

# France fights back

There are still factors creating a competitive climate, but most language schools in France report that new courses, marketing initiatives and in some cases, low-cost flights, are helping boost business. BETHAN NORRIS reports.

## Weathering the storm

When hard times hit the language travel industry, the marketing mix used by language schools becomes even more important. Many language schools in France report that they have reacted to recent years of slow enrolments by focusing more intently on their agent mix.

"Thanks to our excellent partner agencies all over the world we have very stable numbers of student enrolments," says Stefan Adenet-Kaven from Institut Linguistique Adenet in Montpellier. "We increased the number of agencies in countries where we were less well represented and could achieve in those countries."

Ursula Bird from Idiom in Nice says that "about 80 per cent of our students come via agencies. About five per cent via word of mouth and the rest via the Internet."

As well as investing in tried-and-tested marketing techniques, schools also have to pay a strong regard to ensuring quality. Many schools say that word-of-mouth recommendations have been particularly valuable in shoring up enrolment numbers in the last few years.

Eleri Maitland from Inlingua Rouen puts their continued business growth down to a "more efficient website plus excellent reports from past students and agents who have used us." She says, "If you deliver the goods and the students are happy, they go home and spread the word."

Language schools in France were largely more positive when describing their business trends for the first half of this year, when compared with the responses given in our previous Market Report (see *Language Travel Magazine*, August 2004, page 27). Many schools saw student numbers increase this year, after disappointing performances in 2003/2004.

"[Our student numbers are] increasing steadily," says Eleri Maitland from Inlingua Rouen in Le Petit Quevilly. "We still have an active Asian market but we are getting increasing numbers from Europe – Ryanair is a great incentive – and South America is coming through strongly."

Andrew Kinselle from LSF in Montpellier has a similar experience to report; a 19 per cent rise in student numbers this year, buoyed by new markets of Poland and the Czech Republic as well as low-cost flights from Ireland to Montpellier, which are helping the Irish market.

Dominique Rogues from Millefeuille Provence in Saint-Genis-de-Comolas has also noticed a rise in student numbers during 2005 and puts this down to "more American people", while at Educasia France in Rouen, Yan Prevost notes that student numbers during 2005 have increased by 60 per cent on the previous year. "The main reason is that we have put more effort into our international marketing and [have] been more careful in agent selection," he asserts.

Last year, many schools were reporting decreased or static enrolment levels and global economic pressures, visa problems and the instability in Iraq were largely cited as contributing to this slump. While the climate seems to have become more

favourable for many language schools in France, some point out that there are still factors preventing ideal business conditions. "We still have the same number of students [as last year], even if we were hoping to have some more," says Dominique Waag from Alliance Française Rouen, who says the school has invested in marketing, but suggests, "the world seems dangerous to many people and leaving their country will make them feel insecure."

Some student markets are faced with more tangible barriers to studying in a foreign country, as Stefan Adenet-Kaven, Director of Institut Linguistique Adenet in Montpellier, explains. "Traditionally, the European [student] market is strong [for us]. Several markets outside the euro zone have been affected by the strong euro," he says. However, he adds that currency issues seem to be becoming less of a problem. "2005 so far has been very promising despite the strong euro. There are also no major events in the summer like the Olympic Games, which always result in small decreases," he says.

With the expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004 and the strong euro affecting many student markets outside the area,



many language schools were hoping that their fortunes would be revived by an increase in students from the new accession countries. However, according to Waag, this expectation has not been realised. But one positive trend he has noticed at their school is the popularity of academic exam programmes and special interest courses with language learners. "[We have started offering] more exam [courses] with TCF (Test de Connaissance du Français) and a lot of school activities such as tourism and gastronomy," he says. "Specific targets are quite popular, such as painting and cooking."

Christian Rouet at Institut International de Rambouillet in Rambouillet on the other

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hand paints a different picture, with their intensive French course continuing to be the most popular with students. "We [have offered] new courses – for teachers, business courses and exams, etc, but did not notice a real interest for them," he says.

It seems that the incoming student market for French language schools is still far from settled and predictions for the future range from positive – Kinselle foresees an increase in sales with bookings spread out through the year – to cautious. Ursula Bird from Idiom in Nice forecasts "a continuous slight increase [in enrolments] if [there are] no new international crises". ●