

# Quality edge

VisitEngland's magazine for quality-assessed accommodation and attractions

Summer 2012 Issue 15

## Charting a new course

How the Isles of Scilly are planning  
to attract more visitors

**PLUS** How to get the  
most out of online  
booking **p09**

When keeping  
kids amused is just  
child's play **p33**

Why festivals are  
sweet music for  
your business **p44**



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## Summer 2012 Welcome

With the weather at last picking up and the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games now in full swing, our summer edition brings you some great features. The magnificent Isles of Scilly take centre stage and with a great discount offer on travel, we hope some of you will take the opportunity to visit. Helen Tyas reveals the secret of Lucknam Park's five-star welcome is the staff and their training. The hotel's generous reader offer for a one-night stay would make a great birthday treat!

With marketing issues top of readers' minds, we have two related in-depth features. Three readers describe how this season's bookings have not matched last year's and question whether starting to take bookings online will make a difference. We ask specialist suppliers to advise on the options and readers contribute their experiences. If you are unsure how well your own website is performing, then read our two-page article on analysing web traffic.

We uncover visitor attractions and accommodation businesses that go the extra mile to delight their younger visitors and their parents. Owners show us their sumptuous bathrooms and one Warwickshire attraction show-cases its amazing 'Himalaya bathrooms', which continue to amuse visitors.

So here's to an Indian summer and better bookings and visitor numbers for you all!

*Pam Foden*

**Pam Foden**  
Operations  
and Industry  
Engagement  
Manager



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# News

Visit our corporate website, where you can find business and marketing news, information on star ratings, awards and insight and statistics from the VisitEngland research team. [www.visitengland.org](http://www.visitengland.org)



## Fan in a van

A passion for England and a zest for life meant that Rachel Kershaw was the perfect winner of VisitEngland's competition to find the country's biggest fan. Her prize was an adventure of a lifetime: travelling across England in a vintage camper van called Rosie.

Rachel, 30, from Rochdale, kicked off her travels in Land's End, Cornwall, before taking in every corner of England. The ten-week journey was designed to showcase the very best the country has to offer, and Rachel blogged and tweeted the whole way, sharing her experiences and encouraging people to put forward their top tips for the best things to see, do and eat in their local area.

She said: "The Camping and Caravanning Club provided sites for my whole trip, and I can now understand why their strapline is 'The friendly club'. I've stayed at peaceful rural retreats with stunning views and bustling sites close to cities, and once I even woke up in a theme park."

Rachel's experiences throughout the trip demonstrated the variety of activities on offer across England – from pottery-making, surfing and sailing, to archery, chocolate-tasting and flying more than 2,000 feet above ground in a hot-air balloon! She donned a wetsuit, waders, a bungee harness, a bodyflight suit, a crash helmet and a bib. She also fished for trout, salmon and seabass, fed a rhino at Chester Zoo, and was stalked by lions and baboons at Knowsley Safari Park.

Rachel was chosen from a shortlist of 12 other potential Fans in a Van by a judging panel comprising Lady Cobham, VisitEngland's Chair, Martin Dorey, author of *The Camper Van Coast Book*, and Sally Shalam, travel journalist, based on her entry video and enticing description and photograph of her favourite place in England – Newcastle upon Tyne.

Read all about her adventure at [www.visitenglandblog.com/faninavan](http://www.visitenglandblog.com/faninavan)

## Horses welcome



The British Horse Society is seeking to work alongside companies and organisations to promote its 'Horses Welcome' scheme – the UK's first quality-assured scheme for equine guest accommodation.

The society's inspectors visit all Horses Welcome premises to ensure that the stabling, grazing and other facilities are of a suitable standard for visiting horses, and they re-inspect the establishments every three years to ensure that the scheme's standards remain high.

Other benefits of the scheme include your own page on the Horses Welcome website and equine care, custody and control insurance to cover your liability should a visiting horse be injured on your premises. Members also enjoy marketing support.

The current charge for membership is £65, plus a further £35 for the inspection.

For further information, visit [www.horseswelcome.org](http://www.horseswelcome.org) or call 02476 840496.



## THE PINK BOOK IS BACK

VisitEngland has launched a new printed version of the well-respected Pink Booklet. Thanks to sponsorship from Cottages4U,

the renamed 'The Pink Book 2012 – Legislation for tourist accommodation' has been completely updated.

VisitEngland quality-assessed accommodation providers will be entitled to a free copy, and copies can also be purchased at £9.99 plus P&P by emailing [feedback@visitengland.org](mailto:feedback@visitengland.org)



## NEWS IN BRIEF

### SHOWCASING ENGLAND

The City of London Information Centre, which welcomes 400,000 visitors each year and is the only official centre of its kind in London, has extended its remit to provide information on destinations throughout England.

The change is part of a new partnership between VisitEngland and the City of London Corporation. Staff have undergone intensive product knowledge training and are now equipped to showcase the variety of experiences that England has to offer.

### FLUSHED WITH SUCCESS

Despite in excess of 40% of the UK's public toilets closing down in the past ten years, the Loo of the Year Awards are still going strong and are celebrating their 25th anniversary. The awards are receiving record entries for the 2012 event, including many holiday parks, hotels, restaurants, pubs and visitor attractions. The awards are promoted by the British Toilet Association, in association with headline sponsor Lepicol. Further information and details on how to enter are available on the awards website at [www.loo.co.uk](http://www.loo.co.uk)



### BED MANUFACTURER OF THE YEAR

Hypnos is the winner of the National Bed Federation's Bed Manufacturer of the Year award, which reinforces the superior quality, tailoring and comfort of Hypnos beds, as well as the innovative and responsible ethos of the business.

### FIRE SAFETY

As part of the Focus on Enforcement campaign, the Government is urging businesses to share the experiences they have had of fire safety enforcement by fire safety officers who have visited their premises to ensure compliance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order. The Government is also interested to hear where companies get advice on fire safety compliance.

To find out more and to share your thoughts by 31 August, visit [discuss.bis.gov.uk/focusonenforcement](http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/focusonenforcement)



## THE ROOTS OF SUCCESS

The English garden has won the award for Outstanding Contribution to Tourism at the VisitEngland Awards for Excellence 2012. The coveted accolade was one of 19 presented at a ceremony hosted by VisitEngland in Leicester.

The English garden brings pleasure to a huge number of visitors. In winning this award, it joins an exclusive group of English tourism champions. Previous winners have included Michael Eavis, the driving force behind the Glastonbury Festival, the English Pub, the National Trust and last year's winner the Royal Shakespeare Company.

VisitEngland's Chair Lady Cobham said: "English gardens have been seducing visitors for hundreds of years, and we are delighted to be able to recognise the pleasure they bring to so many. Our green-fingered heritage is famous throughout the world."

This year also marked the first time that the VisitEngland Awards for Excellence have awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award. The award, which recognises and celebrates one individual who has quite literally dedicated their life to tourism in England, was presented to His Grace the 11th Duke of Marlborough. The Duke is the custodian, visionary and protector of Blenheim Palace, which is the birthplace of Sir Winston Churchill and a World Heritage site.

Other awards included the Best Bed and Breakfast in England, Best Small Hotel, Best Tourism Experience and the Sustainable Tourism award. There was also an inaugural Tourism Superstar Award for Newcastle cab driver Alan Fidler, who always goes beyond the call of duty to make visitors feel special.

To see details of all the winners, visit [www.visitengland.com/awards](http://www.visitengland.com/awards)

### READER SURVEY



*Quality edge* readers will soon be receiving an email asking for feedback about the magazine. All those who reply will be entered into a draw to win a one night's stay at the five-star hotel Lucknam Park.

To find out more about the luxurious hotel, turn to our feature on page 38.



## A YOUNG INSPECTOR CALLS

Drayton Manor Hotel in Staffordshire has become the first hotel to be officially reviewed by a child.

Nine-year-old James Childs, from Luton, who is also an official toy inspector for Bandai, has decided to take the next step in his career and branch into hotel reviews.

Offering a child's perspective on places to stay and visit, James hopes his reviews will encourage parents to make sure they're taking their children to the right places, which offer value for money, entertainment and a good standard of accommodation.

James said: "I want to give my own view on the hotel and whether it is really are up to scratch, and I figured that becoming a child hotel inspector was the way to do this."

Martin Wright, General Manager of the Drayton Manor Hotel, said: "When James and his dad got in touch to tell us about his new career venture, we thought it was a brilliant idea and were more than happy for him to come and review the hotel."

## Assessing the assessors

As part of VisitEngland's new three-year licence agreement with Quality in Tourism, we will be taking a more active role in monitoring the quality, accuracy and consistency of the assessment visits and assessment reports provided.

VisitEngland's new team of moderators will sample a percentage of the assessment reports each month. These reports should give the operator a clear indication of their position within the rating band, whether there is any risk of a downgrade and, if so, which are the areas of concern. If there is an opportunity to move up a star rating, or gain an accolade, the report should include practical suggestions and steer the operator if choices have to be made in terms of investment.

Following the review of the reports, a sample of businesses will then be selected for a follow-up day or overnight visit, to confirm the accuracy of the scoring and the grading awarded. So, this year, any VisitEngland-assessed accommodation provider could receive a second 'mystery guest' overnight booking or a call from a VisitEngland moderator, requesting a convenient time to carry out a day visit. So if you receive a call from one of VisitEngland's moderators, please welcome their visit.

VisitEngland's Moderation team will be constantly looking out for examples of best practice to pass to VisitEngland's Press and PR teams. They will encourage the Quality in Tourism assessors to report back when they have received exceptional hospitality and service, when they discover a place that is quirky, has historic connections, or is in a stunning location. Journalists want to hear about the hidden gems, the 'cutting edge' and those that make their guests feel especially welcome.

If you have any questions on the role of the moderation team, email [pam.foden@visitengland.org](mailto:pam.foden@visitengland.org)



**It's a WRAP**

An industry initiative is aiming to cut food and associated packaging waste by 5%, which is the equivalent of approximately 100 million meals. This would help the hospitality sector to increase to 70% the overall rate of food and packaging waste that is being recycled or composted.

The Hospitality and Food Service Agreement has been launched by WRAP, the government-funded organisation that encourages recycling. It is supported by VisitEngland and 73 leading UK hotels, pubs, restaurants, quick-service restaurants, contract caterers, industry bodies and government departments.

Encouraging businesses to manage their waste more proactively is a step forward in tackling the causes of climate change, and a significant way to help reduce the overhead costs that businesses face. This is a key message in the agreement and an important feature of VisitEngland's Green Start tool. More information can be found at [www.wrap.org.uk](http://www.wrap.org.uk) and [www.better-tourism.org](http://www.better-tourism.org)

## Free online training



Visitors with disabilities and their travel companions spend more than £2 billion in England each year. To help them enjoy their trips, VisitEngland has launched an online course in disability awareness for those working in the tourism industry. It is designed to help you and your staff to deliver excellent service to disabled customers.

The course consists of six modules, which can be completed online at your convenience. The whole course takes between one and two hours to complete.

Jason Parry, General Manager of Harbour Hotels, who snapped up the free places for his staff, said: "It opened my eyes and helped me understand more about disabled guests. We can get stuck in a tourism bubble, so this programme is definitely helpful. It is good to understand what more we can do."

There are 800 free places available to tourism businesses in England. Businesses can register for up to five places each, by visiting [www.disabledgo.com/tourismtraining](http://www.disabledgo.com/tourismtraining)

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"We use an online booking program called Insight. People book all through the night, which they obviously couldn't if they had to do so by phone. It's brilliant. It's like having someone sitting on reception 24 hours a day with no break – the perfect employee!"

**Bobby Shafto Park, Beamish**

"We chose Freetobook because they don't take commission for bookings on our site. On the whole our experience has been good, but it makes it difficult to operate a dynamic, flexible pricing policy. If we speak to people on the phone there is often a chance to negotiate and get the booking."

**Oaklands Edwardian Guest House, Weymouth**

# World wide bed

Online booking is fast becoming the most popular way for guests to make reservations. *Quality edge* editor **Pam Foden** has been talking to readers, industry experts and suppliers to find out more

Since 2006, the number of domestic holidays booked online has increased by a staggering 90%, according to the GB Tourism Survey 2006-2011. So it's no wonder that more businesses are thinking about using online booking.

Here, two B&Bs, a self-catering business and a touring park ask what online booking can do for them and see if they can be convinced that it would lead to increased occupancy. Several suppliers and an industry expert give their opinions – further insights have been provided by readers who are already committed to online booking. They give their honest opinions – the pros and the cons. Read on to find out more... >

## X FIND OUT MORE

### SUPPLIERS

**Freetobook:** Visit [www.freetobook.com](http://www.freetobook.com)  
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Call 01252 279123

**Pitchup:** Visit [www.pitchup.com](http://www.pitchup.com)

### MARKETING EXPERT

Susan Briggs is Director of the Tourism Network, a small consultancy offering marketing advice and training for the tourism industry. Readers of *Quality edge* can take advantage of a new frugal marketing package designed for businesses with limited budgets who want to improve their marketing for the introductory rate of £45+VAT per month.

For more information, visit [www.tourismknowhow.com](http://www.tourismknowhow.com)

“Eighteen months ago, we signed up with Booking.com. Has it worked? Yes, we’ve been busier. Are we more profitable? Probably not. Booking.com takes 18% including VAT. We miss speaking to customers in advance, too.

We’ll stay with Booking.com but our online prices will have to be higher.”

**Eaton Court, Southampton**

**CASE STUDY:** Number One, Blackpool 🏠★★★★★ Bed and Breakfast

I have been running my three-bedroom B&B in Blackpool for seven years. Four or five years ago, I tried using an online booking site, but found that I missed being able to speak to people and, as the site didn’t show my availability, if people couldn’t book the dates they wanted, they didn’t book at all.

I have what I think is a pretty good website, which gets about 390 unique visitors a week (peaking at 2,134 visits mid-September and then dropping to 270 visits mid-November), but I’m not as busy as I would like to be and I’m very aware that you’ve got to keep up to date with changing trends in the industry.

Information I’m reading is telling me that around 75% of bookings are now made online and I don’t want to get left behind. Is this true? If so, which online channel should I be considering if I want to increase my occupancy? Or should I simply drop my prices, as I shall probably have to pay high commission fees anyway?

My husband’s business, the 14-bedroom Number One South Beach, does all the online booking options but he has more rooms to play with. We do refer business to each other, although I think I send him more than he sends me!

Yours sincerely,  
Claire Smith

“We started using online booking a year ago and have doubled our turnover. We don’t begrudge the commission.

Not having to rush to the phone continually saves time, especially when everyone seems to want Saturday night – our busiest night.”

**Little Mead, Winchester**

## X FEEDBACK

### FREETOBOOK SAYS:

The internet is changing the way customers behave: they are much more confident online and many now prefer to book online. As a business, you need to make it easy for your customers to do business with you. Most visitors will be looking for your rates and availability – many will just leave your site if they can't find them.

Most booking systems perform pretty similar functions, so it's important that you find one that is flexible enough to adapt to your business. Your website looks to be busy, so you are winning half the battle. You just need to convert the visitors to bookings.

Our Freetobook software is free if you simply use it on your own website. No upfront fee and no commission on bookings, so it's ideal if you are already getting good traffic to your site. We only charge our customers if they take up the other channels we link to, such as LateRooms or Booking.com. Freetobook, like most booking engines, also gives you the option of selling different types of offers or adding value, which encourages visitors to book. Just dropping your prices is rarely the right answer.

