

VisitEngland's magazine for quality-assessed accommodation and attractions

Quality edge

Autumn 2011 Issue 13

GETTING NOTICED

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HOW TO MANAGE
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We apologise for the slight delay in getting this edition to you all, but it's packed with articles that we hope you will enjoy. For those readers interested in attracting more overseas visitors, there is a feature on the rapidly growing Chinese market and an insight into working with tour operators. Kurt Janson's regular column includes an encouraging progress report on the Tourism Alliance's lobby regarding the new requirement for self-catering businesses to provide Energy Performance Certificates. There are two excellent case studies – a 'boutique' B&B in Hastings whose owners share the

secrets of their high occupancy levels and a family touring park in Northumberland that has diversified into self-catering and now created a bunkhouse and wigwams to widen their market. The Letters page includes some of your feedback on the recent changes to the Hotel, Guest accommodation and Parks standards and your views on ideas being discussed regarding the self-catering standard. *Britain* magazine has another tempting 'free advert' offer for new subscribers, which many of you took up last time. ■

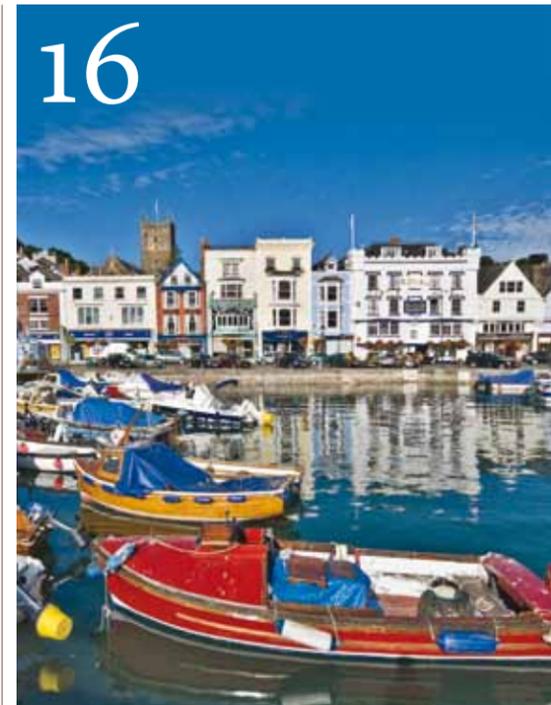
Pam Foden

Pam Foden
Operations and Industry
Engagement Manager



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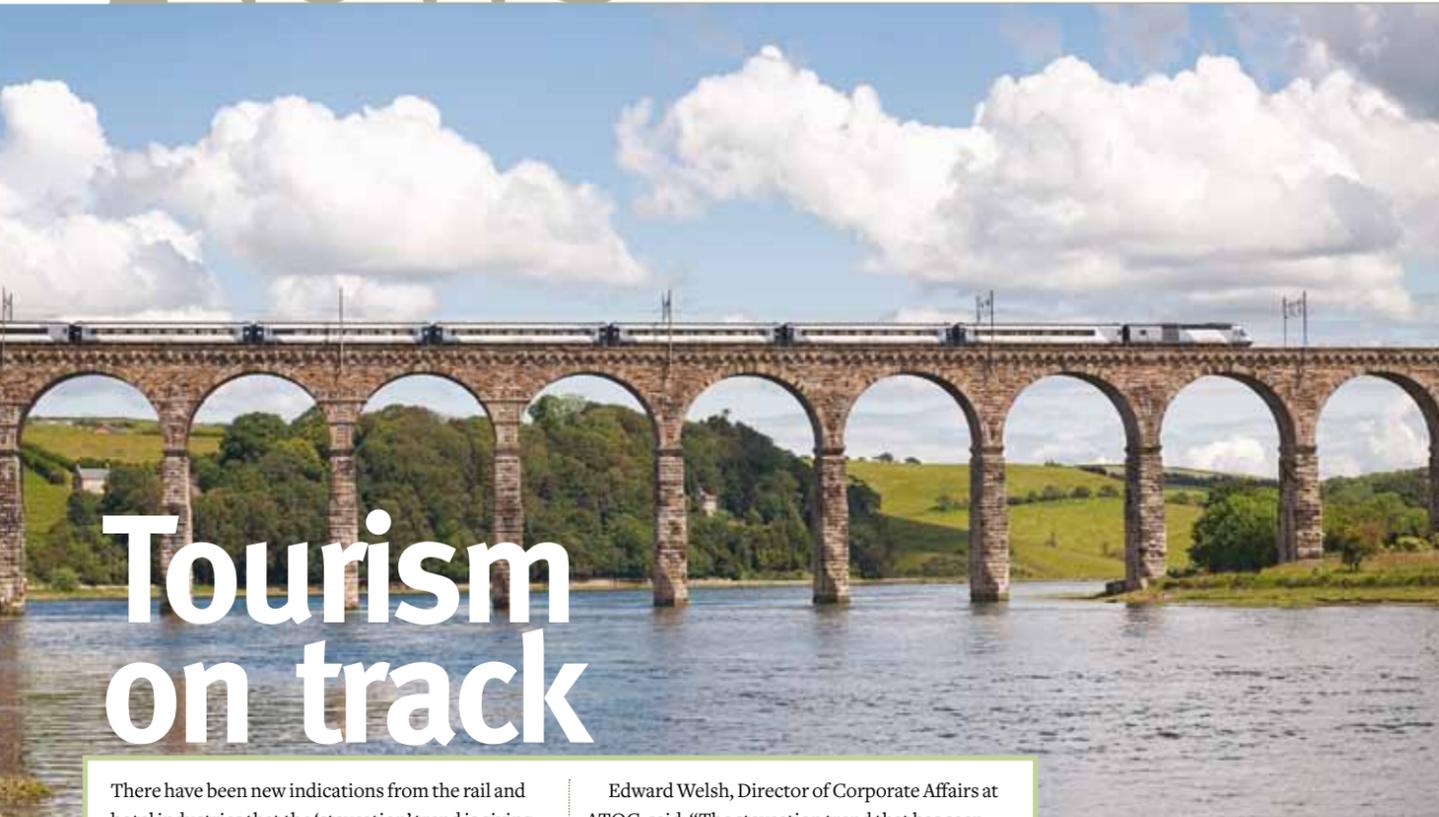
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Visit our corporate website, where you can find business and marketing news, information on star ratings and awards, and insight and statistics from the VisitEngland research team.

www.visitengland.org



Tourism on track

There have been new indications from the rail and hotel industries that the 'staycation' trend is giving the UK holiday sector a big boost.

According to the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) there has been a surge in the number of people using small, rural rail lines as more people choose to take their holidays in the UK.

Many of the fastest-growing branch lines connect to seaside resorts and towns, and show spikes in the summer months. Between April 2007 and April 2011 those that saw an increase in passengers included:

- The Truro to Falmouth branch line, which saw a rise of 91% (22% in the past year).
- The Bristol to Severn Beach branch line, which saw an increase of 90% (19% in the past year).
- The Derby to Matlock branch line, which rose by 86% (20% in the past year).

Edward Welsh, Director of Corporate Affairs at ATOC, said: "The staycation trend that has seen more people holiday in the UK over recent years has undoubtedly played a big part in the significant increases that we have seen on many of these small, rural lines."

Meanwhile, budget hotel chain Travelodge plans to invest £135 million in 37 new hotels near the UK's National Parks – areas where its hotels achieved high occupancy levels far earlier than normal this year. The hotels that filled up the sooner than normal have included sites in Barnstaple in Exmoor, Cockermouth in the Lake District and Scarborough in the North Yorkshire Moors.

Travelodge is now seeking locations in areas such as Grasmere (Lake District) and Minehead (Exmoor).

Celebrate, Bodleian style!

New VAQAS participants the Bodleian Library in Oxford went the extra mile to celebrate their glowing report. Their Historic Venues Officer Anneke Bambery (seen here on the left) awarded VAQAS Manager Janet Uttley with a rather unusual treat – a VAQAS cake!



Register now!

Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, London

Attractions are reminded that the Annual National Conference of Visitor Attractions (VAC) is looming fast. It is not too late to register and join the audience for this industry event, which is now in its eighth year.

It is a great chance to hear first-hand the latest news from the wide-ranging speaker panel and get involved in the stimulating debate that regularly follows the event. This is also a great chance to meet and network with colleagues from the industry.

For the latest information on speakers and to register, visit the website at www.vac2011.co.uk



> AWARDS

A rose by any other name



The well-established 'Enjoy England Awards for Excellence' are back with a new name. Now called the 'VisitEngland Awards for Excellence', they promise to be bigger and better.

The name change is designed to associate VisitEngland more closely with its prestigious awards programme. It also represents a radical new approach to the marketing and administration of the scheme.

Glasgow, a Preston-based event management company, will look after the sponsorship, marketing, administration, application process and initial judging. It will also stage the prestigious annual awards ceremony.

Having been involved in tourism and tourism awards for more than 20 years, Glasgow is delighted to be running the premier tourism award scheme in England. Ron Glasgow, Project Lead for the new awards programme, said: "The VisitEngland Awards for Excellence retain all the values of the old scheme. The categories remain largely the same. Excellence is still at the heart of these awards and the same rigorous standards of judging will apply."

The VisitEngland Awards promote the best of English tourism. Benefits to winners are enormous in terms of prestige, marketing potential, improved turnover and profits and on staff motivation. But the awards do not just benefit winners: all applicants get an insight into

their strengths and weaknesses and feedback gives valuable advice. The winners also provide a benchmark for other tourism enterprises, driving up quality across all sectors.

The big difference for 2012 is that, if there is no local or regional awards programme in your area, you may apply directly to the national awards. For businesses in areas that do still run awards, this will be your route through to the VisitEngland Awards and winners will automatically be put forward as before. If, however, you are interested in applying for a VisitEngland category that is not offered at local or regional level, you may apply directly. To find out more about the new awards scheme, and whether there are local and regional competitions in your area, visit the new website (see below).

