

secret gems

MIREILLE DE BARY BOOKS AFFORDABLE EUROPEAN HOMES, CASTLES, FARMS, B&Bs AND INNS

For many travelers, a vacation is all about immersing oneself into the daily rhythms of some hidden corner of France, Italy or other part of Europe. It means sipping wine on the terrace of a 16th-century cottage while watching the sun set over the Dordogne countryside. Or it could be watching one's children gather eggs on a hilltop farm in Tuscany.

Mireille de Bary, owner of de Bary Voyages, Inc., in Grosse Pointe, Mich., has specialized in finding these secret gems for more than 25 years. She puts her clients into charming inns, farms, self-catering vacation homes, B&Bs and castles, primarily in France, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Germany.

The industry veteran has long known about quaint B&Bs (her cousins own one in Bordeaux), farms and castles. But evolving consumer tastes, the increasing availability of information about such off-the-beaten-path accommodations and exchange rates that have made more traditional hotels prohibitively expensive for her economy-minded Midwestern clients have helped build her market for such products.

She charges service fees for booking these unique accommodations and also charges a \$50 fee for two hours of consultation with clients and more if the trip requires additional time. What she offers clients is a huge amount of expertise in the product. She's been booking them for years and, as the daughter of an airline executive (her mother worked for Sabena) and a shipping executive (her father worked for a Belgian steamship line), she got the travel bug as a child and opened her own agency in Grosse Pointe in 1977. She's always been drawn to idiosyncratic accommodations, and her knowledge of them helps her differentiate herself in the marketplace.

That expertise is invaluable to consumers, given the huge number of such places. One group, Gites de France, (a *gite* is a rural vacation home in France) has 43,000 properties, most of which are self-catering. Not only does de Bary know many properties, but she also knows the locales in which they're situated and can tell her clients about area sites to visit.

She used to take small groups to Europe, visiting all of her favorite places and hosting cocktail parties in private homes to introduce her clients to the lifestyle of European families. That same philosophy fuels her current business model as well.

She stays abreast of new developments by poring over French travel publications that cover such products, as well as the various guides that catalog and rate them.



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Many of the latter now offer websites, but she tends not to use those. She travels five or six times a year in Europe to keep updated on these properties, which gives her firsthand knowledge of their quality and cuisine. She books only accommodations that offer private bathrooms. If they're not self-catering units, they generally include breakfast. And some, such as castles, also offer dinner with advance notice. These are not five-star, Relais & Châteaux castles, but they are authentic, with grand hallways and entrances, parquet floors, traditional furniture, sweeping drapes swathing windows and similar only-in-a-castle details. She books a lot of these for couples and families.

Some of these accommodations are required to serve homemade foods and products, making for a true immersion in local culture. "So you really get the homey atmosphere," she says. Although most Americans at best speak only limited amounts of foreign languages, someone speaks English at each of the places de Bary books.

She markets almost entirely by word of mouth and by sending direct mail to her clients. She thinks something tangible such as a brochure or letter is more effective than an email for her clients.

The nature of these accommodations means that they're for travelers who have rented cars, which de Bary books for her clients. Additionally, she finds that her knowledge of European regional airlines also differentiates her in the marketplace, because she knows how to get her clients to the most convenient airports. ●