Don't even consider going near any other online channel without first getting set up to take commission-free bookings on your own website. Too many B&Bs neglect to do this and it loses them a lot of money.

### SUSAN BRIGGS SAYS:

You have some excellent reviews, so make sure that guests can see some of those when they come to your website. Ideally, they'll see positive reviews and book straight away without feeling they need to go to another site and double-check, which is when they sometimes get distracted.

The words on your website are as important as the images. You have a VisitEngland Breakfast award – your breakfasts are clearly excellent – tell guests more about them! Guests like to see photos of food and know where it comes from – give as much information as possible. Your website is a good place to convey your five-star quality with images and extra details.

### EVIIVO SAYS:

There is a lot of competition in Blackpool and it is a challenge to stand out among all the

other businesses and to convert visitors into bookers. However, as you don't offer online booking, you are missing opportunities. Who has time these days to place dozens of calls to enquire about a property and its availability, when all details and photos can be found on the internet?

Eviivo would enable Number One to automatically connect in real time to the world's leading travel websites, such as Expedia, Hotels.com, lastminute.com, TripAdvisor and LateRooms – and at the best possible commission rates.

Blackpool is the location in the UK where the eviivo online marketing team spends the biggest slice of its advertising budget on Google AdWords via our own websites [www.toprooms.com](http://www.toprooms.com) and [www.blackpool-bedandbreakfasts.com](http://www.blackpool-bedandbreakfasts.com)

With more than 5,400 properties in the UK working with us, we understand the needs of small, independent accommodation properties. Our management system is easy to use and enables proprietors to quickly and simply adjust their pricing and create special offers, early-bird or last-minute deals. We have a whole team of friendly eviivo staff members who are eager to help!

### GUESTLINK SAYS:

Our Guestlink system might be ideal for Claire, as it offers the accommodation providers either a full online booking 'Real time Allocation' model or our 'Reserve and Book' option. Full online booking is where the room(s) are allocated to the system. We call this 'Allocated' availability. The guest gets an instant confirmation if this method is used. Since Claire only has three bedrooms, and might need to juggle her rooms between guests to maximise occupancy, 'Indicated' availability might suit her better. With this option, Claire would receive an automatic email and then she would respond to the customer directly by phone or email, ideally within 24 hours, to accept or decline the booking. Some 60% of Guestlink users choose this option.

Since Claire's website is already receiving plenty of visitors, she might want to start by simply taking bookings on her own site, using Guestlink software. It's easy to get set up. Once we have your details, we send you a bit of code that you need to pass to your web

company, or if you have created your own site or are using a template site, it's easy to install yourself. The commission rate for this is only 2.5% including VAT, payable monthly, after the guests have stayed. An alternative is our annual fee of £195 + VAT. Once monthly invoices get close to this, we advise swapping to the annual fee.

Any customers making bookings online via Guestlink will be emailed four days after their stay and encouraged to leave a review about Number One. These can be automatically uploaded to Claire's website.

This model might be enough for Claire, but the additional 'bolt-ons' would be a link through to Hudson's England – the new website that promotes only VisitEngland assessed accommodation. Claire already has a free listing on that site, but can upgrade to show her availability and be bookable online for a small annual fee. No commission is payable on bookings made on Hudson's England.

Another option is our Roomcheck website, which has 5,000 advertisers in England – again, with the same 'Reserve and Book' option, rather than (confirmed) 'Book Online' option. The commission rate for this channel is 10% including VAT. Our software will also link to the IKnow regional websites, which charge 5% commission.

All of these options can be turned on or off at any time, so when Blackpool is really busy, Claire can just 'close out' all her rooms.

### LATEROOMS SAYS:

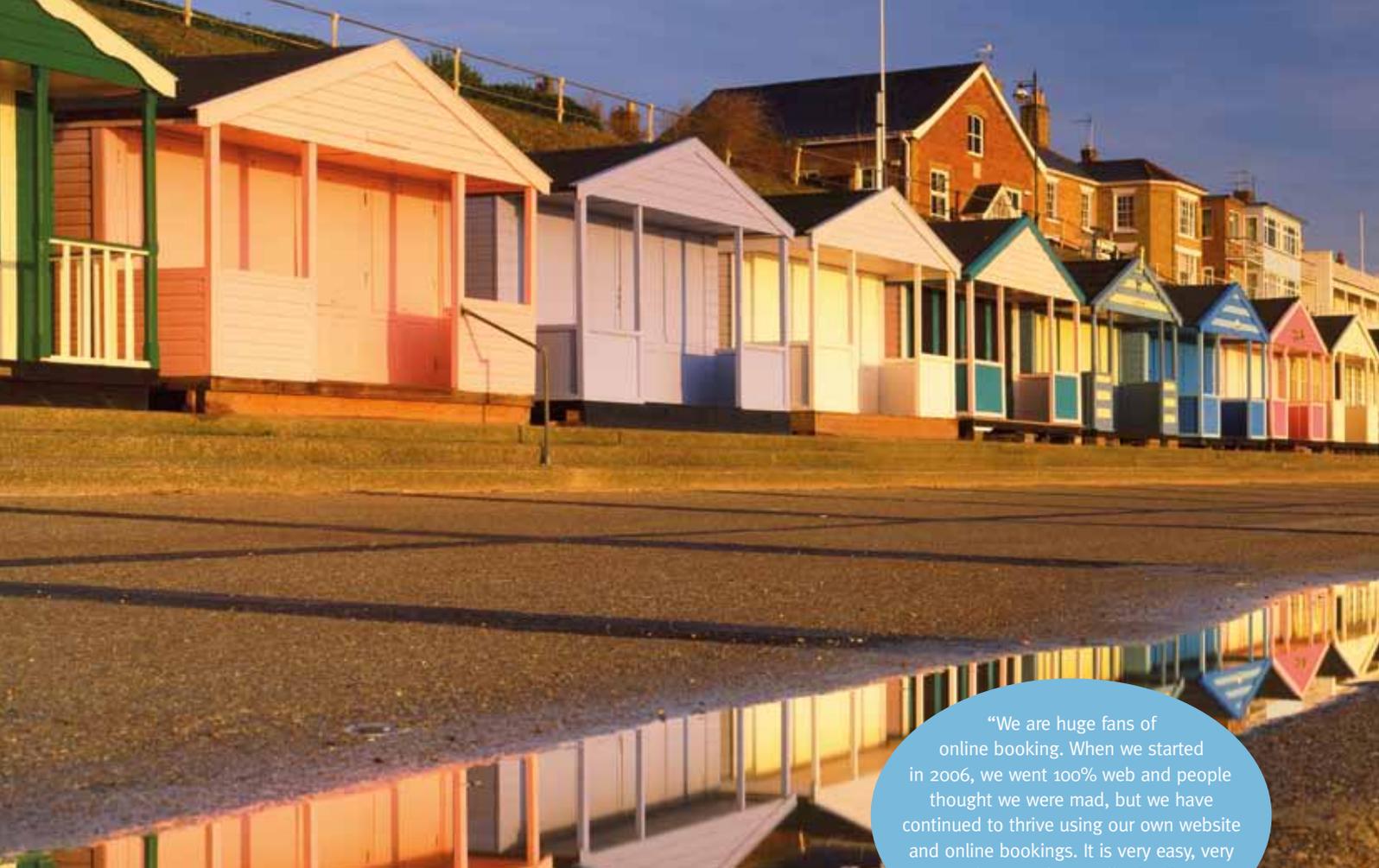
A site like LateRooms.com should present a property like Number One, Blackpool with lots of opportunities for exposure.

We do give our customers the opportunity to book via telephone, and our diary management system is flexible so it allows you to operate on a request basis only, which is ideal for a lot of small properties. Nine in ten bookings are handled online and it enables you to take bookings out of hours or when you're out.

Even in typically seasonal destinations like Blackpool you'll benefit from interest all year round. We're well-featured in search engines and offer your property via 100s of affiliated partner sites, so you'll reach more customers than ever.

Our unique 'search results' page shows the availability before and after the dates selected, so customers can book for an alternative date.





“We are huge fans of online booking. When we started in 2006, we went 100% web and people thought we were mad, but we have continued to thrive using our own website and online bookings. It is very easy, very cheap and very effective.”  
**Wheatland Farm, Devon**

**CASE STUDY:** School Farm Cottages, Suffolk 🏠★★★★ Self-catering 🍽️

We have been running our self-catering holiday cottage business for 12 years. We have four cottages converted from barns on our working farm. We do our own advertising. We are members of Farm Stay and have found the local referral network has worked well for us in the past. However, as other properties themselves are perhaps not fully booked either, recently fewer enquiries have been passed to us.

All cottages are top-end four-star and achieved a score of 100% for cleanliness at our most recent VisitEngland assessment. Two cottages have a NAS level one mobility rating. We are members of Walkers Welcome, Cyclists Welcome and Families Welcome. We have a large games room/conference room, a football pitch, a large garden and play area, a fishing lake and cycle hire.

So far this year 56% of our bookings are repeat business, 44% new business. We are looking at ways to increase our occupancy rates, as we find for the first time in twelve years that we are approaching the school summer holiday with several weeks not fully booked. People are booking nearer the time and holding out for late-availability offers.

We are currently getting quotes for a new website as the one we have is rather dated and doesn't showcase our cottages and facilities to best advantage. We do not currently use an online booking facility, but have a link from each cottage page to the Farm Stay Anglia Availability Calendar, which I keep up to date. I regularly place special offers/late availability on our own website, on the Farm Stay Anglia website and on the Farm Stay UK website. So our availability is accessible online, but customers can't book online.

Our website receives 600-800 unique visitors per month, the main referrers being Farm Stay UK (37%), Farm Stay East Anglia (14%) and Google referrals make up only 2%, despite running a 'pay per click' campaign with Google AdWords for a few months last year.

We have recently joined TripAdvisor and have excellent reviews and are ranked number one in the Speciality Lodging category. I would like to see this converting into a higher level of new business.

I have also created a Facebook business page and am beginning to use this as a blog and as an opportunity to advertise any special deals and events that are happening locally. In addition, I have started sending out a newsletter to guests.

However, we are not as busy as we would like to be and would welcome any advice to increase bookings.

Kind regards,  
David and Claire Sillett

"I'm new to all this online marketing. I tried holidaylettings.com, paying the hefty upfront annual fee, but my two cottages are lost among the competition. I tried Google Adwords, paying £150 for a month's trial, but I realise now that I was paying an agency and could have done it much cheaper myself direct with Google."

Tucking Mill, near Bath

## X FEEDBACK

### GUESTLINK SAYS:

Unlike most online booking systems, Guestlink works well for self-catering businesses. Many destination websites in England use our Guestlink software and the self-catering sector is hugely important. With our choice of 'Allocated' or 'Indicated' availability options, David and Claire could start to offer online booking straight away and see if this would increase the conversion rate on their current School Farm website. If they choose the 'Reserve and Book' option, there is still the opportunity to talk to (or email) the guests before accepting a booking.

The Guestlink software is flexible, so short breaks can be offered alongside whole weeks. Commission is only 2.5% including VAT for bookings taken on your own website with Guestlink.

Your web traffic looks good, so adding this 'Reserve and Book' button on the site may do the trick. If not, remember Guestlink works with Hudsons, the official guide producer for VisitEngland assessed properties, and you can upgrade your basic free entry on their website for an annual fee. Showing your availability on sites such as roomcheck.co.uk and iknow-eastanglia.co.uk now are additional opportunities available through Guestlink – the maximum commission is 10% (including VAT). In your area we work with [www.visitsuffolk.co.uk](http://www.visitsuffolk.co.uk). We also work with attractions all over the country.

Our reviews would work well for you too. Any customer that books a stay at School Farm through Guestlink will automatically be emailed and asked to comment on their stay. These reviews will then appear on all the Guestlink channels against your entry and on your website, too.

### FREETOBOOK SAYS:

Although we don't provide booking facilities for self-catering properties, here is some

general advice. It's definitely worth you putting a booking engine on your site. Your website seems busy enough, so it's just a question of converting more visits into bookings. Try this first and then, if bookings pick up, go for that upgrade of your website. Use Google Analytics on your website, to see if those excellent TripAdvisor reviews are sending customers your way.

Make sure your booking engine features prominently on your home page ('above the fold' – no need to scroll down to find it) and on every other page in a similar position. It's currently difficult to find your availability on your site, so I would recommend making it more prominent.

The repeat bookings are impressive. You may want to use the newsletter and your Facebook page to encourage people to book early by offering discounts. The Freetobook booking engine enables you to track bookings from your various emails, but more importantly it gives you flexibility and speed of response – you can even sell your farm beef on it as an extra!

I think you have chosen the right thing with Facebook. It's a great way to stay in the minds of your customers, build a relationship and let them interact with your business. It's also worth linking your booking engine to your Facebook page. We've got a great free booking app for Facebook and you can link it to any booking engine, not just Freetobook's!

### SUSAN BRIGGS SAYS:

When times are hard and competition is strong, it's essential to not only be different but also to show how your accommodation stands out. Guests now research accommodation to a much greater degree, so set up a direct link to your TripAdvisor reviews from your website. You might want to explore changing your TripAdvisor category from 'Specialist lodging' to 'Holiday rentals'. It's a

bigger category, so might work better for you. Gather and upload to your website as many relevant photos as you can find and detailed information about the local area and what guests can do, especially if it's something a little different. Don't just provide links to attractions describe places and make recommendations that show you really know your area.

Why not consider building your own website? Sites like [www.weebly.com](http://www.weebly.com) mean you no longer need any specialist knowledge. You can be 100% in control of your website and they are cheap to run. This means you can keep adding and changing information, so it's really tailored to the needs of your guests.

Pay per click can be very effective, especially for last-minute bookings, but you need to choose the right words. Google has a good online tutorial ([www.google.co.uk/adwords](http://www.google.co.uk/adwords)). It also offers a telephone service to get you set up. The ads can be switched on and off at any time. Choose the model where you can set a maximum daily spend, then you are in control. It can be as little as a few pounds per day.

### LATEROOMS SAYS:

As a high-end establishment, we feel you would benefit from managing your own content, and the ability to upload unlimited pictures about the property which we offer. As LateRooms.com take bookings up to the day of arrival, any period which invite high levels of cancellation still have a great opportunity to be resold.

Some properties work with 'Advance Purchase' type offers which encourage longer lead-in bookings that cannot be cancelled, protecting properties in weather- or event-dependent areas. Our friendly Hotel Relationships team are on hand to advise what strategy will work best. You sound like a social media-savvy business, so this should work well for you.

## CASE STUDY: The Wadebridge B&B, Cornwall

The Wadebridge B&B is a brand new business hoping to open in August 2012. It is a complete newcomer to online booking and digital marketing.

Conversion work and refurbishments have been carried throughout to a high standard, to create a stylish and relaxing bed & breakfast in the North Cornwall market town of Wadebridge.

There are three letting rooms, one double-only and two doubles or twins (zip and link). All can be let as singles. Particular features are light and spacious rooms with high-quality furniture and brand-new beds. All rooms are en-suite, with power showers and under-floor heating.

The Wadebridge B&B has excellent green credentials – with solar panels, high levels of soundproofing and insulation, energy-saving bulbs and appliances, a full recycling regime and a local produce buying policy. The business is just entering the process of grading and hopes to achieve four stars with VisitEngland at the first assessment.