The benefits of simply taking part and the even greater benefits of becoming a finalist or winner will be spelt out. Case studies of past winners will be included.

"The closing date for applications is 6 January 2012, so there is plenty of time to get on the website and prepare your application," said Ron Glasgow. "All tourism businesses should consider taking part either in their local or regional award scheme where they exist, or directly where they do not, because excellence pays."

For more information, visit www.visitenglandawards.org or call George Thompson on 01772 767522.

Get involved

Inspire children and young people to consider tourism as a career. Sign up to the Children's



Commissioner's Takeover Day and engage with local schools and young people, showcase your business and generate some positive media coverage.

Takeover Day takes place on **11 November 2011** and gives children and young people the chance to work with adults for one day and be involved in decision-making. They experience the world of work, you engage with a younger audience and find out what appeals to them.

To register your interest and get further information, email takeover.day@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk or visit www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/takeover_day

P&G's golden sponsorship

Procter & Gamble (P&G) has been named as one of 11 worldwide sponsors of the 2012 Olympic Games in a deal that's good news for the hospitality sector.

Covering a total of 22 brands, the deal will enable P&G to deliver practical advice to independent hospitality operators. For example, the recent 'Preparedness Pods' pop-up stalls gave free advice to hospitality businesses preparing for the flood of tourists next summer.

"The Games are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our country, and the independent hospitality sector has much to gain from the influx of visitors," said Nick Beresford, Managing Director of P&G Professional. "With our broad portfolio of cleaning solutions, we're confident that independent hospitality operators will have the right products to keep Britain clean and fresh throughout the 2012 Games."



NEWS IN BRIEF

HIGHLY ACCESSIBLE

Chichester's Bishop Otter College has been awarded a high accessibility rating for mobility for its three-star campus accommodation. Open during the university holidays for private and conference guests, the college is the perfect place to stay for independent wheelchair users.



THE PARENTS LEAVING ON A JET PLANE

In a move to capture the business of parents fed up with being pestered by their children while on holiday, Thomson has become the first company to offer breaks that welcome mums and dads, but not their kids.

The Thomson Couples range was launched this summer after the company's research found that 40% of parents said their children annoyed them on holiday and 33% thought that ditching the kids and going on holiday would make them better parents for the rest of the year.

The rights and wrongs of this have been debated in the media but it does give domestic accommodation providers and attractions food for thought. Parents taking time out from their children may be a market opportunity that's worth targeting.

COME TOGETHER

VisitEngland is pleased to announce a new collaboration with a publisher of three popular regional websites that advertise serviced and self-catering accommodation in the Lake District and Yorkshire: www.northyorkmoors-stay.co.uk, www.lakedistrict-stay.co.uk and www.yorkshiredales-stay.co.uk

VisitEngland has carried out a full check of more than 1,000 properties advertised on these sites to confirm their accuracy and will maintain regular contact with the website operator as new businesses sign up or any lapse from our scheme, as we do with www.laterooms.com

News

VisitEngland research

Highs and lows

VisitEngland's most recent accommodation business confidence monitor, a report based on telephone interviews with 500 accommodation providers, has found that while many are satisfied with their business performance, there are still reasons for concern.

Here we have summarised the results and included comments from some of the 30 senior representatives from the tourism sector that we spoke to in our separate qualitative survey.



Opportunities

68% of businesses report the same or more visitors since the start of the year, compared with 2010 (28% more, 40% the same and 32% fewer).

85% of accommodation businesses were confident as they headed into the summer holiday period.

Camping and caravan sites were most optimistic, with 90% saying that they were looking forward to a good summer holiday season.

Hotels were doing very well, with 77% saying that they had the same or more visitors.

80% of accommodation businesses are very or quite satisfied with their performance in recent months.

"Overall, holidays continue to be very important to people and domestic holidays are still a key part of this."

"The economic climate is the major challenge: people are worse off than they have been and will inevitably be watching what they spend."

Threats

20% of businesses reported that guests were travelling shorter distances, possibly because of rising fuel costs.

40% said that visitors were spending less than in 2010.

"Fears about the scale of public sector cuts seem to affect everyone, not just those who are immediately at risk of losing their jobs."

28% said that the average length of stay had fallen.

"Staying closer to home and taking shorter breaks are key ways that consumers look to save money."

59% of businesses noticed an increase in last-minute bookings.

42% said that the number of visitors getting a discount had increased. This was lower among guest accommodation owners.

"Discounting continues to be an important way for businesses to attract customers."

ACCOMMODATION APPS

A series of apps has been developed for the iPhone that allows customers to search for quality accommodation in England.

The five Official Tourist Board Accommodation Guide (OTBAG) apps are free to download from iTunes. There are five in total – England Hotels, B&Bs, Camping, Self-Catering and Pets Come Too – and they feature members who advertise in the OTBAG 2012 Accommodation Guides.

The five apps provide full property descriptions, pricing, photos and booking details, as well as information on rating, awards and schemes.

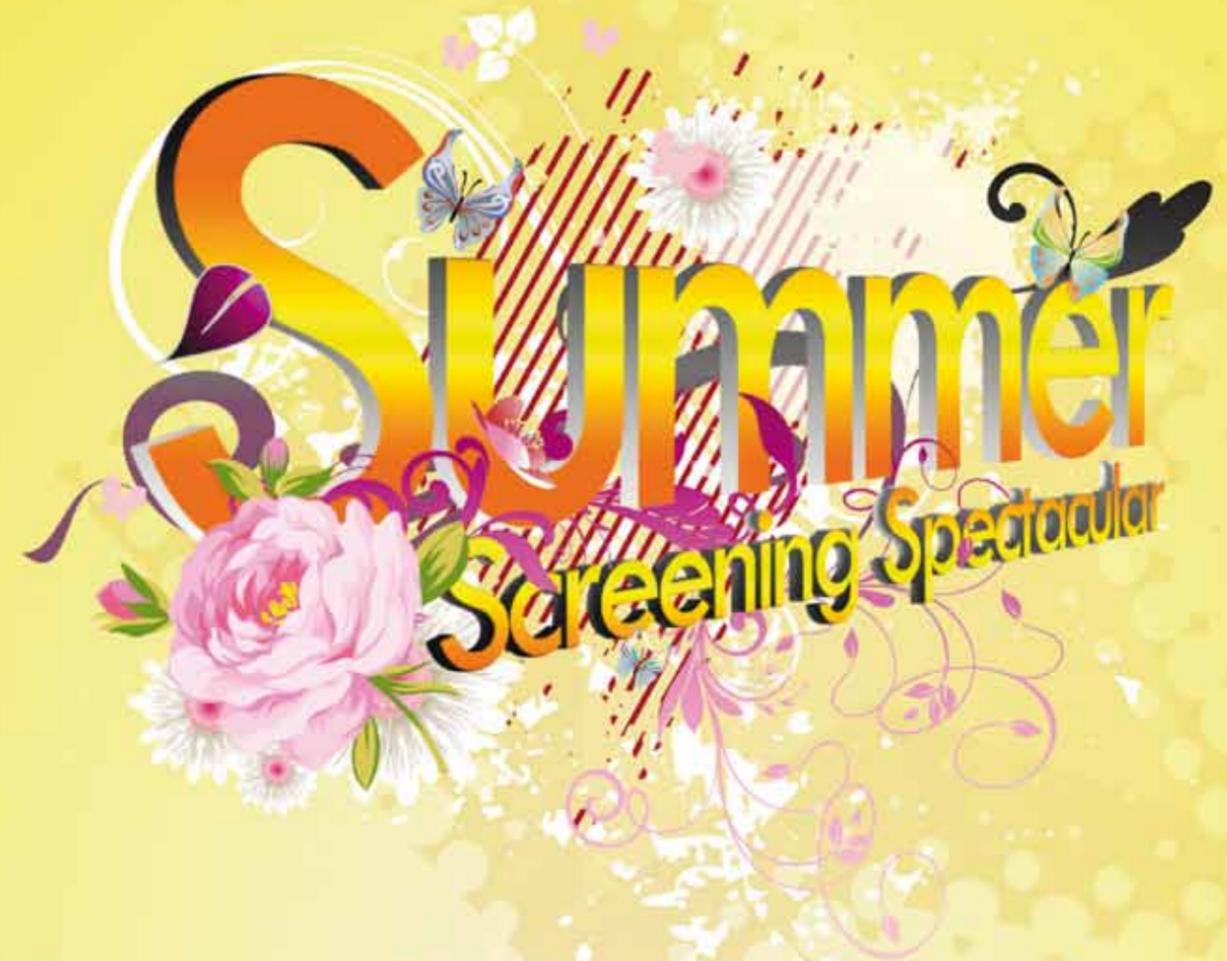
Users can search alphabetically, by region or by property name.



HOTEL GROUPS BOOKINGS BOOST

Fine Individual Hotels, a leading hotelier collection, has reported a 77% growth in referrals for its 54 member properties since launching a new website last September. One of these 54 members, the Green Bough Hotel in Chester, commented: "Fine Individual Hotels has helped tremendously in marketing the hotel. We also benefit from its central PR, which for a small operation such as ours would not otherwise be possible, particularly in this economic climate."

The group is now looking to expand its portfolio. For more information, visit www.fihotels.com or call Bill Clifford on 07979 495390.



Enhance your in-room entertainment service. Today!



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Many UK accommodation properties are now looking to offer their guests an in-room entertainment service in the form of a DVD film library. This service enables guests to borrow a selection of DVDs from reception and watch them in the comfort of their own room.

Smaller properties can now legally offer a DVD film library service to their guests under the DVD Concierge Licence, starting from just £24* per room, per annum.

Filmbank represents many of the leading Hollywood and independent film studios covering movies from studios including Warner Bros., Sony Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Walt Disney Pictures and Universal Pictures. See www.filmbank.co.uk for a complete list of studios.

A DVD library is the perfect way to offer your guests added value during their stay. So make sure your guests get 5 star entertainment this summer.



