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October 10, 2004

## A Brit of what you fancy in France

There are business opportunities across the Channel where about 1.5m of us have settled, says Andrew Stone

CATHERINE GUILLON crosses the French countryside in her brand-new van every week between Limoges and Poitiers, selling speciality food in tiny villages and hamlets.

She doesn't sell French farmhouse cheeses or fresh bread, but British staples, including English tea, Marmite, custard powder, mint sauce and British-style bangers and bacon.

Her target market is the area's burgeoning community of British expatriates. And her business is thriving. She said: "It's going pretty well so far considering we only launched in April and we haven't publicised it at all."

Guillon has seen at first hand the invasion of many towns and villages by British settlers in recent years. "They've virtually taken over some places," she said. "I wonder how it's going to change France and what the country is going to be like in 10 years. It's not only retired Brits who are settling here, but also younger people who are coming to look for work. It's going to have a permanent impact."

There are no reliable official figures for the number of English speakers already residing in France, but experts say it is likely to be at least 1.5m.

Graham Tearse, editor of the France edition of the Expatica website, an online forum for Brits living abroad, said: "It's very difficult to find a definitive figure but 1.5m permanent or semi-permanent English-speaking residents is a fairly conservative figure. We could be talking about more."

One report from the French AFP press agency said some 250,000 Brits moved to France each year.

All this should spell opportunity to UK businesses. British expats in France make up a growing and wealthy community, but they are not always well served by French firms.

Opportunities exist in sectors such as media, do-it-yourself, healthcare, food and drink, finance and property services, said Susanna Hardy of IBT Partners, which helps English-speaking firms do business in France.

Hardy stressed that UK firms should target not only their own countrymen, but also the Dutch and Scandinavians, who generally speak better English than French and are also settling in France in large numbers.

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Food and drink was perhaps the most obvious area for business opportunities, she said.

“Ever since Marks & Spencer closed its French stores, there has been a real demand for British food such as good, strong black tea and digestive biscuits. How to do that logistically is a real challenge, but there’s definitely demand for it,” said Hardy. Even the big French food chains were waking up to this, she said. One, Leclerc, held a British products day this summer.

Hardy said another area worth looking at was services for the elderly and things such as mobility and lifestyle aids.

“Many settlers are retired people,” she said, “but the healthcare and lifestyle market here is really undeveloped.”

France was also a few years behind Britain in DIY, she said. “There’s a real window of opportunity for UK manufacturers of soft furnishings and decorating goods.”

Even the maturing property-services market for expats still offers opportunities. Hardy said financial services such as mortgages and tax advice were offered only by big banks and institutions at considerable cost. There was room for smaller, more competitive players to come in, she said. There were also opportunities for firms prepared to offer property surveying services, something virtually non-existent in France.

Robert McCann, managing director of Aleonor, a Paris-based business consultancy, thinks there’s even scope to market luxury goods, particularly in the French capital.

“The Parisian expat community is fairly affluent. There are a lot of well-paid professionals here,” he said.

“British luxury goods would have an appeal. There’s scope for British sports-car makers like Caterham or Morgan to sell to that community and get the cars seen by the French, too.”

British and Irish-style pubs are becoming increasingly popular across the Channel, while English-language media are another area of opportunity.

“Good British media are drastically lacking here, And Brits abroad tend to be quite attached to their media.”

Hardy agreed. “There are very few truly indispensable web resources for English speakers coming to France, for instance,” she said, “and no truly national magazine serving them — although it would be a challenge to do a newspaper nationwide.”

Paris Live Radio (PLR) is one company that sees an opportunity to reach many of these English speakers. It began broadcasting this summer next door to the Moulin Rouge in the capital.

The station estimates that there are about 500,000 English speakers in the Paris metropolitan area.

Richard Booth, PLR’s general manager, believes it’s a measure of how important the expat market is becoming that some of the big multinational consumer brands are talking to the fledgling station about advertising with it.

“It can be very straightforward for them to take certain generic ads across the Channel and advertise to an audience here,” he said.

Targeting the expat market could also be a good stepping stone for smaller British businesses, he added.

“There are vast opportunities here for British-style businesses that are flexible and strong on service, not just to serve the expat community, but also the French market as a whole. In fact, that could be a sound way to enter France; establish your expat market first and then expand into the wider market.”

None of this comes as a surprise to Guillon as she makes the rounds in her van.

“We’re selling English food to the French, too,” she said. “These customers are often ex-Parisians used to buying English food from Marks & Spencer. They tend to go for things like lemon curd and British biscuits. A lot of them are addicted to McVitie’s Hobnobs.”

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