There has been no marketing at all, other than to register the domain name [www.wadebridgebandb.co.uk](http://www.wadebridgebandb.co.uk) and to purchase a template website from [www.fatcow.com](http://www.fatcow.com). The website is not yet populated with content.

The Wadebridge B&B wishes to trade entirely online. There will be very little external signage to the business other than directional signs for visitors, so 'call-in' visitors are not encouraged. The owner is aware of eviivo and other options in the marketplace, but as a new-start business wishes to know the most effective and economical way to optimise for search engine and online booking business.

- Does a fresh start like this give the Wadebridge B&B any advantages?
- With the availability of inclusive websites such as eviivo should the owner bother to create a separate website?
- If so, how do you optimise a new website to attract the target audience of active/affluent couples?
- Are there other effective and cheap ways to attract new business?
- What is the lead-in time? How soon can the owner get bookings?

"You have to be with one of the big national sites. With just two rooms, I update four different systems. I have both Guestlink and eviivo on my own website and am diligent in keeping LateRooms and Booking.com up to date. Wherever I am, I have my iphone and laptop with me."

**Shakespeare's View,  
Stratford-upon-Avon**

"The big online agents are in control. It's all about maximising their margins. They really don't care where people stay as long as they hit their targets. Rates for all the major agents start at 15% + VAT. The trick is to convert the new business you gain from these sites to book direct next time."

**Butlers, Cheltenham**

## X FEEDBACK

### FREETOBOOK SAYS:

The success of most new businesses is strongly linked to their starting conditions, so get your website up and running and start selling immediately. It takes time for websites to be found and indexed by search engines, so you are effectively at a disadvantage with a new website.

Always build, create and own your own website. It's your most important marketing tool, so you need full control. Keep your website separate from your booking engine, as they are independent functions and you should be able to change either at any time without impacting on the other.

Your booking engine will need to be able to handle selling your rooms in the various ways: single, double or twin. Freetobook has just launched its 'ways to sell' module that allows you to sell your rooms in any combination. At this stage, it may make sense to consider using some of the large online travel agents, as they can give you instant exposure. We have just launched our channel manager, which links your diary with two of the biggest in the UK: Booking.com and LateRooms. Although you pay a commission, they will also drive traffic to your website, where you should be geared up to convert some of that into commission-free business. Freetobook gives just that. Good luck – it sounds like you have a great product!

### SUSAN BRIGGS SAYS:

The main advantage you have as a new business is that you're new and therefore news. This benefit won't last long, so start to capitalise on it right now. Use PR and social media to get out the message that you're new, and use curiosity to stimulate an interest in what you're doing. Be very specific about what you have to offer, how it's different and special. You'll definitely need to have your own content and high-quality images on your website to convey all the benefits of staying with you, directly to potential guests.

You have defined your markets as active/affluent, which is a great start, but take this further by defining them in more detail and thinking about their mindset. What will trigger

them or motivate them into making a booking with you?

### GUESTLINK SAYS:

As you wish the property to be completely marketed online, you can use the Guestlink 'Real Time Allocation' option so that customers make confirmed bookings through all the Guestlink channels with no further contact being required until the guest arrives, unless you want to send an additional follow-up email.

This means you can accept bookings through your own website and only pay 2.5% commission (or pay an annual fee and these bookings will be commission-free). We do not take any booking fees and if a customer cancels their booking, we will not collect any commission. Like many of the other online booking sites, we don't hold any deposits or payments. You decide what deposit you want and can retrieve the customer's credit card details for you to process, once the booking has been made.

Since you don't yet have any repeat guests yet, you will need to gradually build your online presence. In the first season you should look at a range of additional channels. Keep a check on the results and weigh up which perform best and the cost of each in terms of commission and upfront fees.

Guestlink can offer online booking on:

- Hudson's England (no commission, but upfront annual fee), once you have applied for your VisitEngland grading
- Roomcheck (10% commission inc VAT)
- iknow Cornwall (5% commission inc VAT).

### EVIIVO SAYS:

The eviivo online booking system was created specifically for small, independent accommodation businesses, such as the Wadebridge B&B. If you have limited time, budget and knowledge of how to market your property online, then we can offer you access to our expertise, technology, resources, distribution network and exceptional customer service to help you transform your business.

The priority for the Wadebridge B&B should

be to start trading online as soon as possible during the peak season. The eviivo activation process can be pretty much instantaneous, if you are well prepared. With a range of good-quality photos and enticing copy to publish on our online booking pages, you could receive your first booking within 48 hours if you already have a website, and even within a couple of hours if you use an eviivo instant web.

We negotiate the best possible deals and preferential commission rates with our distribution partners, who include high-profile brands such as Expedia, Hotels.com, TripAdvisor, LateRooms.com, lastminute.com. We also work with many local and regional tourism websites.

### LATEROOMS SAYS:

We're often very successful with new business, which tend to have more occupancy to sell until they build up their base business.

Properties in these circumstances often offer 'Special offers' such as a 'stay 4 nights get one free' deal to new bookers to raise their profile, and LateRooms.com customers are very receptive to such deals, raising your profile further. Unique to LateRooms.com too is the 'HotelAds' feature, a flexible online marketing tool which allows you to target an advert of your property to local searches.

We find our active/affluent couples find content very important, and we give our properties complete control over this, allowing you to add the description you want and the right images for you. They will also spend a lot of time browsing guest reviews and we'll display reviews from guests who have stayed at the property.

The map search on LateRooms.com will mean a property in an area such as Wadebridge will benefit from being advertised on many popular local searches, including 'Cornwall' and 'Padstow' – opening you up to even more businesses in the area.

Overall with our easy booking process and profile on search engines, LateRooms.com could potentially act as the sole online presence for a new business.





#### CASE STUDY: Doe Park, County Durham 📍★★★★★ Touring park

We are a family-run touring caravan park in rural Teesdale, County Durham. We have a high-end four-star site with 70 pitches situated in parkland on our farm, with opportunities for walking, fishing and wildlife-watching.

We have built a strong customer base over the years. We target our advertising to caravanning and motorhome publications, directories and websites.

In 2011, 35% of new customers found out about us through recommendation, 15% via the internet, 16% from site directories, 9% through magazine advertisements and the remainder from passing trade. In total for 2011, approximately 20% of our visitors were new customers and 80% were repeat and regular visitors.

We have between 600 unique visits per month (in the closed period) and 1200 during the high season. A total of 60% find us through search engines, 30% from referring websites and 10% are direct traffic. Most referred traffic comes from our advert on [www.ukcampsites.co.uk](http://www.ukcampsites.co.uk). We have a Facebook page, which we keep up to date with news, events and photos.

We don't use an online booking system, as we like to be able to speak to or email our customers personally.

Occupancy rates are down so far this year compared to 2011. The campsite is generally busy over weekends and holiday periods but we would like to see an increase in midweek bookings.

Thanks,  
Alison

## X FEEDBACK

### GUESTLINK FEEDBACK:

Guestlink is uniquely placed to provide an online booking solution that will work for a touring park and allow Alison and the team at Doe Park to talk to their customers before accepting a booking. The pricing options in Guestlink mean you can highlight the short break options, to encourage more visitors to come midweek, with a lower rate without affecting your weekend pricing structure.

There are no upfront costs and only 2.5% including VAT commission on any Guestlink bookings taken via the Doe Park website. Consumers want to plan and book their holidays at all times of the day and night, so why not offer this service? It can link through to your Facebook page and any other channels that Guestlink offers.

### CAMPING NINJA SAYS:

At Campingninja we work with the owners of small and medium sized campsites. We target and connect families and outdoor enthusiasts aged between 20–55 with well-run, friendly campsites in fantastic locations. We offer:

- a simple model – we work on a 10% commission-only basis with no upfront costs
- free support – help is always at hand over the phone or via email
- a low-risk way of seeing if working with a third party is right for your park/campsite
- a free trial – make use of our award-winning website's 'Campsite Management' area.

### PITCHUP.COM SAYS:

According to VisitEngland, over 70% of advance bookings for domestic holidays are now made online, and this figure is increasing each year. Some campsites and caravan parks now take over 50% of their bookings over the internet. Doe Park might like to test out our booking engine. It's easy to update and there are no upfront fees.

We now have more than 300 campsite and caravan parks, from Haven to the YHA.

Up to 25,000 users visit Pitchup.com every day and the website has more than 15,000 fans on Facebook. There are no set-up costs or ongoing fees, only a commission on successful bookings of 12.5% plus VAT.

### SUSAN BRIGGS SAYS:

One of your strengths is the high number of repeat and regular guests. They can also be a great marketing resource. Do you offer any kind of tell-a-friend scheme? Or perhaps some sort of added value come-back-midweek deals? It's also likely that your repeat guests will be willing to post more information on Facebook and tell others about you via Twitter – you just need to keep asking them to do so. Filling midweek slots can be a challenge. Consider which niche markets are more likely to stay with you midweek. Negotiate midweek discounts at a range of local attractions (so they're reducing their prices, not you!) and package great value midweek breaks for retired people or families with preschool-aged children. ■

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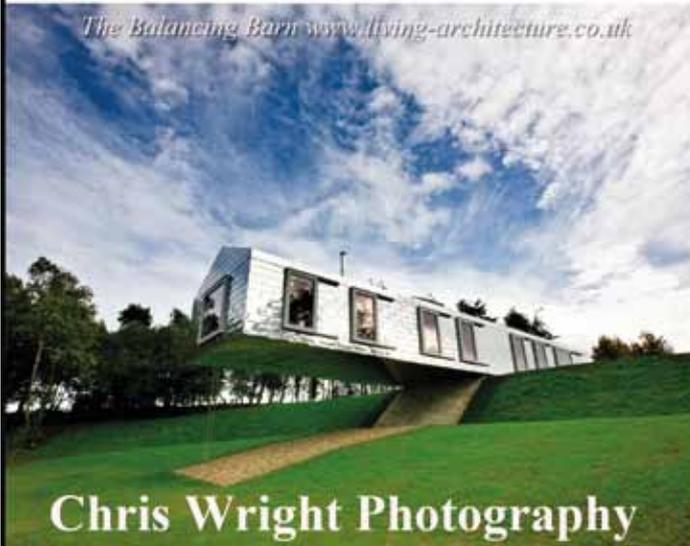


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CELEBRATING  
100 YEARS

# Analyse this

Having a website is vital in this day and age.  
Making sure that it's actually doing its job  
is just as important

**K**nowing how important it is to have an online presence these days, the majority of accommodation providers and visitor attractions now have a website. But do you know how much difference your site is actually making, who visits it and what pages are most viewed? Each visit to your website is a potential accommodation booking or visit to your attraction. You need to know how many visits you are getting each day or week and where these referrals are coming from. Armed with this information, you can then measure the success of your marketing activities and link these figures to your bookings and visitor numbers. What you are aiming for is a higher conversion rate.

There are plenty of trackers available to buy or you can use a free service like Google Analytics or Extreme Tracker. As trackers need to be embedded into your website, you may need a 'techy' person to set one up, but as soon as it's working you can review the data yourself.

Although every tracker works differently, they will all be able to give you the information you need. Here's a guide to what a tracker can do for you.

## NUMBER OF VISITORS

A tracker can show you how many people are looking at your site. But what is a good level of visits? That will depend on the size of your business, your level of occupancy or visitor numbers and the gap between your current performance and where you need to be.

If you have a six-bedroom guest house and are aiming for 60% occupancy, you need to do the following sums:  $6 \times 365 = 2190$  bed nights at 100% occupancy, so  $2190 \times 60\% = 1314$  bed nights at 60% occupancy. If your average stay is two nights, you need half that number as bookings, so  $1314 \div 2 = 657$  bookings each year.

If you convert 3% of the traffic to your site (the industry standard), you need to have 21,900 unique visit -  $(657 \div 3) \times 100$  - to your website each year. That's 1,825 visits each month or 421 visits each week.

Factors that will reduce these big numbers are any advance-bookings that come via third-party websites and repeat/regular bookings that come by phone.

You may also need more traffic to your site at certain times of the year.

Self-catering bookings are typically taken after Christmas and before Easter. If your visitor numbers are not peaking in those months, consider some additional promotion or online activity in good time to see the numbers rise. Make sure your business is listed on Google Places for Business (see box to the right).

## KEY CONTENT

You now know how many people are passing through your website, but which aspects of it are they looking at? A tracker can show you which pages on your website receive the most attention once visitors are navigating around. This will tell you what is of most interest to your potential customers. If some pages don't get much attention, it may be that the navigation could be improved. If hardly anyone looks at the tariff page/entry fees page, you might be right in thinking your website just isn't doing the job.

The tracker will also tell you from which page the potential visitor leaves your site. If it's always the same individual bedroom page, or the page about just one of your three self-catering cottages, you might



want to change the pictures on that page.

Equally if visitors to your website tend to leave from the tariff/entry fees page, they may be thinking your prices are too high. Time to put a special offer on the site, perhaps?

### TRAFFIC SOURCES

A tracker will enable you to find how people reach your website. They might have found you following a Yahoo! or Google search, via your local destination website, or on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. A thorough analysis of the referral sources will show you which of the sites on which you have paid to advertise are performing best. You may find some

surprises in there and even sites that you were unaware are referring to yours, such as a listing on a tourism site. You may also discover some really old listings on sites that contain out-of-date information, such as incorrect prices or opening hours, which you need to get updated.

### COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Being able to find out from which country visitors to your website originate is very useful and worth monitoring each year, to look for trends. If you see a 'spike' from one country, then you may want to explore creating a page translated in that language, or look for overseas directory sites on which to advertise.

### BOUNCE RATE

The bounce rate records when a visitor looks at a single page on your website but leaves without clicking on any of your other pages or links. Monitoring this can help you figure out if your web pages are engaging. Look at this statistic regularly, especially after you make any small changes to your site, especially to the Home Page. You would want the bounce rate to reduce. ■

### CALL TO ACTION

- Install a tracker, if you don't already have one
- Start reviewing the results daily/weekly if you are not as busy as you need to be
- Make some changes to your Home Page, for example, new images and see if that affects the results
- Ensure you are listed on Google Places for Business
- Put a 'call to action' on your website that can be tracked, for example, 'Sign up for newsletter' or 'Book' (or booking enquiry) button
- Compare traffic in one week with number of bookings in that same week

### GOOGLE PLACES FOR BUSINESS

Google Places for Business is a free service that puts your business on the first page of relevant Google searches and lists it with contact details and a map reference. All you need to do is visit [www.google.com/placesforbusiness](http://www.google.com/placesforbusiness), sign in or register a gmail account, enter your business details and wait for Google to call you to confirm that you are the business owner – then watch your website hits rise.