To apply for your DVD Concierge Licence* visit www.filmbank.co.uk/dvdconciierge or call 020 7984 5965

* see www.filmbank.co.uk/dvdconciierge for full pricing and terms and conditions



Smooth operators

Inbound tour and coach operators bring valuable business to England's hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs and attractions. **Helen Tyas** finds out more

These days, there are many options available for people wanting to travel with a tour or coach operator. In addition to the more traditional large group tours, more and more operators now offer private tours for small numbers of people, as well as arranging holidays for independent travellers.

Kent-based Tours International, a family-run business established by Ralph Bennett in 1987, offers mainly group travel, but also organises scheduled tours with set departure dates that individuals can join, and private tours for small groups of between two and ten people. The company's main markets are France and French-speaking Belgium and Switzerland, and English-speaking long haul destinations: the US, Canada, South Africa and Australia. "French groups are mainly senior citizens, often from *comités d'entreprises* – clubs and organisations run by large companies such as Toyota that arrange tours for their workers and retired workers, paying up to 40% of the cost," explains Ralph.

Discover Travel & Tours in Worcester has similar markets. "Our business comes from overseas tour operators," says Managing Director Andrew Grieve, "and 60% is from the 15 main EU countries. Our main markets are Germany, Holland, Belgium and France. A third of our business is English-speaking long haul destinations – Australia, the US, Canada."

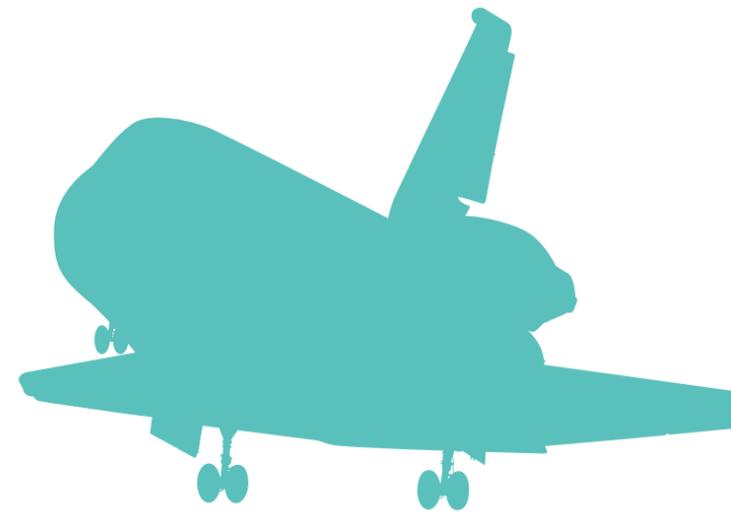
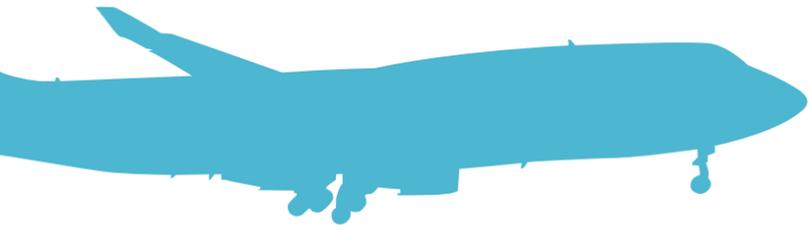
Both companies' tours go to all areas of England. Discover Travel's imaginative themes include England's Wonderful North East (including Beamish, Northumbria's coast and Newcastle), Potteries, Palaces and Peaks (Heart of England) and Wartime Memories (East Anglia). Tour itineraries are a blend of must-see attractions such as Stonehenge and more unusual trips, such as a visit to a Somerset cider maker. "These days, with the internet, it's easy for an individual traveller to book their own tour," explains Andrew, "so we offer tours they can't do themselves, featuring unusual attractions, and make it hands-on, so visitors get a real flavour of the region."

At Tours International, attractions are chosen to fit the tour theme, with a rich mix of attractions and experiences, taking into account travel distances. For instance, the Regency England tour includes such diverse treats as visits

"We've noticed a greater demand for special-interest tours with specific themes"

to Winchester Cathedral with a chance to hear Evensong, lunch in 18th-century pubs, fencing lessons and afternoon tea in the Pump Rooms in Bath. "There's a lot of interest in the TV programme *Downton Abbey*, and Americans love the royal family," says Ralph. "We've also noticed a greater demand for special-interest tours with specific themes. One group wanted to watch Manchester United play."

Accommodation is very important and tour operators look for high standards and sensible commercial terms. "We usually offer 30% off the rack rate," Andrew says, although this is negotiable for B&Bs. "And it's no good offering us one week in November – we don't take hotels on just for the winter. Our customers want to travel in the summer, like everyone else." Full payment is normally made within seven days of the invoice or online payment claim. Ralph expects a discount of up to 20% off the usual rate.



> Tours International uses larger hotels for groups. “They can take a cancellation more easily,” Ralph explains, “and it will make less of a dent in their occupancy levels.” The company often books rooms 18 months ahead, and doesn’t know how the tour will sell until much nearer the arrival date. “Hotel booking conditions are set for the business world, not the travel agent,” Ralph says. “If a conference is taking over a hotel, it will pay a large deposit three or four months in advance. But a travel agent won’t know numbers then.”

Although unusual attractions are popular, Andrew doesn’t use quirky accommodation, especially for large groups. “Accommodation has to be uniform and consistent for large groups, so we use standardised hotels,” he explains. “Quirky accommodation can be charming, but the rooms are often very different, and people will complain if someone has a better room. But for smaller groups, there’s a definite demand for hotels with a distinctive regional style reflecting local character, such as the black and white half-timbered houses around Worcester, where we’re based, the mellow stone houses of Bath and the thatched cottages of Devon.”

Discover Travel also works with small B&Bs and guesthouses for its Freedom Packages: go-as-you-please holidays for independent travellers. Visitors buy accommodation vouchers in advance, and book the accommodation either by phone or online, in advance or as they drive round England, choosing from the B&B Collection or the Hotels, Pubs and Inns Collection. “The vouchers used to be paper, but they’re now electronic,” notes Andrew. Tours International works with B&Bs occasionally when creating itineraries for individual travellers.

Ralph and Andrew both find that their customers are more demanding now and expect accommodation to be of a high standard. “They will soon let you know if they’re not happy,” says Ralph. For this reason, Tours International uses mainly four-star or superior three-star hotels. “We use chains like Hilton and Holiday Inn because we know what they’re like,” says Ralph. “We also use independent hotels, but we always check them out. We look for a welcoming reception, a bar and preferably a restaurant, or one nearby. They must be clean, comfortable and modern. Corridors are always a giveaway – they must be in good decorative order, with no signs of wear and tear. And Americans expect air conditioning, especially in cities.”

“Thirty years ago we could sell non-en suite rooms in B&Bs, but not now,” Andrew says. “We sell good three-star and four-star hotels, never two-star. You could offer a basic room for £10 a night, and people wouldn’t want it. They don’t want cheap – they’d rather pay more and get the quality they want.”

The most important factor for Andrew is the warmth of the welcome. “That really is mission critical, make-or-break,” he says. “You might have the most picturesque hotel, but if the staff are poor, that won’t work.” ■

To contact tour operators, visit www.ukinbound.org, the website of UK Inbound, the trade association representing the UK’s inbound tourism businesses. The website has a searchable database of members. Discover Travel & Tours: www.discovertravelandtours.com Tours International: www.tours-international.co.uk



“Customers are more demanding now and expect accommodation to be of a high standard”



CASE STUDY

Chatsworth Hotel, Worthing

chatsworthworthing.co.uk



The Chatsworth, a 97-room, three-star Silver Award seafront hotel in Worthing, Sussex, is a popular destination for groups, with two to three arriving every week in high season and about one a week in low season. Group business is very important to the hotel and accounts for approximately 15,000 to 20,000 bed nights per year. “The value of business from groups is about £1–2 million per annum,” says Front Office Manager Emma Sayers.

Seventy-five percent of group bookings come through tour and coach operators and the rest are private tours. Groups stay all year round, but mainly in April to December, with a few in January,

February and March. Increasingly, operators now book 12–18 months ahead, private tours eight to 12 months ahead. Groups are mainly from the UK with some from overseas, and are usually between 20 and 50 people, but the Chatsworth has also hosted private reunion groups of 150 people who have exclusive use of the hotel.

“It is sometimes difficult to balance the needs of groups and individuals,” says Emma. “Ideally, we have no more than three tour groups a week as we also have many independent leisure guests and corporate guests.”

Group bookings are essential for the hotel because they fill rooms that might otherwise be unsold. There are disadvantages, however, as Emma explains: “Groups can cancel as late as six weeks prior to arrival, leaving us with empty rooms.”



CASE STUDY

Cadbury World

cadburyworld.co.uk

Cadbury World at Cadbury’s Bourneville site near Birmingham opened in 1990 and attracts more than 500,000 visitors a year. Groups make up a small percentage of Cadbury World’s total business. “Our visitors tend to be families,” says Sales Manager Penny Dyer. “But in 2010, we had 2,572 groups here.”

Most of the groups are self-organised, for example schools, scouts and Townswomen’s Guilds, and usually book four to six weeks ahead. Some groups are organised by commercial tour companies. “We work with 13 tour and coach

operators who have accounts with us,” says Penny. “They book 6–12 months ahead, and some book a whole year’s visits in one go.” Pre-booking is encouraged for all groups and individuals. Most groups are from the UK, with very few from overseas, although one of the attraction’s key clients in London regularly brings French school groups.

The minimum size for group discounts is 15. There is no maximum size, but if the group is more than 60 people, it is split into smaller groups, which enter 10–20 minutes apart. Group members go round at their own pace on a self-guided tour, and as all entries are by timed tickets, groups do not tend to affect individual visitors.

The disadvantages of group visits include last-minute cancellations, leaving holes in the schedules they may not be able to fill, late arrivals and, occasionally, bad behaviour. “Teenage groups can be difficult,” says Penny, with diplomatic understatement. “But groups are good for us, because they bring in large numbers of visitors.”

