

Lodgings FRANCE

Flat chat in Paris

It's easy to see why these apartments attract Paris' cultural community, writes **Fiona Carruthers**.

Over the centuries, its residents have included such diverse types as Voltaire, Charles Baudelaire, Camille Claudel, Georges Pompidou – and more recently, Jodie Foster. It's also where Queen Elizabeth II used to stay on visits to Paris, in the old Hotel de Lauzun.

In 2004, eccentric local songstress Brigitte Fontaine named her CD *Rue Saint Louis En L'île* after it – and the tiny Ile Saint Louis again made headlines in 2007 after the brother of the Emir of Qatar, Abdallah Ben Abdallah-Al-Thani, bought arguably the most important historic private mansion on the Ile, the Hotel Lambert, built between 1640-44, from Baron Guy de Rothschild for around €82 million.

"The Ile is pretty much loved by everyone," says Guest Apartment Service's co-manager Philippe Pee, who helps his partner in business and life, Christophe Chastel, manage their 55 private apartments located on or nearby Ile Saint Louis. "If you can't decide on the Left or Right Bank, stay in the middle," says Pee. "We're no more than a 20-minute walk to virtually every Paris landmark, including the Louvre."

It makes sense to me. Besides, there's nothing like flouncing around the city of light with your own set of keys, the ultimate living it local accessory. A jangling metal key ring hanging casually from your pinkie finger will ooze Parisian flair as you dash out to restock on coffee, baguette and cheese – in trench coat and ballet flats, of course.

When it comes to apartments in Paris, travellers are spoilt for choice at every price point. Thanks to long-standing operators like Airbnb, Paris for Rent and Vacation Rentals by Owners

(VRBO), serviced apartment options – from marbled luxury to shabby bedsits – remain hotter than the *Mona Lisa*. Indeed, for small hotelier and apartment operators in Paris, the problem can be finding a market niche in this space. They've all been carved out.

For Chastel, his point of difference was ready-made when he established Guest Apartment Services almost two decades ago.

It all started when Chastel lost his job in real estate during the financial crunch of the early 1990s, explains Pee, his eye colour perfectly matched to his khaki brown Lacoste polo shirt.

"Christophe lost his job – but he didn't want to lose his beautiful apartment on Ile Saint Louis, so he began renting out his spare room as a B&B to friends and friends of friends. Word spread fast."

It's like staying with your best friends without having to make chit chat.

Chastel was also blessed with a good contact book, plus knowledge of the value and ownership of the buildings in this history-rich area. Unable to keep up with demand with only one room to rent, he began speaking to absentee landlords of pied-a-terres and apartments in neighbouring 17th and 18th century buildings.

By 1997, Guest Apartment Services officially opened its doors. Today, more than 90 per cent of the properties Chastel and Pee manage are located on Ile Saint Louis, plus around the Notre Dame and Le Marais areas. The apartments start at \$264 a night,



rising to \$1306. Up in Normandy, there's also the grand five-bedroom Norman manor house, Le Manoir des Labbes, set on 1.7 hectares about 40 kilometres from the town of Rouen and 20 minutes' drive from the coastline of the famous Normandy Beaches. At \$807 a night, it will sleep about 10 of your best friends – but has a minimum seven-night stay requirement.

Chastel and Pee bought the then rundown 1826-built Normandy house in 2001. Like almost all the properties on their books, the house has been fully renovated – and is filled with Chastel's collected antiques, a passion he began indulging at age 16; he's now 53. Sitting in his office, flicking through images of the handsome manor house, Chastel points to the floors: "You have the cabochon detailing – very French, very traditional – on the marble floor," he says, then turning to a shot of

the bathroom: "and in here, you have the multi-jet shower – very today. When you're tired of Paris, drive up here, and shut the world out."

Early and still loyal fans of Guest Apartment Services include a who's who of the cultural community, from American opera singer and soprano Renee Fleming to Australian cook, author and restaurateur Stephanie Alexander, Greek-born Australian chef Janni Kyritsis, plus the Australian founder and former owner of World Expeditions, Christine Courtenay, writer Bryce Courtenay's widow.

American and Australian ambassadors, diplomats, models and fashion designers are also among the diverse group of devotees. "Most of our guests have been staying with us for years now," says Pee. "And they keep spreading the word."

It's a pertinent time to be

spreading the word given what Paris has been through over the past few years, including the horrific terrorist attacks on the evening of November 13 last year that resulted in 130 deaths.

"Parisians are resilient, passionate and determined," Pee says. "Our lives will not change (as you might guess!) But there have of course been challenges over the past year, and sensitivities, which has meant we've all had to work even harder. We're so grateful that Australian travellers have proven to be loyal and quite resilient."

I stay in Christine Courtenay's favourite apartment, Acacia, a deluxe fully renovated natural-light filled suite in a 17th century building on Ile Saint Louis, overlooking the Seine and the back of Notre Dame Cathedral.

With its ceiling-high windows, decadent linen on the Queen-sized bed, decorative Louis XVI-style sofa and chairs, 19th century