#### Park Inn

[www.parkinn.co.uk/hotel-manchester](http://www.parkinn.co.uk/hotel-manchester)  
5 Google reviews - £68 ▼

#### Verdene Hotel

[www.verdenehotel.co.uk/](http://www.verdenehotel.co.uk/)  
2 Google reviews

#### Luther King House

[lutherkinghouse.co.uk/](http://lutherkinghouse.co.uk/)  
5 Google reviews - £33 ▼

#### Merchants Hotel

[www.themerchantshotel.com/](http://www.themerchantshotel.com/)  
2 Google reviews - £42 ▼

**A** 4 Cheetham Hill Road  
Manchester  
0161 832 6565

**B** 454 Moss Lane East  
Rusholme, Manchester  
0161 224 1576

**C** Brighton Grove  
Manchester  
0161 224 6404

**D** 31 Back Piccadilly  
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0161 236 2939

### SIGN UP

VisitEngland is considering running a short course on how to set up a Google Adwords campaign in the autumn. This would be run by media agency M4C and hosted at their London offices in Holborn. To register your interest and for details of the cost, please email [feedback@visitengland.org](mailto:feedback@visitengland.org)

# Turning the tide

Helen Tyas finds the Isles  
of Scilly working to reassert  
themselves as a major  
holiday destination



“Warmed by the Gulf Stream and the North Atlantic Drift, the temperate climate is among the mildest in the UK”

An archipelago 28 miles off the coast of Cornwall, the Isles of Scilly are an unspoilt and uncrowded subtropical paradise of about 200 islands, five of them inhabited – the main island St Mary’s, Bryher, St Agnes, Treseo and St Martin’s – with pristine white-sand beaches, exotic gardens and wonderful wildlife. Warmed by the Gulf Stream and the North Atlantic Drift, the temperate climate is among the mildest in the UK and temperatures rarely drop below 4°C. In short, it’s the perfect holiday destination. But, while Scilly still has a band of loyal regular visitors, the market is changing and visitor numbers, both day and overnight, are declining – down 8% since 2005. Of visitors, 30% are in the 65+ age group and Scilly is attracting fewer visitors aged 26–44 years of age.

One reason is that, for holiday makers used to relatively inexpensive foreign travel, Scilly may be seen as costly and difficult to get to. Travel to the islands is by passenger ferry, the Scillonian III, from Penzance to St Mary’s from March to October; the journey being short enough to enable day trips to be made. The Skybus flies direct from five airports in England, and British International Helicopters fly from Penzance (relocating to Newquay in November 2012) to Treseo and to St Mary’s. In the winter, there are two flights a day, but in the main season, there can be as many as 16 flights a day, Monday to Saturday.

Gill Dan runs Isles of Scilly Inclusive Holidays from Bryher, and finds that first-time visitors are concerned about the cost and logistics of travelling to the islands. “That is why some people book through us and not direct,” she says. “When they discover how easy it is, they book for subsequent visits themselves.” In April, the Council of the Isles of Scilly published a report comparing ferry travel to Scilly and the Scottish Islands. The ferry to St Mary’s costs £95 return in the summer, while the ferry to the island of Islay in Scotland is only £17.30 all year, due to the £80 million subsidy given to the island ferries by the Scottish Government. The Council is lobbying the UK Government for a similar subsidy.

Tourism plays a significant part in Scilly’s economy, and accounts for at least 63% of all employment on the

islands – much greater than other remote and rural areas in the UK. Nearly 30% of the workforce is employed in the hotel and restaurant sector, compared with just 6% in the rural South West. To safeguard the tourism industry, it is vital that Scilly attracts more first-time visitors. The three tourism organisations on Scilly – the Isles of Scilly Tourist Board, Island Tourism and Island Marketing – realised that they needed to take action.

In 2010, the Scilly Destination Management Group commissioned a study into the future of tourism on the islands. The study, carried out by Blue Sail Consulting, identified many strengths, but also several areas requiring improvements or changes, including the large number of businesses that do not take credit cards, some outdated accommodation, variable levels of customer service and very limited facilities out of season. In October 2011, *ScillyToday.com* reported that the tourist information centre received complaints from visitors that businesses were closed during their visit, and in the same month a group of 70 visitors arriving on St Martin’s found that the only place to get a cup of tea was from the machine in the post office.

To ensure that the research recommendations would have the backing of the local community, the Council of the Isles of Scilly and the consultants gathered data and opinions from residents and businesses before the public consultation process started, and this paid dividends. “We are very much in agreement with the report findings, and we started acting on them from day one,” says Julian Pearce, Economic Development Officer at the Council. “We’ve already changed the format of the brochure and are using different imagery.”

The report recommended a major change: Scilly’s three tourism organisations should be merged into a single tourism body to give strong leadership, coordinate efforts and resources, and maximise effectiveness. “Our main focus is to develop the single body that will drive everything forward – destination management, marketing and improvement,” says Julian. “We have managed to keep everyone’s support and it has been a very interesting, informative, necessary and worthwhile initiative.”



Left: An aerial view of St Martin’s island  
Above right: A kingfisher looks out to sea



Left: A boat sails into a harbour  
 Right: Hugh Town Harbour, St Mary's  
 Far right: Abbey Gardens, Tresco



Chris Gregory, Land Steward for the Duchy of Cornwall, which owns most of the land and nearly one-third of the residential buildings on the islands, is the new chairman of the partnership. While the Duchy lets very few holiday properties direct to visitors, many of its tenants let self-catering accommodation or run B&Bs and guesthouses. “I believe that all on Scilly who are in some way engaged in the industry need to play their part in securing a prosperous future for the economy,” says Chris. “We believe that the Duchy’s appropriate involvement can help the whole community to embrace these opportunities.”

In the current market, fewer holidaymakers return to the same place every year as they once did – they want to experience different places. “We are not getting as many ‘repeaters’, but we want to attract first-timers and make them ‘recommenders’,” explains Julian. About 35 cruise ships a year bring hundreds of day visitors to the

islands, and there is always a warm welcome for them. “For most passengers, their arrival at the Isles of Scilly is the jewel in the crown of their itinerary,” says Sophie Hughes, Tourism Marketing Coordinator for the Council of the Isles of Scilly. “If we can’t meet passengers on board, we try to meet them on the quayside with maps and a smile, to help them make the most of their time here.”

Chris Gregory agrees that changes need to be made, but advises caution. “One of Scilly’s great strengths, and a feature held close to the hearts of many loyal visitors, is that Scilly doesn’t change: it continues to offer values that one struggles to find on the mainland these days,” he says. “But we need to be sure that we are also meeting expectations. And that might require a few adjustments.”

Scilly attracts a high proportion of older guests, but on the small, privately owned island of Tresco, likened by its fans to a luxury Caribbean resort, the visitor



## Scilly insider

There are dozens of great things to do on Scilly. **Sophie Hughes** reveals some of her favourites

**1** Get out of town on **St Mary’s**. There is a whole world in miniature, including nature trails and rocky headlands. The best beach is arguably Pelistry Bay, attached to a tiny island at low water.

**2** Take a trip around the Eastern Isles or to the bird colony of **Annet**. The best time to go is on a low tide in May: the seals bask on the rocks, seabirds entice mates with their mating rituals and the puffins perform a flypast as they head out to sea to catch fish.

**3** Don’t just watch gig racing, **choose a boat and support the crew** – women race on Wednesdays and men on Friday nights. Boats leave from each island, and after the race the crews meet in the pub to discuss how it went. If you are on St Mary’s, pop down to the Gig Shed; the doors are always open.

**4** If you don’t get a chance to catch your own supper, try the new **Fish Box**. It lands the freshest crab, lobster, crayfish and fresh wet fish right on the quay – and they will even provide recipe cards! Perfect to enjoy over the campfire or with a bottle of island wine or beer.



demographics change with the seasons. The island is almost car-free – visitors either hire bicycles or use buggies to get around – making it a very attractive destination for families. “In the school holidays we have a lot of families,” says Alasdair Moore, Marketing Manager for the Tresco Estate. “I have met many parents who say it’s their children’s first choice as a holiday destination. There’s a lot to do here and a real sense of freedom. During the shoulder periods, in term time, there are more couples – both romantic breaks and retired.” The Tresco Estate includes accommodation – mainly self-catering – two indoor swimming pools and a choice of eateries, and offers outdoor activities from tennis and bird-watching to sailing and fishing.

Scilly has limited bed spaces, but as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, development is strictly controlled. Last winter, the 1960s-built Island Hotel on Tresco was demolished and the £10 million Sea Garden >

## Beaches on Scilly

Scilly has some beautiful beaches and it’s hard to pick favourites. Simply Scilly recommends the following.



**For families:** There are many, including Green Bay on Bryher and Par Beach on St Martin’s.



**Swimming:** Great Bay, St Martin’s. Remote and beautiful, this beach has a vast expanse of creamy white sand and was recently voted Best Beach in the UK.



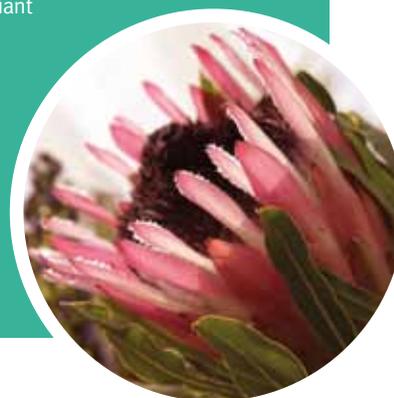
**Shell hunting:** Pentle Beach, Tresco, and St Martin’s, are probably the best shell beaches.

**5** The Bryher Shop’s **tattie bread** is a must; it’s an old Scillonian recipe and is delicious. And if the weather turns, the Bryher Community Centre, brimming with books, games and facilities, is the best place to be.

**6** For children, **Tresco Abbey Garden’s Valhalla Trail**, exploring the garden by following clues using a compass, is brilliant fun, and entry is free for under-16s.

**7** On Tresco, look for **Piper’s Hole cave**. It’s best accessed at low water and there are candles to light to help you find your way.

**8** **Carreg Dhu** (black rock) is a community garden on St Mary’s. A little haven in the middle of the island, it’s the perfect place for a picnic.





Above: Dinghies on St Martin's beach

## “Scilly doesn’t change: it continues to offer values that one struggles to find on the mainland these days”

impress guests. “Some 75%–80% of our accommodation is accredited,” says Julian. “That’s pretty high, and it helps to improve the quality. We are very proud of our two four-star hotels, the Star Castle on St Mary’s and Hell Bay Hotel on Bryher,” he explains, pointing out that 20 years ago none of Scilly’s accommodation was quality-rated. “How standards have risen!”

The Duchy of Cornwall is involved in a number of initiatives on the islands, including affordable housing, flower growing and the reintroduction of cattle and sheep. Is it difficult to balance the different demands of development, conservation and tourism? “No, not at all, they are wholly complementary,” says Chris. “We need to maintain a balance in all that we do, but I see agriculture playing a major part in the maintenance of Scilly’s extraordinary landscape, which is the foundation of the Islands’ tourism offer. What could be better for visitors than to enjoy fine beef from the natural pastures of St Agnes?”

Another priority for the partnership is public-realm improvements, which cover everything from signposts to waste collection. The environment is important for both residents and the tourism industry, and the partnership will have a green framework to underpin all its work. There are also plans for a brand-development exercise. “We want to define Scilly’s image and to position the islands in the market as a distinct brand, so visitors understand what they’re coming to,” Julian explains.

There are challenges ahead for Scilly, but residents and businesspeople are excited and positive about the future. Chris Gregory sums up the feelings of many on the islands. “Scilly is a unique destination, offering a truly exceptional experience that is like no other in England,” he says. “Our visitors are pretty special, too, and it is particularly exciting to be involved with a partnership that has the commitment and resources to help ensure that Scilly stays at the top of its game.” ■

Cottages development was built in its place.

“Each of these luxury one-bedroom contemporary cottages is available on a nightly basis, offering the ultimate flexibility for our guests,” says Alasdair. “Choose to dine at the Mediterranean-inspired Ruin Beach Café or cook for yourself. Three rates are available: half board, bed and breakfast and self-catering.” Tresco now offers a magnificent choice of high-quality self-catering accommodation, with its traditional granite island cottages and the luxurious beachfront houses of the Flying Boat Club. “I think all of our expectations of service and delivery have gone up hugely over the past two decades, and rightly so,” Alasdair says. “The Tresco Estate has made enormous efforts and a considerable investment to provide our guests with the level of comfort, service, food and facilities that they expect.”

The Duchy has been busy too, and Chris is pleased with a recent project, the new eco guesthouse on Bryher (see case study opposite). “It is very satisfying that projects such as Samson Hill Cottage provide opportunities for energetic and entrepreneurial tenants such as Issy and Gareth to make really exciting contributions to Scilly’s visitor experience,” he says.

Upgrading the quality of accommodation is a key part of the improvement plan, and the Council’s recent work with VisitEngland has given a welcome boost to accommodation providers. To supplement the annual Quality in Tourism visits, VisitEngland has run workshops, including a very successful ‘hands-on’ Breakfast Workshop hosted by one of the guesthouses, and another on housekeeping. The group toured self-catering properties with a Quality in Tourism assessor, giving tips on how to present properties to

### Useful websites:

[Simplyscilly.co.uk](http://Simplyscilly.co.uk)

[Scilly.gov.uk](http://Scilly.gov.uk)

[Duchyofcornwall.org](http://Duchyofcornwall.org)

[Tresco.co.uk](http://Tresco.co.uk)

[Islesofscillyholidays.co.uk](http://Islesofscillyholidays.co.uk)

[Bluesail.com](http://Bluesail.com)

## EXCLUSIVE READER OFFER

Isles of Scilly Travel is offering 20% off all Skybus flights and Scillonian passenger ferry rides.

To book, contact the Isles of Scilly Travel Centre on 0845 710 5555 and quote Quality edge magazine.

Bookings must be made before the end of 2012 for travel in 2012 and 2013 only. All bookings are subject to availability and cannot be used in conjunction with any other offer.

## Island businesses



### TROYTOWN FARM, ST AGNES

The Hicks family has lived at Troytown Farm on St Agnes for 30 years. Previously a flower farm, Troytown is the only dairy farm on the islands; the Hicks made the change because of falling flower prices. As well as the farm, the family – Sam Hicks, his wife Laura, his parents and his sister – run three self-catering properties, a campsite and bell-tent rentals. They also produce handmade ice cream and clotted cream, sold in the farm shop and to shops and restaurants across the islands, and sell farm-reared beef and pork.

With a spectacular location and panoramic views across the Western Rocks, Bishop Lighthouse and uninhabited islands, it's not surprising that the accommodation and the campsite book up fast.

The Hicks have recently upgraded their properties. "We are now offering high-quality accommodation that is also warm, cosy and energy-efficient," Sam says. "And we now have pre-erected bell tents for a more convenient camping experience."

What makes Troytown so special that holidaymakers return year after year? "The views of the ocean, the big skies, the working farm," says Sam. "There are no cars, so children are free to safely explore the island."

Juggling the businesses and looking after three young children is not easy, even in the winter. "It is a common misconception that we hibernate during the winter months," says Sam. "A dairy farm is hard work all year round! There is also the maintenance and preparation for the next season. Most of our bookings are taken in the winter, too, and without any staff from October to May, we keep ourselves busy!" [Troytown.co.uk](http://Troytown.co.uk)



### SAMSON HILL COTTAGE

Issy and Gareth Tibbs opened eco guesthouse Samson Hill Cottage on Bryher in March this year. The couple were living and working in Cornwall and had never worked in hospitality before. "Gareth has always been interested in environmental issues and I am passionate about using local food," says Issy, who was born and raised on Scilly. "So it was a great opportunity to run a business and live in an environmentally friendly way."