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first impressions

No matter what type of business you run, maintaining an attractive frontage is important. Here, we get the inside scoop on some of England's finest



Sue Casey
May Cottage, Bowness

★★★ *Bed & Breakfast (featured on previous page)*

“My husband is in charge of the flowers and I make sure the garden is tidy – I even Hoover the crazy paving!

“We see many tourists stopping to look at our frontage, or take photos – especially the Japanese. You wouldn’t believe it, but I once said ‘Good afternoon’ in Japanese to a Japanese couple who were looking at the garden. They smiled, waved at me and then took their photos. Seven years later, the phone rang, and it was the same couple wanting to make a reservation for a specific date. Sadly we were fully booked, but they insisted that when they came to England they had to stay with us, so they changed the date and came to stay with their two young children.

“Obviously, we generally hope for a quicker turn-around, but it’s still a great example of how putting in the extra effort pays off.”



Dee Revell
Bramley, Orchard Croft, Shropshire

★★ *Self-Catering*

“As the property is quite small and unassuming I try to make the most of the garden by adding little touches, that I think make a big difference.

“I aim to have colour and interest throughout the year. Guests always comment on our lovely cottage garden. Some have even given plants or craftwork as a way to leave part of themselves here.”

Ed and Barbara Findlay
Pier View, Southend

★★★★ *Guest Accommodation*

“Being the owners of Pier View is a great honour because the building dates back to 1871 and has a splendid Georgian front. We want to make the property look as elegant and fascinating as it had been for more than 200 years, adding colour to it with a variety of seasonal flowers and keeping the small front and back gardens in perfect condition.

“In the summer, we plant trailing geraniums to keep the tradition that the building has had for many years. At night, we light up the front garden to give it a new dimension and show the plants and the front of the hotel to passers-by. We also have a large chandelier in the breakfast room, that is visible from the street, it illuminates the property with a soft tone of yellow, giving it a warm and appealing atmosphere of days gone by.

“We have so many people who take pictures of the property. Thanks to its appeal, we have had a great interest both from the public and professionals. We have had film crews using our property, fashion photographers doing their shoots and a number of brides have had their pictures taken on the balcony.

We have been asked many times to have photos taken alongside guests at the front of our property, which means we must appear in lots of photo albums in all corners of the world.”



Caroline Backhouse
The Feathers, Helmsley

★★★ *Guest Accommodation*

“Our cheerful façade provides an invitation to passers-by to come in and see what else we offer.

“We have a wonderful gentleman who regularly sweeps and tidies the front of the building, and this year we have removed unsightly, redundant wiring and signage to make it look even nicer.

“Our hanging baskets change with the seasons and are watered via an automatic system.”



Dorothy Fernandez
Lyzzick Hall, Keswick

★★ *Hotel, Keswick*

“A fantastic husband-and-wife team from the local area maintain our grounds. We always give them a brief and they come up with designs.

“We like to do something a little different and we plan everything. We currently have a ‘Real Madrid’ colour scheme surrounding the front door, as my Spanish husband is a big fan of the team – and they won the Spanish Cup this year.

“Guests always comment on how lovely the garden is and our regular guests love to see how it changes.”

The collaborators

With cuts in public funding, independent tourism marketing organisations are on the rise. **Helen Tyas** talks to three organisations about their success

One of the biggest changes in the English tourism industry in the past decade is the rise of independent tourism marketing organisations. Traditionally funded and run in-house by local authorities, the tourism department and tourist information centre are often among the first victims of funding cuts, and are increasingly going independent, funded by the private sector or run as a joint public and private partnership. It's likely to happen more and more, as the Government is backing the change. Its new Tourism Policy states: "We will modernise and update local tourism bodies to become focused and efficient Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) that are led by and, increasingly, funded through partnership with the tourism industry itself."

Three private-sector pioneers are Discover Dartmouth, Shakespeare Country and Silverstone TIC.

CASE STUDY

Dartmouth

www.discoverdartmouth.com

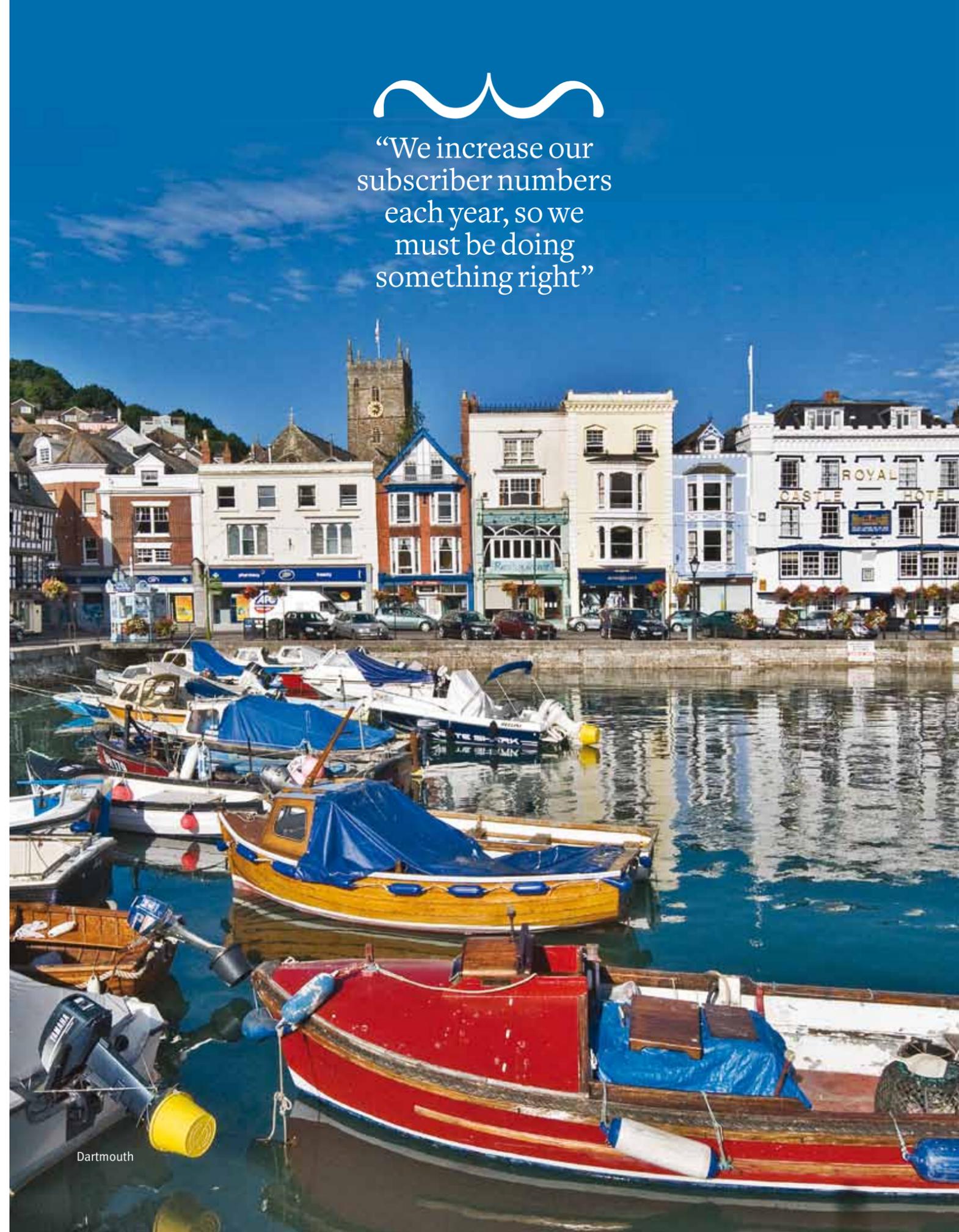
Discover Dartmouth, based in the Dartmouth Tourist Information Centre (TIC), is a non-profit-making limited company and is completely independent. "Unusually, it has never been funded by the local council," explains Sue Thompson, Manager of the TIC. "South Hams District Council used to have its own tourism department, but that was cut a few years ago."

Funding for the TIC, which has six paid staff members, a brochure and a website comes from subscription fees paid by accommodation providers, visitor attractions and businesses in the area. Sue estimates the current membership to be about 260, of which more than 50% is accommodation. "Between 80% and 90% of accommodation and all the attractions in the area are members," she says. Members choose from a range of packages, paying from £150 to £1,500 annually for benefits including advertising on the website and in the brochure, and marketing activities. Platinum is the most expensive option, offering extras such as larger adverts and more display space in the TIC.

"Discover Dartmouth's market in general comprises serious and professional businesses that value the support of an equally professional TIC team," says Committee member John Harrow, who owns Southfield House B&B. "Once a subscriber joins us, they tend to stay because they quickly recognise the value. And we increase our subscriber numbers each year, so we must be doing something right!"

The company has three voluntary directors and a management committee. "We try to have a well-rounded committee with members who represent the different interests here," says Sue. "For instance, we have one member

"We increase our subscriber numbers each year, so we must be doing something right"



Dartmouth



“Our website pulls together accommodation, attractions and events”

> representing B&Bs and another who’s involved in water and boating activities.” John adds: “Committee meetings often generate lively debate, but our two common interests are the generation of high-quality business for our subscribers and the survival of the TIC. We agree on most things.”

Extra money is raised by selling gifts and children’s books, as well as guide books and maps, in the TIC. “We sell guided tour tickets for Dartmouth Naval College that are very popular, and receive a commission on sales,” says Sue. “We also sell rail and National Express coach tickets, but the costs are getting too high, and we’re struggling to keep that going.”

There are advantages to being independent. “In the current climate, it’s good to be masters of our own destiny. And we’re not political in any way,” Sue says. John agrees: “It’s reassuring to know that our future is in our own hands – nobody can suddenly cut our funding.” But there are disadvantages, mainly for staff. “We don’t have the backup of council pensions, for example,” admits Sue. Financing the organisation can be difficult, too. “We often get other TICs asking how we do it. And I have to tell them, it is a struggle.”

