course, facebook group. There are organised events and spontaneous activities from a quick get-together for coffee or a trip to the shops with a friend. The numbers are growing and it is a free and open membership. (www.ladiesinfrancetogether.fr).

Whatever your interest, there is something to keep you going through the quieter times in France. The important thing is to ensure you enjoy every season and not just the warm ones. The French countryside is truly beautiful at this time of the year, so make sure you are in a positive frame of mind to enjoy it. □

See Helen's blog on our website at www.french-property-news.com