The newly built cottage is leased from the Duchy of Cornwall, which is very supportive of the business. The cottage is highly insulated to save energy, has low water usage WCs, and was painted with eco paints. The Tibbs use eco-friendly products and recycle and compost as much as possible. The guesthouse won a Gold Award in the Green Business Scheme in May, and praise for the Tibbs' innovative practices, including buying sustainable and recycled furniture, creating a wildlife-friendly garden and having a strict local food policy.

Business has been good, and the guesthouse is almost fully booked for the summer. "May started completely empty, but with the World Pilot Gig Championships and the Art Scilly Festival we picked up a lot of last-minute bookings," says Issy. "We've even taken quite a few bookings for October and November." The main problem is getting things to and from the islands. "If something breaks, we can't run out and buy a replacement," she says.

Running the guesthouse is hard work. "But when someone says they'll be dreaming about their holiday at Samson Hill when they return to the office on Monday, I know it's the most worthwhile job I've ever had," says Issy. [Samsonhill.co.uk](http://Samsonhill.co.uk)



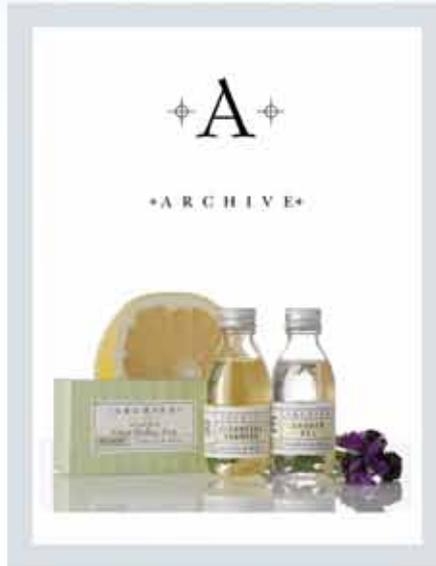
### BRYHER SHOP

Zoe Dan is 29 and has lived on Bryher, the smallest of the five inhabited islands of Scilly, for most of her life. She had always wanted to settle on Scilly near her family, and opened Bryher Shop in June 2011. The traditional general store caters for both locals and visitors; in summer the population of Bryher rises from about 80 to almost 400, with the influx of visitors and seasonal staff. Zoe stocks a wide selection of goods, from essentials to special local produce, and offers an online ordering service. She loves baking, and sells her home-made bread and cakes, including the Scillonian tattie cake. "It's an old islander recipe that flower pickers used to eat in the fields, and is made from potatoes," she says. Zoe now employs one member of staff, and has taken on another for the summer.

The first year has gone well. "A lot of locals shop here, and the winter months were busier than I was expecting," says Zoe. "I reduced my opening hours to 11-1 and 3.30-5.30; it seemed to suit most locals and it created a place to meet on the island and have a chat." She aims to keep prices competitive, but she has to add the freight costs. Most of the stock is shipped from the mainland and Zoe has to order days in advance. "It is difficult to judge how much to order and when," she says. "And the smaller inter-island freight boat can only bring the stock up on a high tide, so sometimes I have to wait until the end of the day for my delivery."

Zoe adds: "I have been lucky enough to run a business and stay close to my family. I also get to meet so many people who love Scilly as much as I do." [BryherShop.co.uk](http://BryherShop.co.uk)

# THE EVER CHANGING INDUSTRY IN WHICH WE ALL OPERATE CREATES NEW CHALLENGES EVERY DAY



Sysco Guest Supply offers solutions so that hotels can continue providing the best products and services to their guests.

For over thirty years, our business has evolved to become a global provider of world class branded and non-branded amenity programmes, in-room accessories, textiles and electrical goods.

We are continually developing ways to protect natural resources and our design and manufacturing processes combine cutting edge technology with ethical and environmental practices.

Welcome to our world of innovation...

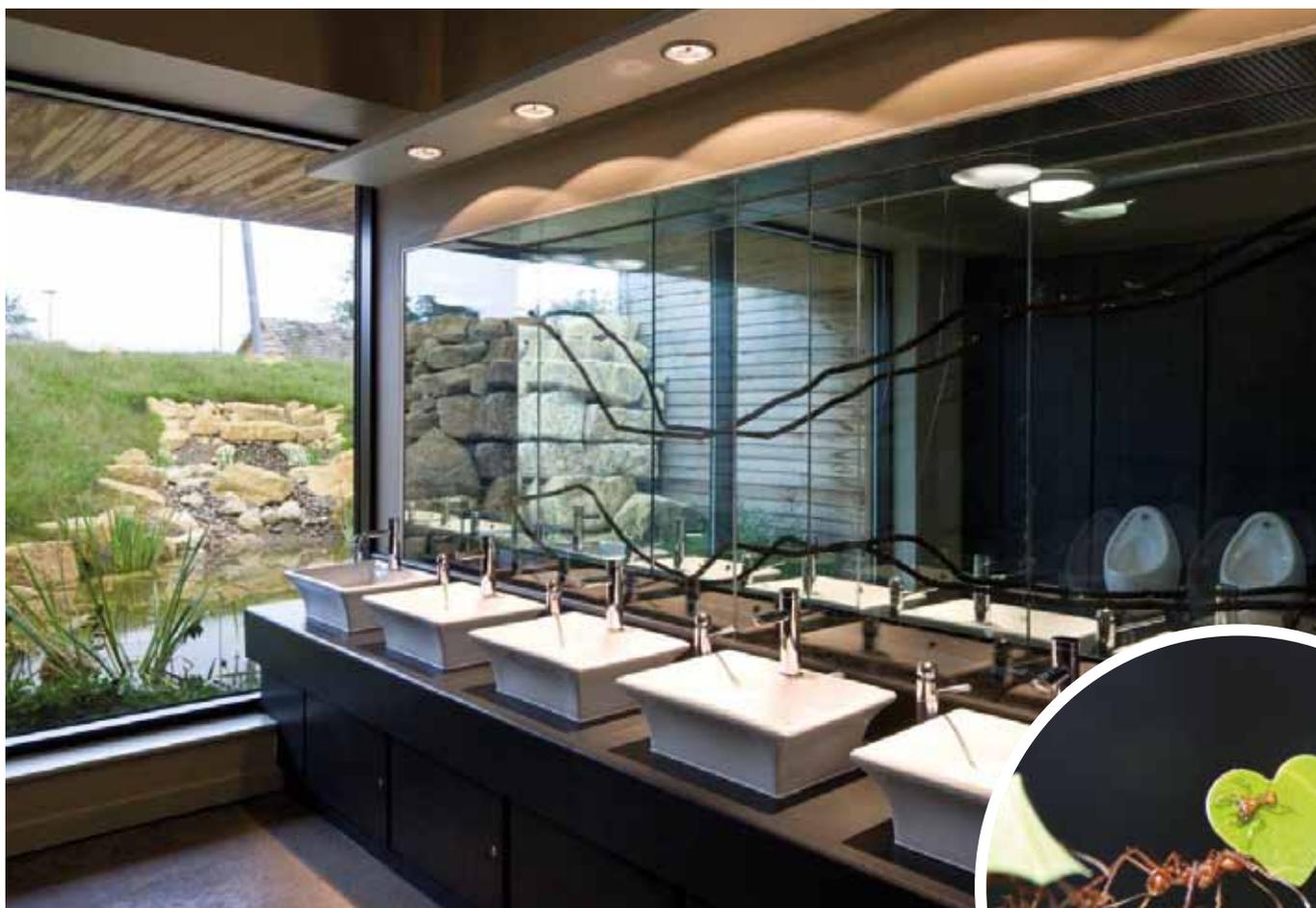
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# Brilliant bathrooms

These days, guests have high standards – and no more so than when it comes to bathrooms. Here we discover some of the best in the business



## *Twycross Zoo, The Midlands*



Although there is plenty to see and do at Twycross Zoo, you may be surprised to hear that it's the toilets in its visitor centre that really get people talking. And it's no wonder, as they feature a colony of leafcutter ants.

Built in 2009, the toilet facilities were designed as part of the zoo's multi-million-pound construction of its Himalaya Visitor Centre. Designed in such a stylish and contemporary fashion, it can take some visitors a while to even notice how close they are to the creepy crawlies. However, everyone is delighted when they make the discovery.

"I thought the idea of an ant colony – behind glass I hasten add – in the toilets was an inspired and imaginative idea," says visitor James Landon. "It made washing one's hands rather more interesting than

usual – and is completely appropriate for a place such as Twycross."

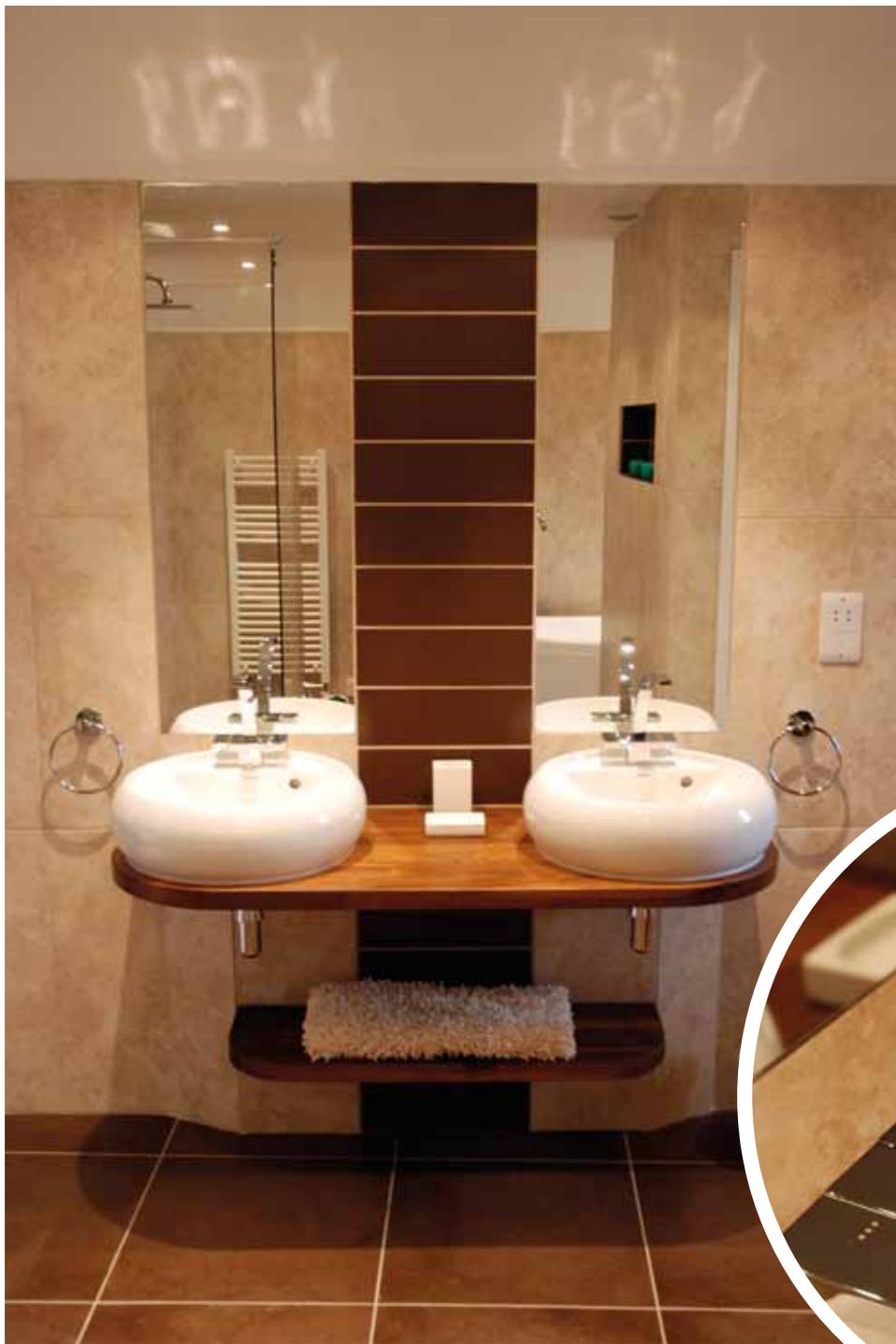
"It's fabulous," says another visitor.

"I could spend all day watching the ants carry petals and leaves to and from their nest. The space is lovely and tranquil, has a modern feel about it, and it's clear a lot of thought went into the design. It gives the visitor experience that something extra."

Despite the fact that the facilities have a real novelty factor, they are also practical. "I visited the zoo with my elderly Godmother, who is in a wheelchair, and we had no trouble accessing the wonderful facilities," says a recent visitor.

[www.twycrosszoo.com](http://www.twycrosszoo.com)





“We did a lot of visualisation exercises, to make sure that our ideas suited the building”



### Woodlands Farmhouse, Somerset

★★★★★ Self-catering



The greatest compliment that Paul Crang has ever had about his interiors came from a young, fashionable guest from London, who asked if he had used an interior designer.

When it turned out that she was an interior designer herself, he was even happier.

Paul and his mum Helen completely renovated the farmhouse from scratch, and took inspiration from design magazines and shopping visits. “We did a lot of visualisation exercises, to make sure that our ideas suited the building,” he says. “It was a real case of trial and error.”

Each bathroom has a theme, which complements its

accompanying bedroom. One has a contemporary look, while the other is more natural and features reclaimed timber.

Paul and Helen worked with a local builder and local suppliers, who were aware of what would work in the grade II listed farmhouse. They also shopped online in order to save money where they could, buying from stockists Victoria Plum and Online Bathrooms.

As a wedding florist, Helen knows the importance of finishing touches, so the bathrooms feature candles and smart marble surfaces. Guests are also treated to a small range of Woodlands Retreats toiletries.

[www.woodlandsretreats.co.uk](http://www.woodlandsretreats.co.uk)



## Deer's Glade Caravan and Camping Park, Norwich

★★★★★ Touring park



Heather Attew ensured that her shower blocks were of the highest standard by imagining that she was designing a hotel bathroom, rather than campsite facilities. "I really wanted to achieve the 'Wow!' factor," she says.

With marble effects, underfloor heating and spotlights instead of harsh fluorescent lighting, Heather has certainly succeeded.

"Guests constantly comment on our facilities," she says. "On the first weekend that we opened, I was in one of the blocks doing a bit of a tidy up and I witnessed a guest walk in, look at the showers and say 'Wow!'. I knew then that I'd achieved the look that I wanted."

The bathrooms don't just look good though, they are also fit for purpose. Anti-slip tiles make the floors safe to walk on with wet feet, and the units are durable enough to withstand heavy use. Each of the two blocks also contains disabled facilities.

"Getting the bathrooms right was so important to us," says Heather, "as people can easily be put off by bad facilities. It's especially important when you have families staying with young children – they don't want to be faced with a grubby bathroom."

Heather wanted the modern amenity blocks to fit in with the surrounding area, so they are wooden clad. The smaller shower block, which has recently been built to accompany the park's eight new camping pods, echoes this look.

No matter which shower block a guest uses, the feedback on [ukcampsite.co.uk](http://ukcampsite.co.uk) is unanimously positive about the facilities. "The toilets and showers are as yet the best we have experienced," says one guest. "The shower blocks are absolutely brilliant," says another.

[www.deersglade.co.uk](http://www.deersglade.co.uk)



**"The toilets and showers are as yet the best we have experienced"**

>

“There’s an element of indulgence to having a bath on holiday, as you don’t always have the time at home”



## The Ashton, Lancaster

★★★★★ Guest accommodation



The Ashton's owner, James Gray, is a man who knows the importance of a 'nice' bathroom. So much so that he's even called one of the five rooms at his luxury B&B 'The Nice Bath Room' – that's not to say that the other four rooms aren't equally well appointed though.