As a B&B owner, John is enthusiastic about the benefits to his business. “For me, the TIC offer is very broad and very valuable. It’s clicks, pics and bricks: it has an excellent website; a brochure with a distribution nearing 40,000; and the physical presence of our Dartmouth Tourist Office with its excellent team, brimming over with local knowledge,” he says. “Nobody else can offer me that. I couldn’t tell you the exact value I get from my subscription to Discover Dartmouth. I simply know it’s money well spent, and my business would be the poorer without it.”



Dartmouth

Shakespeare Country (above and below)



CASE STUDY

Shakespeare Country

www.shakespeare-country.co.uk

Shakespeare Country hit the news last year when it was forced into liquidation after losing its public funding. “It was very sad,” says former non-executive board member Tony Merrygold, “and it left a huge gap in tourism for the area.” So Tony and fellow board member Sally Carrick decided to do something about it. Together with Ben Tagg, Managing Director of tourism technology company New Vision, they bought the assets of Shakespeare Country from the liquidators and started a new company, Shakespeare Country Tourism Ltd (SCT).

“The assets were the brand name, logo, website content and database,” explains Tony. “The destination management system is key in the tourism sector, and that was created by New Vision. My background is in marketing and Sally has a travel agency business. We needed someone with technology expertise and that’s why we teamed up with Ben.”

The business, previously owned by South Warwickshire Tourism Ltd,

was a company limited by guarantee, with every member owning one share. It is now a private limited company and receives no public funding; it is entirely commercial, funded by membership fees from accommodation providers, visitor attractions and other businesses. “We changed the membership structure,” says Tony. “Membership used to include a lot of things, but we’ve ‘unbundled’ it so members can opt for what they need.”

There are three levels of membership for each category: accommodation; attractions, restaurants and retail; and personal. The basic level includes a short entry and two images on the website and online booking for accommodation and online ticket sales for other members. The second level offers an enhanced online advert and extras, including the facility to add special offers and a link to the member’s own website. The top level includes all these benefits plus up to eight images, booking priority and a video option.

Members can choose to take part in other marketing activities, including web banner advertising, trade stands at exhibitions and printed guides. Fees for accommodation members are set according to the number of bedrooms, self-catering units or campsite pitches. Rates range from £150 to £275 for serviced accommodation with one to five bedrooms and £639 to £1,171 for more than 100 bedrooms, and from £150 to £400 for attractions. Tony won’t reveal membership numbers, but estimates that the membership split is 45% attractions, 45% (but growing) accommodation and 10% retail and restaurants. “We have almost 100% of the local attractions as members and are working on increasing membership in other areas,” he says.

To save money, the company employs staff on contracts, on a project-by-project basis. The old company used to run two tourist information centres in Stratford upon Avon and Leamington, but these are now run by local councils and SCT has no involvement with them.

One of the advantages of being independent is that the company is free to work with other

regions nearby. “The only area that matters is what the visitor wants, and they want Stratford and the Cotswolds, so we can now work with Cotswold attractions,” says Tony.

The company has set up an online shop, selling tickets for attractions and events. “One of the challenges is that businesses say ‘we can be on any website’, but SCT is not just any website – it pulls together accommodation, attractions and events,” says Tony. “No one else in this area is doing this.”

CASE STUDY

Silverstone Visitor & Tourist Information Centre

www.silverstone.co.uk

The first and only privately operated attraction to be awarded official tourist information partner status by VisitEngland, Silverstone Visitor Centre was set up four years ago by Silverstone Circuits, Northamptonshire Enterprise Ltd (NEL), South Northamptonshire Council and East Midlands Tourism (EMT). It is a good example of a public-and-private-sector partnership.

“We wanted to provide information for visitors where it was most needed,” explains Robin Tjolle, then Project Manager at NEL, and now International Marketing Manager at VisitEngland, “and we were looking at locations in the county where there were already large numbers of visitors.” Silverstone, the

historic home of the British Grand Prix, which attracts about a million visitors a year, was ideal. The funding for the project came from Silverstone, with NEL and

East Midlands Tourism providing additional funding for regional branding, brochure racks and a touch-screen kiosk. They also provided their expertise in tourist information delivery and trained the staff.

The centre was completed, on time and within budget, in 2007 and is open seven days a week. All the running costs, including staff, are funded entirely by Silverstone Circuits. “They’re not doing this for altruistic reasons – they have a clear

“We wanted to provide information for visitors where it was most needed”

business case for funding it,” explains Robin. “The management realised that they needed to encourage repeat visits to Silverstone. Visitors used to turn up when there were no events on, and they wanted to give them something to do. They were also aware of Silverstone’s importance in the county and wanted to encourage visitors to stay overnight in hotels and visit other attractions in the area, too.” Silverstone continues to work in partnership with NEL and the South Northamptonshire Tourism team, which also provide regular, vital support for the staff.

Four years on, the centre is a great success. ■



Silverstone race track



On the vine

With sales of English wines at an all-time high, it's time we raised a glass to the success of our award-winning wine industry

Every year, English wines are growing in status and popularity – our vintages are being whispered about around the world and what was once an amateur profession has blossomed into something quite special. In the past nine years, England has won trophies for the World's Top Sparkling Wine no fewer than five times – something no other country has achieved. We've been given the royal stamp of approval as the Queen is going to start producing her own wine at Windsor Great Park and it's rumoured that white wine from Chapel Down was served at one of the private receptions following the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's wedding ceremony. And as if that wasn't enough, we beat 55 other countries to scoop Gold in the International Wine Challenge, the accolade awarded to Denbies Wine Estate's for their Chalk Ridge Rosé 2010. All in all, it has been a vintage year for English wine.

It was not so long ago that many connoisseurs would scoff at the mere mention of English wine and no one except those who lived within a cork's pop of a vineyard had tried it. Not so, anymore. Now, foreign wine producers are looking to our isles for potential plots, and retailers such as Waitrose and Laithwaites are buying up English vineyards. With our homegrown industry booming, there's never been a better time to start offering your guests English wine.



LOOKING BACK

There were 46 wineries listed in the Domesday Book and by Henry VIII's reign there were more than a hundred known wineries in England. However, bad weather and a lack of interest soon led to them all dying out. It wasn't until many years later, in 1952, that the modern age of winemaking really began – when Sir Guy Salisbury-Jones planted a vineyard at Hambledon in Hampshire. He was the first person to produce wines commercially since 1875, when he planted 4,000 vines on his 1.5-acre site.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when English wines first started to appear on the market, the biggest sellers were German styles. By the 1980s, we'd moved on to different styles as wines from the New World started appearing on our radar.

ENGLISH VINEYARDS AND WINERIES

We now have more than 400 vineyards and more than 100 wineries in England, which are responsible for producing 1.6-plus million bottles of white wine and almost 400,000 bottles of red wine per year – with sparkling wines making



up 50% of production. Since 1990 we have increased the volume of red wine we're producing by six times and more than doubled the production of white wine. Based on plantings over the past five years, it is likely that more than three million bottles of sparkling wine will be produced by 2012.

Technological advances in winemaking equipment and better industry training have played a big part in both the increase in production and improvement in the standard of our wines.

Prices might still be a little above average, but the quality more than justifies the price; you can expect to pay around £8 for a still wine and from £17 for an English sparkling wine. Exports of English wine may currently be practically non-existent, but we're gaining momentum and getting noticed around the globe.

Although England's wine production is largely concentrated in the south, vineyards in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Anglesey are starting to crop up. Yorkshire, previously deemed the 'land of ales and puds', has been making a name for itself as prime wine-growing territory. The creation of new grape varieties capable of ripening in cold, wet environments has led the region's growers to produce some excellent wines.

Holmfirth vineyard in Yorkshire is one of the county's most successful wineries with just eight acres of vines. Owners Rebecca and Ian Sheveling bought the site, which was originally a sheep farm, in 2007, working seven days

“There's never been a better time to start offering your guests English wine”

How to get a liquor licence

If you are thinking of offering English wine at your B&B, self-catering property or visitor attraction, you will need a licence. The easiest way to find out more is to contact your local council directly and ask them for advice. It's important to remember that even leaving complimentary wines in a welcome hamper requires a licence. As the guest has paid to stay at your accommodation it is seen as an 'incentive to purchase'.

To find out more visit: www.accommodationknowhow.co.uk





For more information, visit the following websites:

- Camel Valley
www.camelvalley.com
- Chapel Down
www.englishwinesgroup.com
- Denbies
www.denbies.co.uk
- Holmfirth Vineyard
www.holmfirthvineyard.com
- Nyetimber
www.nyetimber.com
- Purbeck Vineyard
www.vineyard.uk.com
- Ridgeview Vineyards
www.ridgeview.co.uk
- Stanlake Park Wine Estate
www.stanlakepark.com
- Tiltridge Farm Vineyard
www.elgarwine.com
- The Wine Pantry
www.winepantry.co.uk

> a week to plant 7,000 vines by hand, even digging in deep snow. Their hard work paid off when in 2009, far sooner than expected, their first crop of 1,400 bottles sold out within three weeks.

By 2010 Holmfirth had increased production to 8,000 bottles and customers were placing orders to reserve bottles. "We never set out to be so big but because of our picturesque location and the success of our first crop we've boomed," says Rebecca. Much of their success has been down to word of mouth, boosted by their appearance on the Channel 5 programme *Build a new life in the country*, which charted the creation of their vineyard.

"We don't advertise at all but we get people travelling from as far afield as Australia and Chile and returning with cases of wine. Our winemaker Martin

Fowke makes sure our wines are top quality." Rebecca and Ian have built up a loyal client base, selling their wines directly to consumers or through a few local restaurants and shops. Retailing from £9 to £11, they're good value.

Down in the south of England, Denbies in Dorking, is England's largest winery. A vast 265 acres, it is responsible for producing 14 still, sparkling, red, white and rosé wines.

Jeannette Simpson, Assistant General Manager at Denbies, says the future for English wine is bright. "As English wine is competing equally on an international level and being judged among the best in the world, the future for us is looking towards long-term growth. England has become renowned for producing award-winning sparkling wine, but there is increasing demand for premium-quality still wine."