"People expect good bathroom facilities when they go away," says James. "There's an element of indulgence to having a bath on holiday, as you don't always have the time at home. Bathrooms in people's homes tend to become a bit of a dumping ground, so it's nice to be able to provide guests with some escapism here."

The bathrooms at The Ashton are both stylish and practical. Flattering lighting and dark tiles are complemented by plenty of space for guests' toiletries.

Although James used to be a TV set decorator, he believes that his background in design wasn't as important as the input that he got from his mum Susan. "I know it might sound a little sexist," says James, "but women generally do spend more time in the bathroom, so I roped Mum in to get her advice. We spent a lot of time going to bathroom shops and looking at the space I had to play with. It was great to get a woman's opinion on the space and lighting that they need to do their make-up."

As well as making sure that his bathrooms were practical, James and his mum were also intent on making sure they stood the test of time. "It's important to remember that fashion changes," says James, "so you want to choose things that will last. You don't want to have



to continually update a room which costs so much to do.

"I was tempted by some fantastic, funky tiles, but you don't want to buy something that could become the equivalent of the avocado suite in a few years' time."

As James wanted to go for a traditional look and use a British company, he chose the Birmingham-based company Imperial as the supplier of his baths, shower and sinks.

"We fitted the largest sinks that we could," he says "and made sure that every room had a shower, as I think they're just as popular as baths. We then thought about what else we could fit in on top of that."

Although only two of the rooms contain baths, they all feature underfloor heating. As James renovated the Victorian property from scratch, he says that this wasn't as expensive to install as it would be to do in an existing bathroom.

Even though James may have made savings by building from scratch, he has clearly spent a lot on his bathrooms – the room with the roll-top bath cost about £6,000, for example.

However, he believes that some of the least expensive touches make the biggest difference. "People really appreciate the fact that we provide things such as oil burners with essential oils, and books and magazines to read in the bath," he says. "We also provide good towels, useful things like cotton buds and luxury REN toiletries – lots of guests comment on how lovely everything is."

One guest who was clearly impressed with what she saw is hotelier and TV presenter Alex Polizzi. She wrote in a review for the *Sunday Times Travel* magazine: "James has done an excellent job on the decor, with chic muted tones and roll top baths – it's like a five-star hotel."

[www.theashtonlancaster.com](http://www.theashtonlancaster.com) ■



## A different view

When I left home and ran away to join Bath's Natural Theatre Company, a grand old lady who shared my compartment on the train (yes, it was that long ago) confided that she always stayed at a certain hotel "because they give one two towels in one's room".

Having never stayed in a hotel at that stage in my life, I couldn't imagine a bathroom with one towel. Forty-five years later and many a hotel and bed and breakfast later, I know exactly what she meant. Being a fairly large chap, I have experienced the lone postage-stamp-sized, stiff-as-a-board, ironed-to-death terry rectangle all too often!

Many people these days have stylish bathrooms at home and want their hotel facilities to be equal to that or better. Whether it's the standard chain offering, with everything the same but different and exactly where it should be, or the more homely version decorated with shells and marine-themed knick-knacks, we want it to be clean, warm and functional. And with no sign of anyone having been there before.

This last one is paramount. There's nothing worse than a wet bathmat. Or, as one of my colleagues put it, "someone else's steam".

These days, most places have learnt that a stack of fluffy towels can make up for numerous other deficiencies, such as flickering mirror lights and cash-and-carry toiletries. Gone are the days when, for example, if you wanted a bath rather than a shower, you had to pay extra for a larger towel and a minuscule bar of soap issued Prisoner Cell Block H-style by the scary landlady. Although a friend has a photo of a shared bathroom with a chain across the bathtub holding a sign saying 'Private'!

I'm not too keen on those shredder toilets that make an alarming grinding noise when you flush, but if it means the owner can add an extra little room in the basement or attic, then fair enough.

## DREAM BATHROOMS?

Ralph Oswick, Director of the Natural Theatre Company, shares his most memorable bathroom moments



Although my minuscule quarters high in the gables of one establishment was perhaps a room too far. The shower doors were so narrow, I had to soap up before I could actually squeeze in.

I was once having a quiet drink in a bijou hotel in Covent Garden, when water started cascading through the ceiling. The waiter seemed unconcerned. "That always happens when two people get in the jacuzzi in room 12," he explained. Fifteen minutes later, to everyone's secret delight, a damp-looking couple slipped into the bar and ordered two gin and tonics.

Similarly, in a seaside establishment, a friend seriously overdid the expensive bubblebath provided. She tried to rinse it away, which only made it worse. The bubbles forced their way through the drains and the whole esplanade outside the hotel became covered in foam. And now to settle that age-old controversy: to "steal" the toiletries or not? I always take mine with me, even the unopened ones. My bathroom cabinet is stuffed with miniature bottles of shampoo, moisturiser and shower gel, and more sewing kits than a man could use in a lifetime. Some people feel guilty about helping themselves, but, after all, we've paid for them. Do hotel owners think less of a guest for stocking up on freebies? Answers on a postcard, please. ■

# Child's play

Entertaining children is not always easy, but get it right and you'll also please their paying parents. Five visitor attractions and accommodation providers demonstrate how it's done



## Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre, Buckinghamshire

With interactive displays, fun and educational workshops and even talking toilets, there is plenty for young visitors to enjoy at the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre.

What the centre does really well is ensure that everything is as fun as it can possibly be, and this even extends to its café. Café Twit, which takes its name from one of Roald Dahl's most famous stories, *The Twits*, may offer standard food and drink, but it's the names it gives them that add to the atmosphere and keep alive the mischievous spirit for which the author was famous. From 'sanwiches' to drinks with names such as Swishwiffler and Whizzpopper, its kids' menu is full of silly-sounding treats that refer back to Roald Dahl's crazy creations.

## "Café Twit does amazing whizzbanging food" Visitor



"It's very important to us that we're as family-friendly as possible, so we try to maintain that in everything we do," says Museum Director Amelia Foster. "Café Twit reflects our brand values perfectly, and the children love it."

The café also encourages children to be creative with food by running chocolate-decorating workshops. It has also recently launched a workshop called Dream Potions, which lets children 'create a dream that they can drink'.

[www.roalddahlmuseum.org](http://www.roalddahlmuseum.org)

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"Perfect in every aspect - we really couldn't ask for any more. The animal feeding has been a brilliant start to each day. Tim is fantastic with the kids" F, J and B, West Midlands



### Tredethick Holiday Cottages, Cornwall

★★★★★ *Self-catering*

Targeting the pre-school market is the key to Tim Reed's success at Tredethick Farm. And although the farm is full of excellent facilities, Tim has no doubt what his little visitors like most. "Animal feeding is by far the most popular activity with the kids," he says. "It barely costs anything compared with the cost of putting in an indoor pool, and they get so much out of it."

Tim makes sure that he keeps parents and the health and safety inspector happy, by clearly stating in his welcome letters, information packs and verbally that children must wash their hands straight after feeding the animals. This attention to detail is evident throughout the business.

To ensure that his guests are satisfied, Tim regularly conducts surveys. "It makes sense to ask people what they want, rather than just making assumptions," he says. "Over the years, we've extended both our outdoor and indoor play areas, because our guests have suggested that we should."

Tim has added plenty of extra touches that make parents' holidays more enjoyable too, such as providing comfy chairs, newspapers and a Lavazza coffee machine in the soft play area, so they can relax while their children play. There is also a handy onsite farm shop that sells local produce and ready meals, which Tim says parents are incredibly grateful for after a long journey. And as the shop is run on an honesty-box system, it is open all hours.

[www.tredethick.co.uk](http://www.tredethick.co.uk)

### Turner Contemporary, Margate

The Turner Contemporary art gallery in Margate has set up a schools-participation project that is so popular, some of the students have asked if they can carry on working on it during the holidays. The scheme, which trains students to be gallery guides known as 'Youth Navigators', started last year. So far, 135 students from seven local secondary schools have taken part, and there are plans to extend this further.

The idea behind the scheme is not only to awaken in young people an interest in art, but also to make them more curious about the world and confident in themselves. "The focus of the training is on helping the students explore ideas and hold conversations with visitors, instead of just providing information," says Head of Learning, Karen Eslea. "Our Youth Navigators have become advocates for the local area and have a real sense of civic pride. They have started making more formulated arguments and we've seen their confidence blossom."

"I think Youth Navigating is the contemporary way of tour guiding," says 15-year-old Youth Navigator Harley. "Not only am I expressing my views on the art, but I am also listening to other people's opinions and building a clearer view of the art displayed."

"I am grateful for the Youth Navigating programme, as it has led to bigger things for me. When Her Majesty the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh visited Turner Contemporary, I was privileged enough to meet them. Opportunities like that are scarce in a place like this and for a person like me. I have lived in Margate all my life, and since Turner Contemporary has been here, I have noticed a positive change in the area. The gallery has put Margate on the creative map and makes me proud of my home town."

[www.turnercontemporary.org](http://www.turnercontemporary.org)





"If I hadn't seen the crèche and kids' facilities on the website, I would not even have known they were there! It was very quiet and as a young couple with no children we loved every minute and are desperate to return"

A visitor review on TripAdvisor

### Calcot Manor, Gloucestershire

★★★★★ Hotel

Offering both a luxury spa and Ofsted-registered crèche, Calcot Manor manages to make all of its guests feel at home – no matter what they are looking for.

With 12 dedicated family bedrooms and suites away from the main house, a crèche and an area for older children that contains games consoles and a cinema, there is plenty to please parents and keep their kids entertained. The hotel also offers a baby-listening service and children's menus, and can cater to guests' requests if they have forgotten to bring anything from home.

Children are welcome to swim in the heated outdoor pool (open from May to September) at any time, but the hotel has also allocated special times for them to swim in the spa's indoor pool. By only letting children in the spa pool between 3.45pm and 5.15pm during the week and from 8.45am to 10.15am at the weekend, the hotel once again manages to satisfy the needs and requests of all its guests.

Managing Director Richard Ball is very proud of this fact. "Calcot Manor presents guests with various facets that are diverse yet in harmony," he says. "It is wonderful to be acknowledged for appealing to young families as well as couples, foodies seeking special value and spa aficionados alike."

As the hotel appeals to all sorts of people, it does good business all year round. The fact that guests with pre-school children are not restricted by school holidays is a major reason for this. "Having the crèche has definitely encouraged those with pre-school children to visit in the quieter periods during school terms, and has led to increased business," says Richard. "Over 15 years ago we identified the opportunities to welcome families whole-heartedly and we've never looked back."

[www.calcotmanor.co.uk](http://www.calcotmanor.co.uk)





"Fishers is always a special treat for our three girls and it was a brilliant added bonus for them to meet their favourite character Peppa Pig!" Visitor Jess Muddle



### Fishers Farm Park, West Sussex

Fishers Farm Park ensures repeat business by continuing to offer new and different events and activities. It has recently started offering 'meet-and-greet' sessions with famous children's characters, just like they do at Disney theme parks.

To ensure that it books the most popular characters, the farm conducts polls of its customers on Facebook. As the farm is allowed to use the official character artwork up until the date of the event, it makes the most of this by advertising via local banners, newspapers, magazines, flyers and posters and online via its website and social media sites. It also sends a monthly mailshot to its annual membership holders.

In the past year, the farm has held sessions with a number of famous faces, including Fireman Sam and Peppa Pig, and everyone has been delighted by how well the events have gone. "The kids get so excited about meeting their favourite characters," says Marketing and Events Manager Kate Rollings. "It's really great to see their faces light up."

The meet-and-greet visits don't just make children smile; they are also good for business. "The characters not only increase footfall, they also draw in new customers who then come back," says Kate. "It's also nice to be able to provide annual membership holders with something different that they don't have to pay any extra for."

The farm books its 'meet-and-greet' sessions with the UK's official supplier of personal appearances of famous children's characters, Rainbow Productions. The company is one of only a handful that is licensed to reproduce the characters on behalf of film and television companies.

Helen Ede, the company's Marketing Manager, says that TV and

films both have an influence on which characters become popular, but a new film release tends to offer a short and more concentrated burst of consumer awareness and interest. To maximise the benefit of booking a character, visitor attractions must consider the age group of the children that they are hoping to attract, what type of event would suit the location and which brand matches their own.

"Each character appeals to a slightly different demographic," says Helen. "Many appeal to both boys and girls. Our team provides insight into what character choice could work well for a particular venue and which characters are current and popular. This is all based on product knowledge as well as feedback from previous events."

For more information, visit [www.rainbowproductions.co.uk](http://www.rainbowproductions.co.uk)  
[www.fishersfarmpark.co.uk](http://www.fishersfarmpark.co.uk) ■

### FUN AND GAMES

If you have children coming to stay, here are a few ideas to keep them entertained.

- Maintain a selection of toys, books and DVDs – it's a good idea to stay up to date with which characters are the most popular.
- Consider providing children's menus and meal times.
- Think about giving children a small gift, such as a colouring book, on arrival.
- Provide a children's guide to the local area.
- Team up with local attractions to offer reduced rates for families.



# Great expectations

Helen Tyas discovers what makes Bath's Lucknam Park Hotel & Spa so special

★★★★★ Country house hotel

**L**ucknam Park, a five-star Gold, luxury country house hotel near Bath, is regarded by many as one of the best hotels in the country. Driving down the impressive mile-long avenue of 400 lime and beech trees to the house, my expectations are high – and Lucknam Park does not disappoint. The elegant Palladian mansion sits in a 500-acre estate and has unrivalled facilities, including an equestrian centre, a spa, a brasserie and a Michelin-starred restaurant. But what makes Lucknam Park special is the hotel's superb customer service. The hotel and its staff have won many awards, including the Catey's Independent Hotel of the Year and the Welcome trophy from Relais & Chateaux, and guests praise the 'personal, consistently excellent' service and 'friendly' and 'can-do' staff.

## Attention to detail

Managing Director Claire Randall knows the hospitality industry well, having worked everywhere from small establishments to the 500-room Mandarin Hotel in Hong Kong, as well as a spell as a Michelin inspector. Formerly the hotel's General Manager, she has been at Lucknam Park for 13 years. "If anyone thinks it's easy to deliver that level of service, it's not, whether a five-star hotel or B&B," she says. "The success we've had doesn't happen overnight. It's about continuous improvement, setting goals, and making a plan to achieve them; focusing on the standards and delivering them consistently. I am passionate about detail at every level." Claire is a very hands-on manager, who leads by example. "There is nothing in this hotel I would not do," she says. "I greet guests, carry luggage, and even unload the dishwasher, if the kitchen is manic." To get the details right, every member of staff is trained to a set standard,



using *Standards of Performance Manuals* for every department. For Housekeeping, for instance, the manual covers everything in minute detail, from servicing the room to making the bed and turning down.

The ethos at Lucknam Park is guest-focused. Rather than just reacting to guests, Claire and her team try to anticipate what guests want and deliver a service that exceeds customer expectations. With 42 bedrooms, Claire admits that making it personal for 84 guests is hard, but systems are in place to help. Records are kept about each guest's preferences and requirements, so the team can personalise the guest's experience. Every morning, staff members from each department meet to report on arrivals, restaurant guests, events that day, and any important information. The duty manager prepares a daily programme, which detailed information on repeat guests, first-time visitors, guests' dietary needs and allergies, and special occasions. The information is passed back to every team member.