She says consumers are changing their perception of English wine. "The quality of English wine has been reinforced by recent awards; that, together with the fact that people are more aware of their food miles, has all contributed to a greater awareness."

Denbies wines are stocked in all major supermarkets and lots of independent wine stores – as well as at the vineyard. This year they have been invited to make a wine for Tesco's Finest range, the first English vineyard to be given this honour. Last year they planted the first trial of Sauvignon Blanc in England, a major step for the English wine market.

Denbies isn't England's only success story. Wineries such as Cornwall's award-winning Camel Valley and Nyetimber, Ridgeview Vineyards in Sussex and Chapel Down in Kent are growing in status. Berkshire's Stanlake Park Wine Estate is one of the UK's oldest wineries. Dating back to the 12th century, it now grows the largest number of grape varieties in England on its 25-acre estate. Hundreds of other smaller and lesser-known wineries, such as Purbeck Vineyard, a two-acre micro vineyard in Dorset, and Tiltridge Farm Vineyard in Worcestershire, are also all playing a part in building England's reputation as a winemaking nation.



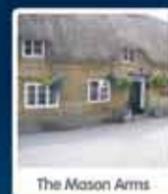
A STRONG SHOW OF SUPPORT

Support is growing, with English wines cropping up on wine lists all over the country. John Morrell, Food and Beverage Manager at the Swan Hotel at Lavenham, Suffolk, stocks Hartest, a sparkling rosé produced at local vineyard Giffords Hall, just five miles from the hotel. He says: "The rosé sells really well; it's a great alternative to Champagne and priced just

below it, at £39.95. People are really interested in drinking local and love trying English wine."

Another passionate advocate of English wine is Julia Stafford, who recently opened the Wine Pantry at London's Borough Market. "What lots of people don't realise is that English wines are massively diverse," says Julia. "We need to get past the prejudices and get people enjoying English wine, not because it's English but because it's great wine." Already selling to the trade, Julia says: "We want to encourage more proprietors to offer English wines on their wine lists, but it's not a lazy sale. Proprietors need to be educated on English wines as well, so that they can pass their knowledge on to their customers."

With her help, one of Julia's local restaurants has started an English wine promotion, and she hopes that more will follow. "We invite restaurateurs to come down and sample our wines so they can see what they like," says Julia. ■



The Mason Arms

"Frontdesk is easy to manage, gets wide exposure across many search criteria, the commission rates are low and the support desk is very supportive. If you sign up to an online booking service, this should be the one you use."

The Mason Arms
Odcombe, Somerset
(Inn: 6 rooms)



Uig Hotel

"We ditched our old online booking system which was costing us around £5,000 per year in favour of frontdesk. It's the best thing we've done over the last 2 years and it has increased our bookings by 30%."

Uig Hotel
Uig, Isle of Skye
(Hotel: 37 rooms)



Senlac Guesthouse

"Since using frontdesk, we have really seen a difference in the bookings – they have been up 30-40%! Our business is listed on so many different sites via frontdesk and 70% of our business now comes through the internet."

Senlac Guesthouse
Hastings, East Sussex
(Guest house: 12 rooms)



4,691 frontdesk users in the UK and counting*...



Russell's

"We regularly promote special offer packages on our website as well as on our evivo booking pages. These offers are very popular and more often than not result in fully booked rooms!"

Russell's
Broadway, Worcestershire
(Restaurant with rooms: 7 rooms)



Rylstone Manor Hotel

"I don't mind paying the commission on definite bookings, it shows the return better than on any other advertising stream."

Rylstone Manor Hotel
Shanklin, Isle of Wight
(Hotel: 9 rooms)



Muriou Park Guesthouse

"What we find most useful is the ability to manage the reservations made both online and offline together with the recording and management of payments received. Frontdesk has become an essential part of our business and customer service has been excellent."

Muriou Park Guesthouse
Caernarfon, Gwynedd
(Guest house: 5 rooms)

Frontdesk is the UK's No.1 online booking and property management solution for independent accommodation



*as counted on 22 June 2011

- Increase your exposure on the internet by linking your business to leading websites such as Expedia, TripAdvisor and lastminute.com.
- Convert lookers into bookers by offering your guests a first-rate online booking experience.
- Enjoy total peace of mind with the automatic processing of all booking payment transactions (fully PCI-DSS compliant).
- New! Collect debit/credit card payments for telephone bookings in frontdesk.

Contact our friendly team to find out more about frontdesk



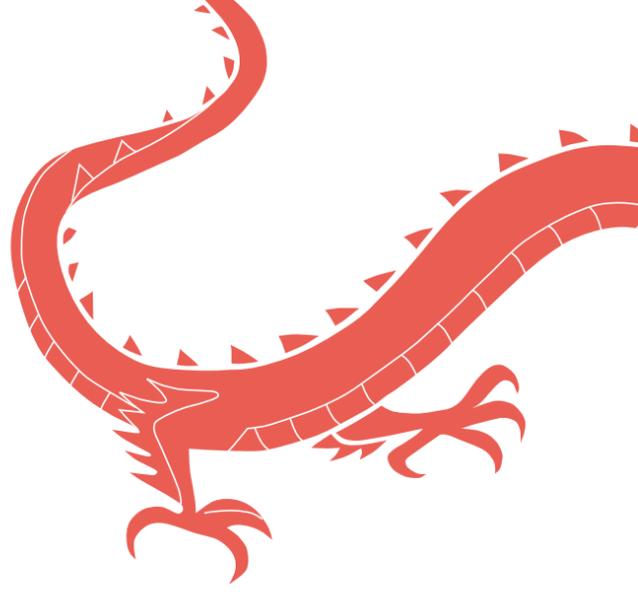
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ENTER the DRAGON



In 2005, after 20 months of negotiations, China granted Approved Destination Status (ADS) to Britain, allowing Chinese leisure tourists to holiday here for the first time. Before gaining ADS, travel to Britain was permitted for education, business and visiting friends and relatives, or with official groups only, and government approval was needed for every visit. There are still restrictions – the Chinese must travel in groups of five or more with a Chinese certified tour guide and all ADS tours, which are closely monitored by both the Chinese and foreign authorities, must be booked through agents approved by the China National Tourism Administration. Savvy travellers are finding ways round the rules by creating their own groups of relatives and

friends and then getting a travel agent to make the arrangements; others join a tour group to enter the country and then pay a fee to opt out of the often tightly timetabled and arduous itinerary, rejoining the group before returning home.

Since travel restrictions to the UK were relaxed, Chinese tourists have flocked here in growing numbers. **Helen Tyas** examines China's fast-growing outbound travel market

The latest figures available show 89,000 visits to the UK in 2009, with a total spend of £117 million, and UK Border Agency statistics suggest an overall 26% increase in visitors from China during the first half of 2010. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, China is now the fourth most valuable international market, spending \$43.7 billion annually on foreign travel. Prime Minister David Cameron is keen to attract more Chinese visitors; in a speech last year, he complained that the UK currently has only 0.5% of the market share of Chinese tourists.

The Government's new Tourism Policy, published in March this year, emphasises its plans to strengthen links with China, and the tourism industry's need to capitalise on this emerging market.

Carey J Fletcher is Group Chairman of China Holidays Group Ltd and has been bringing Chinese business groups to the UK for more than 15 years. He has extensive knowledge of Chinese tourism, both the business and leisure markets. China Holidays has a Mandarin-language website promoting Britain, and represents UK destination marketing organisations, hotels and visitor attractions including Visit South East England, Leeds Castle and the Tate Modern. (Take a look using Google to translate the website at www.hellobritain.cn) "What's happening now with Chinese leisure tourism is how the Japanese market was 25 years ago," Carey says. Business and leisure tours are similar but delegates travel on business visas, which are easy to get for people with the right type of passport who have travelled before. "You may hear that the Chinese can travel as fully independent travellers (FIT) but in reality this is very



14%

of the £1bn spent in Harrods last year was from Chinese customers

100,000

The approximate amount of Chinese visitors the UK gets each year

£117m

The amount spent in the UK by Chinese tourists in 2009

> rare," adds Carey. "It's not easy, unless they are VIPs." In the last six months of 2010 China Holidays brought 40 business groups (with eight people per group) a month to the UK, each with a guide and translator.

SLEEP CHEAP, SHOP EXPENSIVE

Most Chinese tourists are from the rapidly expanding and increasingly affluent middle classes, who see travel to Europe as a status symbol. In research carried out in 2007 by VisitBritain/BAA China comments by Chinese respondents included: "The further away, the higher the cost, the prouder you feel..." and "I'd like to show off to all my friends that I have been to Britain, even if I was hungry earlier." Typically, tours visit the UK only or are the final stage of a European trip, and last six or seven days. Leisure and business groups generally stay in London; leisure groups in three-star or budget hotels, while more upmarket business groups stay in four- and five-star hotels. Visits include famous sights such as the Tower of London and Big Ben, and day trips to Cambridge, Stratford and Bath. If the tour includes Scotland, they may stay one night in the Lake District on the way back to London, and stop briefly in Durham and York. Some tours include Manchester United's Old Trafford Centre – English Premier League football is very popular in China, where televised matches attract audiences of more than 100 million, more than any other foreign sport.

The Chinese are the biggest spenders per head of all international travellers, and love luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton and Burberry, which are cheaper here than in China – and they know they will be genuine, not fakes. Most groups will be taken to upmarket London stores and Bicester Village for designer shopping. Harrods employs 40 Mandarin-speaking staff members to assist Chinese customers, who last year contributed 14% of the £1 billion spent in the store, nearly double the year before.

BARRIERS TO TRAVEL

The UK gets about 100,000 Chinese visitors a year, compared with the two million who visit mainland Europe, mainly due to Britain's visa requirements. "The visa is a deterrent," agrees



UK Inbound tour operators bringing groups to the UK from China:
 China Holidays Group Ltd
hellobritain.cn
 Jade Travel Ltd
jadetravel.co.uk
 Titicaca Travel
www.titicaca.co.uk
 ML Global Travel Ltd
 Wang Dynasty UK Ltd
wanguk.com

For more, visit ukinbound.org, the website of the trade association for UK inbound tourism businesses (formerly BITOA).