#### **Service with a smile**

Recruiting the right people is vital to achieving high standards. "We have 150 staff. That's 150 opportunities to get it right or wrong," says Claire. "It doesn't matter how passionate I am, or how much drive I've got, it's down to everybody buying into it." Claire's philosophy is to employ nice people. "Many of the jobs in hospitality are trainable – chef, sommelier – but it's difficult to train attitude," she says.

A key member of Claire's team is the Front Office Manager, Ben Woodward. Ben worked at Hampshire's five-star Chewton Glen Hotel after university, before coming to Lucknam Park two years ago as a floating Assistant Manager. "I was an extra pair of hands, working

## **"The success we've had doesn't happen overnight. It's about continuous improvement"**

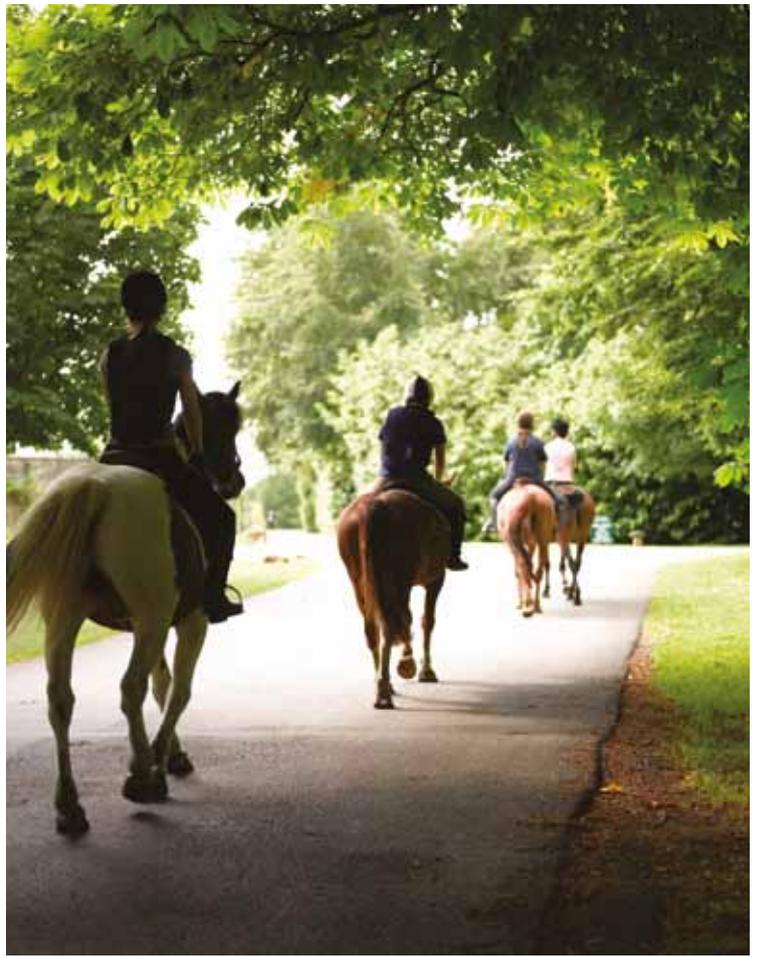
wherever I was needed," he explains. "It enabled me to broaden my experience in every department of the hotel, and I had the time and energy to carry out projects."

Claire interviewed Ben for the role. How did she know he would fit in? "He has the can-do, make-it-happen approach. He's focused. He looks and he sees, he listens and he hears," she says. "And then he does something about it. He cares about what he does, and that was evident in the interview."

"I like to get to know our guests," says Ben. "If you know their preferences, you can start to anticipate what they want. You have to read the individual, though – some guests want to talk, others want a more formal approach."

#### **Recruiting the best**

Recruiting good staff is a common problem for accommodation providers across all sizes and levels, and Lucknam Park is no exception. "People say the things they think you want to hear at interviews," says Claire. "It's about finding out what drives them, what are their ambitions and passions. If you do it in a chatty way, they feel they can open up." Trial days are a good way to assess an applicant's attitude and >



skills, says Ben, “because the person is showing that they are really keen to get the job, and you also get to see them working in the environment.”

To find staff and advertise vacancies, Claire uses: the Germany-based European Hotel Academy, which arranges industry placements for its students worldwide; the Any Work Anywhere website; GumTree; Reed Hospitality; Caterer Search; and even the Job Centre. Some vacancies are posted on the Relais & Chateaux website – the hotel is a member. Claire always follows up references, usually by calling referees. “It’s really worth doing,” she says. “It’s amazing that sometimes people don’t call me for a reference. I would be honest about the person’s abilities.”

High staff turnover is not a major problem at Lucknam Park. Occasionally people do leave after a short time, usually because of a mismatch in the role and their expectations. Claire is always honest about the demands of the job. “I tell them about the nitty-gritty and see if I can put them off,” she says. “Do they still want to come when they know that as a commis chef they will be washing plates, polishing cutlery, carrying trays – it’s a heavy, hard job! But having had a conversation about what they’re looking for in the next year or two, I can say Lucknam Park can offer good training and you will have opportunities to move up to another job.”

If an applicant’s English is not good enough for a front of house role, Claire may offer them a different job with the possibility of being considered to work on reception after a year, if they improve their English. “We have people who started as commis chefs and leave as assistant front office managers,” says Claire. “If they are diligent, passionate and work hard, they start to move up very quickly.”

One of Ben’s first projects was to create a placement position for a student. To make the interview process more challenging for the second placement this year, four shortlisted candidates were invited back to stay overnight and attend a recruitment day. “It was interesting, as you saw them in a completely different light. One applicant who was one of the weakest in the interviews was the strongest in the group situation,” observes Ben. “He demonstrated the skills you need on reception rather than good interview skills, and he got the job.”

Claire feels it is important to build loyalty in employees. “Don’t take your staff for granted,” she says. “Involve them, make them feel valued. If someone comes in on a day off because someone’s off sick, reward them – give them an M&S voucher! That person has saved your bacon: it’s worth it. And that’s how you start to get loyalty, because they will also respect you for where you’re taking them.”

### TEN OUT OF TEN

Lucknam Park is part of the Ten out of Ten training programme, involving ten hotels, including The Fat Duck, Chewton Glen and Gidleigh Park, and ten trainees, each one spending five months in each of five properties in every department. The selection process is tough, with interviews and challenging team exercises. “It came about because we were all struggling to find good, hospitality-focused people,” explains Claire. “It’s a fantastic opportunity for the youngsters.” Hotel staff were envious, so Claire introduced an in-house, two-year management development programme for Lucknam staff.



Left: Managing Director  
Claire Randall

“Anybody can have a nice location and beautiful rooms, but that’s not what it’s about. The heart of a hotel is its people.”

In any business, but especially in hotels, working as a team is essential. “In a five-bed property, if you’ve got five arrivals that day, you can bet that two or three will come at the same time,” says Claire, “and then you need an extra person who can talk to one guest while you show another to their room. Train employees, perhaps the maid or whoever you’ve got there, to be able to talk to guests and make them feel welcome.”

### Training is key

Ben is responsible for 15 members of staff and is closely involved with day-to-day coaching and mentoring. He prefers to sort out any problems informally as they happen, or he will have a chat with the staff member about how they are getting on and then bring it up.

Claire often uses role-playing exercises, both informally and in training sessions, to help staff learn to deal with difficult situations and guests. “It’s no good if only me or the duty manager can deal with them,” says Claire. If someone on the front desk is shy, Claire will pose as a guest and go through different scenarios with them. She will also be Mr Angry or Mr Pushy on the phone, sometimes taping the conversation. “They need to understand what they sound like,” she adds.

### Dealing with complaints

“Of course we get complaints, but it’s about how you deal with them,” advises Claire. “It’s always better to talk to the guests. Let them sound off, listen to what they’re saying. Don’t conduct the conversation by email. People can be unreasonable, but you need to deal with it.”



“It’s important to be flexible and find solutions,” says Ben. “Mattress too soft? We add a board underneath. And we make a note, so next time they stay we can put the board in place before they arrive.”

One night recently guests complained about very loud music in the room below at 3am. The anti-social guests refused to turn the music down, so hotel staff had no option but to apologise to the guests and move them to another room. The information is passed on to the duty manager, so he can talk to the guests the next day.

All guests receive a feedback questionnaire, and Claire and her staff are always talking to guests and asking for suggestions. These, such as requests for dog-friendly rooms, and criticisms – gripes about noisy children in the spa pool and the Park restaurant – are regularly reviewed, discussed and considered.

#### **Making memories**

Claire is proud of the achievements of her team and the many accolades they have won, but is always looking to the future. One current major project, which she calls ‘The Way Forward’, involves looking at best practice in every area of the hotel, from lawns to gourmet meals. Claire is constantly thinking of ways to delight guests, and future plans include a cookery school and a wellbeing centre.

“Guests come here for special occasions and we are making wonderful memories,” notes Claire. “It’s about saying ‘yes’ before you know what you’ll be asked to do; that is what makes the difference to the guest’s experience. And, in the end, that’s what sets you apart, because anybody can have a nice location and beautiful rooms, but that’s not what it’s about. The heart of a hotel is its people.” ■

*Lucknampark.co.uk*

Reader offer

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# Making sweet music

Helen Tyas explores the world of music festivals  
and finds out how they help to boost tourism



England's strong musical heritage and lively music scene are major attractions for tourists, both domestic and overseas. From the Last Night of the Proms and the Cambridge Folk Festival to Glastonbury and Glyndebourne, concerts and festivals bring thousands of overnight visitors to all regions of the country every year.

So how much is this worth to England's tourism industry? Millions of pounds, according to the research study *Destination: Music*. The survey, commissioned by industry body UK Music, analysed the data from more than 2.5 million ticket purchases for music concerts and festivals in 2009, as well as statistics from festival surveys, tourism reports and economic impact assessments. The figures are staggering. In 2009, major concerts and music festivals across all regions of the UK attracted 7.7 million music tourists (defined as those who booked a ticket to a live music event in advance and travelled either from overseas or outside their home region in the UK specifically to attend the event). They spent £1.4 billion, much of it in the host region on accommodation, restaurants, cafés and other goods and services.

Music attractions such as The Beatles tours and John Lennon's childhood home in Liverpool, The British Music Experience at the O2 and Manchester Music Tours receive significant numbers of visitors too – about 400,000 in 2009, of whom 4,000 were from overseas. Liverpool City Council estimates that fan-related tourism attracts 600,000 people to the city every year.

### Festival time

The last decade has been a boom time for music and arts festivals, with hundreds now taking place all over the country, attracting millions of people of all ages. Glastonbury started in 1970 as a small, alternative gathering for 1,500 hippies paying £1 a ticket, and is now an internationally famous event with an attendance of 137,000 and a ticket price of £195. Tickets usually sell out within a few hours of going on sale, and the festival contributes more than £100 million annually

to the economy, of which £52 million is spent in Somerset and the South West.

However, the economic downturn is affecting audiences – several festivals were cancelled this year and tickets have sold more slowly than usual. According to the February 2012 *YouGov SixthSense Music Festival Report*, less than a third of those who attended a festival in 2011 planned to go to one this year, while half did not expect to go to one at all. One-third of the 1,000 adults polled said festivals had become too expensive. Some organisers have cited the Olympics as the cause, others say cash-strapped, austerity-hit fans have become more selective about which events they attend. But many remain confident that festivals will continue to be popular with music-lovers and believe that there is scope for more festivals, whether professionally run events or those started by enthusiastic amateurs. If you are bemoaning the lack of a festival in your area, why not organise one yourself? Start small, like Glastonbury, Womad and Cambridge Folk Festival, and who knows what might happen?

### Suffolk in the spotlight

The tourism industry is a key economic driver for Suffolk, contributing £1.75 billion each year and employing around 34,000 people across 2,000 businesses. In 2009, the Festivals Suffolk marketing campaign brought an additional spend of £1.75 million into the county, according to the Choose Suffolk Tourism Partnership.

Two very different Suffolk festivals, Latitude and the Aldeburgh Festival, bring thousands of visitors to the county. Now in its 65th year, Aldeburgh (8–24 June) was founded by composer Benjamin Britten in 1948. Centred around the Snape Maltings concert hall, it features mainly classical music and sells about 21,000 tickets every year. Latitude (Southwold, 12–15 July) began in 2006 and attracts 35,000 people to its family-friendly, eclectic mix of open-air entertainment, from big names to unknowns, and also features comedy, theatre, dance and poetry.

Clare Hart is a Latitude regular and also owns Southwold Rock, a four-star self-catering >



## “Festivals are fantastic – they bring new people to the area”

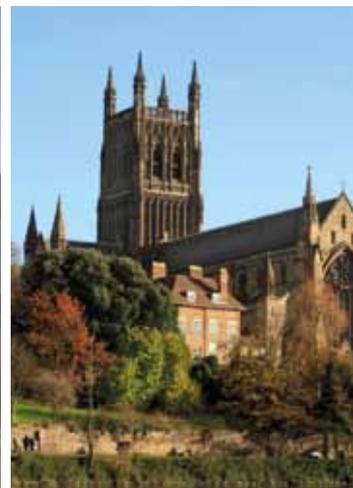
apartment in Southwold. “Real festival-goers camp to get the whole experience,” she explains. “Those who don’t want to rough it try to book Thursday to Tuesday, but because it is in July, I generally hold out for a full week.”

Festivals bring benefits for other businesses beyond tourism. “Festivals are fantastic – they bring new people to the area,” says Clare. “We own a shop in Southwold and it is always a good weekend for us, as many people leave the festival for a break or to see the local area. I live in Wangford, the small village closest to Latitude, and I know the village shop has a fantastic weekend.”

Clare admits there are some drawbacks. “There is noise late at night. Traffic is generally horrendous on the A12 on the Monday as everyone leaves. There is talk of more crime over the weekend,” she says. “But I think we are lucky to have Latitude on our doorstep. Anything that helps with tourism and local businesses gets the thumbs up from me.”

Alex Paul is the General Manager of Suffolk Secrets, a holiday lettings agency with over 280 VisitEngland assessed self-catering properties across Suffolk, and he lets accommodation to visitors for both festivals. He explains that the visitor profile for the Aldeburgh Festival is similar to the usual Suffolk Secrets customer, while the Latitude audience has a broader demographic.

“With Latitude, the majority of people camp, but some do book properties through us,” he says. “They tend to come before and stay after the festival, so they stay longer than just the festival weekend.” The agency works with both the festivals and provides accommodation for high-profile performers and VIPs, but Alex is



far too discreet to reveal any names. He is very supportive of music events. “Festivals raise the profile of the county,” he says. “And they introduce a different market to the delights of Suffolk. They may come for the festival first, but they often come back.”

The White Lion Hotel (three-star) in Aldeburgh is always fully booked for both festivals, and hosts musicians, celebrities and organisers, as well as festival-goers. “Aldeburgh is a key event for us,” says General Manager Peter Osborne. “The recession hasn’t affected bookings at all – we are full.” Aldeburgh Music’s visitors spend on average about £60 per person per day, which is significantly higher than the county average.

In Peter’s experience, the two festivals attract very different visitors. “The typical Aldeburgh Festival visitor is very cultural, well travelled, likes good food and wine,” he explains. “Latitude guests are more of a fun crowd; they’ll have a drink in the bar when they

get back. They tend to have late nights and lie in, while the Aldeburgh Festival goers have been up since six and had a walk before breakfast.”

### The Three Choirs Festival

The Three Choirs is one of the oldest classical music festivals in the world and rotates between the cathedral cities of Hereford, Gloucester and Worcester. It was started in 1707 by two young cathedral organists as regular annual music club meetings, using the cathedrals for church music and other venues for secular music. It has grown over the centuries and is now run by the Three Choirs Festival Association, with a general manager, a development manager and representatives of the three local festival committees and their artistic directors. This year it took place in Hereford in July instead of its usual August slot, to avoid clashing with the Olympics.

The festival has a loyal audience of regulars who attend every year – around 80% of each



Main image (page 44):  
Crowds in front of the main stage at Suffolk's Latitude festival  
Far left (clockwise l-r):  
Audience members at Aldeburgh Festival, the interior of Aldeburgh's Snape Maltings Concert Hall, Worcester Cathedral (the main venue for the Three Choirs Festival), the exterior of Snape Maltings Concert Hall  
Left: Crowds at Leicester's Summer Sundae Weekender

grown from a one-day concert to a three-day event. Its USP is that it manages to create the full festival experience, complete with camping, in the most unlikely of venues – slap bang in the centre of the city, around the De Montfort Hall and Gardens. The festival attracts 7,000 visitors, many of whom camp, but those who prefer to sleep in comfort can choose from a range of city centre hotels and guesthouses. The three-star Belmont Hotel's location, just a few minutes' walk from the De Montfort Hall, makes it an ideal base for festival revellers, and usually around half the hotel is booked for the event. During the week the hotel is primarily a business hotel, while weekends are more leisure-oriented. "Music events and festivals are very good for Leicester and always bring us business," says James Bowie, the hotel's Operations Manager. "And outside the Weekender we often have performers from the De Montfort Hall staying, such as the *Strictly Come Dancing* team. We also support the Leicester International Music Festival, which is fantastic. It's fun to walk down the hotel corridors and hear music as the performers practise!" ■

## “Music events and festivals are very good for Leicester and always bring us business”

year's crowd have been before. "In every city there's a huge influx of visitors, 8,000–9,000 for the week," explains Development Manager Debbie Liggins. "We sell about 21,000 tickets and on average each visitor attends seven events."

In Hereford this year, all accommodation, including campsites, was fully booked. A shortage of good quality places to stay in Hereford and Worcester led to residents letting rooms in their homes to visitors just for the festival week, and they were all full too.

Lesley Hines owns the three-star Shrubbery Guesthouse in Worcester, just one mile from the festival's main venue, Worcester Cathedral. "More of our trade during the period comes from the performers themselves (including the choir and orchestra), as we have limited rooms and they prefer to book for the week, rather than just a couple of nights," she says. "We have had some Dutch and German people stay with us, although the majority tend to be British. It's definitely more popular with older people: I don't recall ever having a younger party or family for the event."

There is no data available on the economic impact of the festival, but a 2009 study of six arts organisations in Worcestershire, including the Three Choirs Festival, found

that they generated £7.1 million and received £1 million in grants in 2008, and the total spend, including money spent on accommodation and in restaurants, shops and pubs, was £21.7 million.

The latest festival audience survey, conducted in Hereford in 2009, revealed that 71% stayed overnight and 5% came from overseas – Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Eighty-three per cent of respondents were aged 60 plus.

Has the recession affected bookings during the festival in the last few years? "That's difficult to quantify," says Lesley. "Everyone's business has been affected by the recession, but our rooms are limited and it's during our busiest time of year anyway." Guests have commented that they would like to stay longer but have to consider the cost. Linda is all in favour of the festival and the visitors it brings to the city. "It's good for the larger economy," she says, "and it may be worth looking at ways to accommodate similar events to encourage tourism in Worcester."

### Summer Sundae Weekender

Leicester's Summer Sundae Weekender (17–19 August 2012) is now in its 12th year, and has

#### Find out more

- [Ukmusic.org](http://Ukmusic.org)
- [Suffolk-secrets.co.uk](http://Suffolk-secrets.co.uk)
- [Southwoldrock.co.uk](http://Southwoldrock.co.uk)
- [Whitelion.co.uk](http://Whitelion.co.uk)
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- [3choirs.org](http://3choirs.org)
- [Shrubberyguesthouse.com](http://Shrubberyguesthouse.com)
- [belmonthotel.co.uk](http://belmonthotel.co.uk)
- [summersundae.com](http://summersundae.com)



# Cutting through the red tape

Kurt Janson, Policy Director of the Tourism Alliance, explains where things stand in the world of red tape



## Controlled Waste Regulations

The Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has recently published the Controlled Waste (England and Wales) Regulations 2012. These replace the previous Controlled Waste Regulations from 1992 and define the powers of local authorities to charge for the collection and disposal of various types of household and commercial rubbish. The new regulations were introduced because those written in 1992 contained limited provisions for local authorities to charge for the disposal costs associated with collecting rubbish. There was also a schedule to the regulations that specifically prevented councils from charging the disposal costs of rubbish collected from a range of property types including self-catering properties.

Having been lobbied by the Tourism Alliance, DEFRA has maintained this exemption. So if you own a self-catering property that is eligible for Small Business Rate Relief and has a rateable value of less than £12,000, you are still entitled to free waste and recycling collections.

For more information, visit [www.defra.gov.uk/environment/waste/local-authorities/controlled-waste-regs](http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/waste/local-authorities/controlled-waste-regs) or contact the waste control section of your local authority.



## Age discrimination legislation

It now seems certain that new legislation that prevents businesses from discriminating on the basis of age when selling goods and services will come into effect on 1 October 2012. This legislation will mean that you will not be able to have a rule that prevents anyone over the age of 18 booking your property. It also means that you will not be able to market your property to a specific age group, such as over-21s, or impose different terms and conditions on the booking on the basis of age.

For example, you will not be able to refuse a booking from a group of 18 year olds because you consider that they might cause damage or disrupt other guests. In addition, you will also be unable to require such a group to pay a larger deposit for their booking in case they damage the property.

However, there will be some exemptions. These include:

### 1. Objective justification

This is where you have a valid provable reason for treating people of a specific age differently. For example, car insurance companies might be able to justify higher premiums for those under the age of 25 based on evidence from accident rates. However, it is doubtful that objective justification will be able to be used by accommodation providers.

### 2. Positive action

This is where the different treatment is actually beneficial to a targeted age group and does not impact upon other customers. For example,

you should still be able to provide midweek discounts to pensioners because they benefit and other customers do not receive a worse rate than usual.

### 3. Package holidays

This is where you sell a package that includes multiple components for a set price. An example would be if you provide golfing breaks where the accommodation and the green fees are included in the price. The exemption also applies if you provide a package that includes transport but provides the customer with the option of providing their own transport. For example, you could advertise an offer on the basis of age that includes rail fares and provide an option of a lower price if the customer drives to your property.

There are a number of 'grey areas' as to what will be acceptable practice. It is hoped that the guidance that the Home Office will be issuing with the legislation will help to clarify these.



## Alcohol and smoking consultations

I mentioned in the last update that the Government was preparing to undertake consultations on reducing the regulatory burden on businesses that provide small quantities of alcohol (including B&Bs and self-catering premises that provide a bottle of wine as part of a welcome pack). The Home Office has now met with the Tourism Alliance and other affected trade bodies and is in the process of developing its proposals for consultation. The Tourism Alliance will look to the tourism industry to support this.

Similarly, the Department of Health has expressed concerns regarding the proposed removal of the requirement for businesses to display no smoking signs from entrances. It has been suggested that allowing businesses to make their own signs rather than buying the signs prescribed in the regulations might be a suitable compromise.



## Brown signs

The Department for Transport has recently undertaken a pre-consultation on improvements that can be made to the guidance on the provision of tourism signage. This consultation will be the fulfilment of one of the action points in the Government's Tourism Policy that was launched in March 2011.

The Policy found that many tourism businesses considered that brown signs were not meeting the needs of the industry and a commitment was made to help ensure that this signage better reflects the needs of drivers and supports the growth of businesses. It is expected that the public consultation on tourism signage will be published towards the end of summer and will be open for businesses to provide comments for three months.

For more information, visit [www.tourismalliance.com](http://www.tourismalliance.com) ■

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# Your letters



Please contact the Editor with any comments or ideas, or to share your experiences:  
Pam Foden, Editor, Quality Edge, VisitEngland, Floor 9, 1 Palace Street, London  
SW1E 5HX pam.foden@visitengland.org

## Talking scents

I am writing about a problem we have at our guest house. Although all our rooms are non-smoking and our guests abide by this, some guests and their belongings smell so strongly of smoke that it almost gives the effect that rooms have been smoked in anyway.

We have had several guests who have passed comment about being able to smell smoke, despite excellent housekeeping, and our knowledge that no one has actually been smoking on the premises.

In the defence of a complaint, we explain that we do police the issue of smoking and that the smell, if any, is purely 'residual'. We often have to compensate guests in some way or run the risk of a bad review or a non-recommendation. I really don't think they believe our explanations and think we are fobbing them off.

It would be unfair to discriminate against guests who smoke, but I really don't know how to tackle the issue. Many of our guests smoke and it would be tricky to broach such a sensitive issue as they are playing by the rules. You can hardly tell them they 'smell' and are damaging the business. They would never return, be left very upset and that would then damage the business even more!

Perhaps we should just 'take it on the chin' and treat these rooms as if they had been smoked in, going to the added expense of a deep clean, or lose a day's tariff to provide a thorough room airing. It would be great to get some advice and hear what other people have to say on the matter.

**Keith Muller**

**Pride Lodge, Blackpool.**

★★★★★ *Guest Accommodation*

**Editor:** *This seems to be a 'creeping' problem, especially for self-catering operators, where unsupervised guests will sometimes smoke inside the cottage, too. I have heard of B&Bs that refuse to accept bookings from smokers, for the reasons you give. I wonder if you could afford to do this, or whether quizzing guests about their smoking habits would be seen as being unwelcoming? What about surveying your guests to ask their views?*



Congratulations to Keith Miller, who has won a pair of tickets to see *Oliver! The musical*

Star  
letter



## Hearing query

I would like to take this opportunity to tell your readers about a guidebook that I am planning on publishing called *Tourism for the hearing impaired*. The guide would make it a lot easier for the deaf/hard of hearing to find places to stay with suitable facilities.

If any guest accommodation owner reading this has any of the following facilities, it would be much appreciated if they could email me at [ruthy@supportthedeafpeople.co.uk](mailto:ruthy@supportthedeafpeople.co.uk) and tell me which ones they have at their property.

- Smoke alarm with strobe light
- Vibrating pad
- Minicom
- Text relay service/SignVideo
- Hearing loop
- Door beacon
- Vibrating baby alarm monitor
- TV subtitles
- Any other equipment
- Basic/British sign language
- Undertaken deaf awareness training course

I look forward to hearing from you.

**Ruthy Fletcher**

[www.supportthedeafpeople.co.uk](http://www.supportthedeafpeople.co.uk)

## Group effort

Earlier this year, I met with a small group of guest accommodation owners from the village of Dunwatch near Bassenthwaite Lake in Cumbria. They are working together to both maximise their online marketing capacity and ensure that the local community looks its best. The group currently comprises three four-star guest houses, and art gallery, a tea shop, a pub (without rooms), a garden centre and a number of (non-industry) neighbours.

Claire Shepherd, who runs a guest house called Ouse Bridge House, is one of the founding members. As a group, she and the

other businesses now advertise with discoverthelakes.co.uk. The group meets four times a year to discuss marketing ideas and they often work together to improve the local area by creating flower beds and cutting verges.

As I was so impressed with their efforts, I thought I would write to you in the hope that it will inspire other small guest accommodation owners. It would be great to hear from any who are already involved in a similar scheme, too.

**Linda Richardson MIH**  
Quality in Tourism Assessor

## Customer dissatisfaction

In my new role as Chair of The Lakes Hospitality Association, I receive feedback about accommodation from people who have visited the Lakes. As a result, I wanted to write to you about the problems we are encountering with hotels and B&Bs that self-award stars. I've seen a green/blue logo with a bed image, stars and the term 'self-assessed' underneath.

Recently, I had a customer who was so disgusted with the hotel they had booked, which was a 'self-assessed' four-star, that they checked straight out. They told me that there was no-one on reception (just a note and a key), a very basic room and not even a basic shower gel in the bathroom. This is just not acceptable in 2012, even though it is a self-assessment. Is it not checked or moderated by someone?

Fortunately, the customer found my property via the TIC, so we were able to rescue them. We offered them the rooms that we had (which as it happened were deluxe rooms – far better than they had expected), but at the same rate that they had originally booked at.

Even though they did not get a refund and so effectively paid twice, I think I achieved my objective of recovering the goodwill of the customers who went away happy that the Lake District as a brand did look after them. But they are still going to give a stinging review of the place on TripAdvisor. That may impact them but it hurts all of us.

I know none of this is your fault, and I am sure you find it as frustrating as we do, but

something has to be done. The idea of 'self-assessment' is clearly a non-starter! This is the first time that I have come across it and it is a customer disaster. We, the Lakes, and VisitEngland are going to suffer if it is not stopped, and soon.

**Tony Blaney**  
Fairfield House and Gardens  
★★★★ Guest House

**Editor:** This logo is used by eviivo on its consumer-facing websites. 'Self-assessment' crept in when online booking sites like LateRooms took off. The business is saying "I think I am worth four stars", but as a guest house or a hotel? It may be that the business was previously VisitEngland or AA star-rated, but their membership has lapsed. It

doesn't mean that if they were still in the scheme they would get that rating again. Customer expectations rise and the schemes change to reflect this.

The commercial booking sites don't want to lose any customers or income, so they will never operate 'assessed-only' policies. However, if the customers start to complain, for example, "How can this property have four stars?", maybe the booking site will encourage the business to drop a self-awarded star. If the business over-promises, then customer ratings are going to be poor.

Of course, there are plenty of examples of very good quality businesses that self-assess. It's as if the stars are deemed to be valuable, but the businesses (some!) don't want to pay a fee to achieve them.

## EYES ON THE PRIZE

The writer of next issue's star letter will win a pair of tickets to the touring production of *The Ladykillers*

*The Ladykillers*, which received rave reviews during its run in the West End, is a celebrated Ealing comedy that has been brilliantly adapted by *Father Ted* writer Graham Linehan. Directed by Sean Foley (*The Play what I Wrote*) and starring Michele Dotrice (*Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*), Shaun Williamson (*Extras* and *EastEnders*) and Clive Mantle (*Casualty* and *The Vicar of Dibley*),

*The Ladykillers* is a classic black comedy about a little old lady and a gang of criminal misfits.

For more information, performance dates and locations, visit [www.theladykillers.co.uk](http://www.theladykillers.co.uk)

\* Tickets are valid for the first night at each venue. They are also subject to availability and are non-transferable.



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Quality edge is published for VisitEngland by Wardour, 5th Floor, Drury House, 34-43 Russell Street, London WC2B 5HA  
**Telephone:** 020 7010 0999  
**Website:** www.wardour.co.uk



Average audited circulation: 19,322 for period July 2010 – June 2011

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...for an online booking system.”*

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