“We would not take groups to attractions and hotels that do not have information in Mandarin”

Carey, "both in terms of the difficulty of getting it – a Chinese person may have to travel 500 miles to the nearest British Consulate – and the restrictions because the UK is not in the Schengen Agreement." While other European countries – 22 members of the EU, plus Iceland, Norway and Switzerland – are members of the Schengen visa scheme, which allows a tourist to travel freely among all of the 25 Schengen member countries within a 90-day period on one visa, Britain is not; the Chinese require a separate visa to enter the country. When Switzerland joined the Schengen Agreement in 2008, Chinese visitor numbers instantly soared. The UK visa is the most expensive in Europe, but the Schengen countries are due to introduce biometric applications this year, making the process less simple and the cost more in line with Britain. Travel agents can help with visas. "There are more than 69 accredited agents in China who can submit visa applications," explains Tammy Liu of VisitBritain's Beijing office. The Government has said it will look at making visa applications easier.

Food can be a problem but the Chinese are becoming more adventurous as they travel more. "Now they're happy to try other food, but not every day, and not for dinner, which is always Chinese," says Carey. "They'll try fish and chips, they like places like Planet Hollywood and the Hard Rock Café, and they might eat a pub lunch in the Lake District. They like KFC – there are more KFC outlets in China than anywhere in the world – but not burgers. The Chinese don't linger over meals, even good-quality meals in China – and the food in China is outstanding – so there's no point in taking them to upmarket restaurants for dinner. They also like to eat early – 6pm – and often the only restaurants open then are Chinese."

Businesses offering information in Mandarin have an advantage. "I decreed this year that we would not take our groups to any attractions and hotels that do not have information in Mandarin," says Carey.

How is the market likely to develop over the next decade? "Special interest tours could be the way forward," says Carey. "There's a great interest in golf. The Chinese love antiques and come to the UK to buy Chinese antiques." Fashion is also popular. "We brought a large delegation over for London Fashion Week last year – they're very interested and want to educate themselves. This may be niche tourism, but with 1.3 billion potential tourists, the numbers could be huge." ■

For more information about the Chinese market, go to www.visitbritain.org/research



CASE STUDY
China Friendly Suffolk
chinafriendly.suffolk.co.uk

The China Friendly Suffolk (CFS) initiative was started two years ago by Yaxley China, an educational and consultancy business with offices in Suffolk and Beijing, China. Managing Director Drew Ross approached Choose Suffolk, the local destination marketing organisation, and Suffolk County Council, and together they set up www.choosesuffolk.cn, a website in Mandarin promoting Suffolk for tourism, business and education. "We are the first county to actively promote ourselves to the Chinese," says Drew. "We want to provide a one-stop shop Chinese website linking with other partners, attractions and accommodation." Initiative partners include Adnams hotels, Aldeburgh Music and Aspall Cider. CFS brought a delegation of upmarket Chinese travel agents to Suffolk last year, and the group is planning more marketing activities in China. "We want to make the county a must-see destination for the Chinese," says Eddy Alcock, Chairman of Suffolk County Council. "We're mindful of the Olympics next year. There could be lots of Chinese people in the UK for that and we want them to come to Suffolk, too." What advice would Drew give to tourism businesses wanting to attract Chinese visitors? "Ideally, attractions should have Mandarin-speaking staff," says Drew. "But it's essential to provide information and a website in Mandarin to encourage the Chinese to travel here. We've started a campaign to encourage local accommodation providers, attractions, shops and restaurants to provide basic visitor information in Mandarin."

Knowing what your customers need is always important, but never more so than when they have an impairment. Here we learn more about the challenges the hard of hearing face

Quiet world

There are more than ten million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. Each year they, and those travelling with them, make 2.5 million overnight trips in England, spending nearly half a million pounds in the process.

“Accommodation providers and attractions can strengthen their appeal by appreciating the needs of this significant and growing group,” says VisitEngland’s Skills, Welcome and Accessibility Manager, Ross Calladine. “Understanding how you can provide a safe environment for deaf and hard of hearing people may be more profitable than you think.”

Providing the right type of environment for the hard of hearing is relatively easy to do, but sadly many service providers fail to get the basics covered. Steve Kessell from VisitCornwall tells us about an uncomfortable encounter he had at a rather fishy business:

“When you enter my local fish and chip shop, invariably there will be a number of people standing in a line. There are no signs telling you what to do, so on my first visit, I joined the queue.

Shortly after, I noticed everyone was looking at me, and the lady behind the counter was also waving. At that precise moment my hearing aid decided to act ‘deaf’, but from the now more urgent waving and blatant staring I guessed I was being told to order at the till. Feeling slightly foolish but battling on I ordered cod and chips and was given a receipt with a number on it.

“Things got worse when I realised that the very softly spoken lady behind the counter was calling out the number when your chips were ready. I was now on full alert and I had no idea how long it would take. Ten minutes later, the queue had grown and my anxiety levels were at a record high. I was trying to work out when my order would be called, knowing that I probably wouldn’t hear it and that I

“The staff had no idea that their system was difficult for the hard of hearing to comprehend”

might get embarrassed looks from customers and staff alike.

“A simple trip to the chip shop had become an ordeal and it’s so silly because all they had to do was install an electronic display that would tell you when your order was ready. Sadly, I don’t go there anymore, not because of the food, but because the system is so stressful it’s put me off my chips!”

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

What Steve’s story demonstrates is how customers will go elsewhere if the service isn’t up to scratch. Making sure that you are in tune with the needs of the hard of hearing can therefore benefit you and them. The owners of Torquay’s Atlantis Holiday Apartments, Pauline and John Roberts, couldn’t agree more.

“Not only are there lots of deaf people in the UK, but many of them travel with others, which brings in more business,” says Pauline. “Also we have an ageing population, so there’s a good chance that the amount of people with hearing impairments will rise.”

Pauline and John try to make life as easy as possible for deaf and hard of hearing guests at their apartments – the fact that they know sign language is a real plus. They first learnt British sign language 20 years ago and have found that it often comes in handy. However,

Essential equipment

Vibrating alarm clock: Includes a vibrating pad that you pop under the pillow. (From £25)

Door bell: A portable door chime system with both a vibrating and audible alert. Guests can put the receiver in a pocket so they can feel it vibrating whenever someone is at the door. (From £30)

Induction loop: Helps hearing aid users to hear sounds far more clearly. (From £113)

Textphone: a telephone typewriter device to receive and transmit messages that are typed into it by deaf/hard of hearing persons. (From £270)

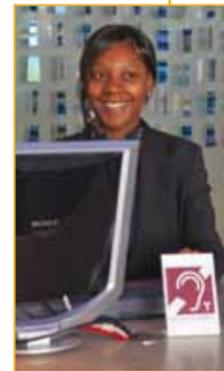
All available from www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop

numerous facilities such as vibrating alarm clocks, flashing doorbells and strobe light fire alarms. All of these devices can make a world of difference – as Ruthy Fletcher, a provider of deaf awareness training, can attest to.

“I was once staying in a hotel and unbeknown to me the fire alarm went off,” she says. “I decided to pop out and was surprised to see the fire brigade, guests and staff outside. Luckily, it was a false alarm. The coach driver said he never thought of reporting to reception that there was a deaf person in his group. If my room had had a strobe light fire alarm, I would have felt safe in the knowledge that should the fire alarm ring, I would evacuate immediately with everyone else.” ■

Top tips

- Ensure that staff who deal with customers by telephone are trained to speak clearly and rephrase rather than repeat when people are struggling to hear.
- Always face the person you are talking to, speak clearly and provide a pen and paper if required.
- To avoid putting staff members into silhouette, ensure that light sources clearly illuminate them. Shadows on the faces of staff can make lip-reading more difficult.
- Ensure any emergency and evacuation plans take into consideration the needs of customers with hearing loss.
- Consider providing facilities such as subtitles on TVs and using the text relay service. This is a fully automated text-to-voice and voice-to-text translation service for customers who cannot use a standard telephone. Visit www.textrelay.org for more information.



one of Pauline’s tips for communicating with the hard of hearing is to do so via text message.

“I always have my mobile on me so guests know they can easily contact me,” she says. It may sound basic, but it’s a great way to communicate important messages with the hard of hearing and anyone can do it.”

Ensuring that their hard of hearing guests feel safe is also a top priority, so Pauline and John provide

How to take your customer service to the next level

If you’re interested in undertaking some training in how to serve the hard of hearing these courses will fit the bill and could give your business a real boost.

Welcome All

‘Welcome All’ is part of the Welcome to Excellence range of customer service courses. It is a one-day course that provides participants with practical advice and cost-effective ideas to enhance service quality for disabled customers and those with specific needs.

“The Welcome All training was absolutely wonderful – it opens your eyes to disability. What you don’t realise until you do the training is what disabled people have to deal with on a daily basis.”

Volunteer Brian at Imperial War Museum North, Manchester

To find out more, visit: www.welcometoexcellence.co.uk/trainingprogrammes/welcomeall.asp

WorldHost – Customers with Disabilities

Awarded the London 2012 Inspire mark, this half-day programme gives the key skills and knowledge required by front line staff in order to meet the needs of disabled customers. To

find out more about the course, visit: www.worldhost.uk.com/disabilities.html

Ruthy Fletcher’s ‘Support the deaf people’

www.supportthedeafpeople.co.uk

VisitEngland’s National Accessible Scheme (NAS)

If you are interested in having your business officially rated for its accessibility you should look into the National Accessible Scheme (NAS), which is the only scheme that rates the accessibility of visitor accommodation throughout England.

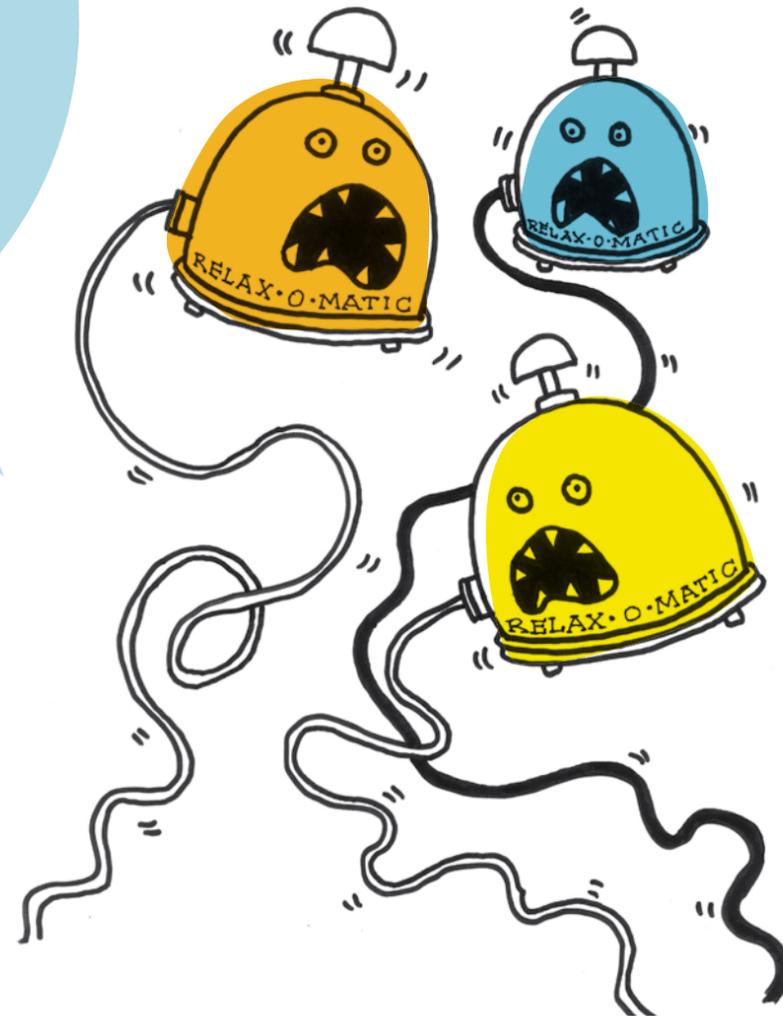
The NAS helps accommodation operators improve and promote their true level of accessibility while helping those with impairments make an informed decision about where they stay. Visit www.visitengland.org/nas for more information.



Room technology



RALPH OSWICK, DIRECTOR OF THE NATURAL THEATRE COMPANY, SAYS THAT COLLEAGUES HAVE TO BE PREPARED TO DEAL WITH UNEXPECTED AND SOMETIMES AMUSING SITUATIONS



Years ago, the only high-tech equipment to be found in hotel rooms would be a dodgy telly and a flickering light above the bathroom mirror. And sometimes, thrillingly, one of those coin-in-the-slot vibrating massage beds. After an arduous journey across the Alps in a crowded crew bus, I was indeed suitably thrilled to find one installed in my room in the idyllic hotel overlooking the Swiss lakes. To tell the truth, it was late at night, I was utterly exhausted, aching all over and very nervous about tomorrow's show. We had performed to many an enthusiastic German audience but had no idea how the Swiss would take us.

Time for some relaxation. I had a shower, switched the phone to 'do not disturb', poured myself a stiff drink from the mini-bar and set about finding a suitable classical music station on the bedside radio. Enveloped in a cloud of easy-listening, I adjusted my pillows, put a handful of coins into the meter, dialled up a double session on the ratchet and lay back, ready to drift off into glorious reverie as the tensions of the day were left far behind.

Now, these machines, which are franchised around the world, deliver a mild vibrating sensation accompanied by a gentle hum. They work by having a solid rubber plunger pressed up against a piece of two-by-one timber fitted at tension across the bottom of the bed frame. I know this because no sooner had I closed my eyes when there was a sharp crack,

followed by a sinking feeling and a series of loud thumps. I jumped up and, upon investigation, found that the wooden slat had snapped. The act of lifting the bed to have a look released the heavy electric motor and its plunger, which then leapt out at me.

There followed a scene of carnage as the machine bounced around the room, attached to its umbilical cord of thick electrical cable, thrashing wildly and bashing into furniture, the door and my ankles. I tried forcing it back under the bed, but it just vibrated out of my hands. In fact, nothing I could do would stop it, as I had paid for twice the normal time. There was, of course, no off switch! I thought it would never end. I just had to let it run its course, like some horrible alien set free from its cage.

It was at this point that I discovered that most of the furniture and indeed the bedroom door were made of thin metal. I've never stayed in a room with a tin door before, and I probably wouldn't have noticed if my new alien acquaintance wasn't throwing itself at it with gay abandon. Most of the hotel guests seemed to have discovered it at the same time, as lights started to come on all over the building.

Finally, my nightmare ended and the creature ceased its noisy cavorting. I hadn't exactly had the relaxing experience I had hoped for, but the incident had certainly distracted me from the day's tribulations.

Goodness knows what everyone thought I was doing in my room – I definitely got some funny looks at breakfast.

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Springhill Farm holiday park started life as five caravans in a Northumberland field, but has grown to offer a range of accommodation including self-catering cottages, wigwams and a bunkhouse



Back in 1994 Julie Gregory saw an advert in *Farmers Weekly* that changed the course of her and her husband Colin's business for good. The Caravan Club was looking for locations that could take up to five caravans. As there was no need to obtain planning permission, Julie thought this could be the perfect way to increase the viability of their farm.

"Our two children were young at the time and I loved the idea of getting a little extra pocket money and being able to work from home," says Julie.

After putting in some electrical points and advertising in the Caravan Club handbook, the Gregorys were ready to begin and

they continued to happily trade as a small Caravan Club site for ten years. By 2005 they were having to turn away so many prospective customers that they decided to expand.

GETTING BIGGER

As the park is situated on the coast between Seahouses and Bamburgh, the local Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) supported the Gregory's planning application. The AONB's research had identified a demand for one-night stays in the area and that local B&Bs often wouldn't take such short bookings, so they thought a larger caravan site could be the answer.

As if expanding the caravan park wasn't enough to be getting on with, the Gregorys also decided to convert some of their disused barns into self-catering accommodation.

They already had one four-star self-catering cottage, but as they were looking to attract a higher-spending customer, they wanted to achieve a five-star Gold rating for the new accommodation. Although they struggled to get funding, they eventually added a further seven self-catering cottages.

Last year, again with encouragement from the AONB, the Gregorys decided to embark on a new concept. Due to the recession, they had found that more people were looking for cheaper accommodation so they built a bunkhouse and five wigwams. Although called wigwams, these are actually wooden buildings modelled on the sheds that are made locally from upturned retired boats from the East coast's largest herring fleet on nearby Holy Island.

GROWING SUCCESS

The work was carried out with the help of a grant for 50% of the total £100,000 cost from the Rural Development Programme for England, which was administered by Defra and One North East. Because of the timing of the grant application and the delays caused by the struggle to find matched funding, the work had to be completed within a tight timescale.

"We had decorators painting bits of buildings while other parts were still being erected, says Julie. "Fortunately we worked with a great building team who worked seven days a week through the wind, rain and even snow. In the end we welcomed the first guests with smiles on our faces and they didn't have a clue how hard it had been to complete!"

Although it has taken much hard work to achieve such a great

A helping hand

The Gregorys received a lot of support for their building projects from the Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB). Each AONB will often lend support to planning and grant applications and they have a small grant fund called the Sustainable Fund. If you are thinking about expanding and are located in the right area, your AONB may be able to help you.

For more information, visit www.aonb.org.uk

choice of accommodation at the park, it has certainly paid off. "Having so many options works really well for us," says Julie. "We often have situations where young families come to stay in a caravan and the grandparents stay in a wigwam next door so

they can be nearby, but have some peace and quiet. We've also had times when the weather has been bad so campers have moved into the bunkhouse. It's great to be able to please every person and pocket."

The bunkhouse is popular, with average occupancy rates between 55% and 69% through the year, but rising to around 95% during July and August. Occupancy levels for the wigwams are also high and average around 65% for the full year, but between April and

September it is 85% or higher.

Each wigwam with its furniture pack cost £7,500 to build and required planning permission. They sleep up to five and are rented out at £19 per night per adult and £11 for children. The average stay tends to be about three nights and the Gregorys charge the same rates all year round. Two new wigwams are

"People like to be able to book at the click of a button and at any time of the day or night"



Park life





A bedroom in the Engine House self-catering cottage

“It’s great to be able to please every person and pocket”

planned for next season and each one should last for about 15 years if maintained correctly.

Springhill Farm’s main market is UK residents choosing to holiday in England, while overseas visitors currently only account for 3–5% of its business, often arriving at the caravan site with their pushbikes and motorbikes. This year, cheaper accommodation such as the wigwams, bunkhouse and the caravan site have been much busier, while the cottages have remained on a par with 2010.

Despite the differences in accommodation, Julie says that people always expect the best quality. “When we started off we used to have things like second-hand furniture, but these days you just need a higher standard of everything.” In order to help maintain such standards, the Gregorys employ seven part-time cleaners all year round, two part-time receptionists for the peak season and two wardens who live on site and oversee the campsite 24/7 from April to October. However, Spring Hill Farm is very much a family business. Julie’s husband Colin and son Simon are in charge of the farming and landscaping while Julie and her daughter Sarah are the public faces of the holiday park side of the business.

Working mainly on reception, Sarah is responsible for looking after the farm’s excellent website, which was created in 2008. She says that one of the main benefits of the site is the online booking facility. “People like to be able to book at the click of a button and at any time of the day or night. In fact, there have been a few times when I’ve had people call up needing to change their booking as they’ve been half-asleep when they made it online at 2am!”

As the Gregorys received a grant for half of the cost of setting up the website from the Rural Development programme for England, they were able to employ both a company to create it and a professional photographer to take the best images. In total, the venture cost about £7,000

and the Gregorys think it was well worth it. “The site has been so successful,” says Julie. “It looks great and has brought in a lot of business. I’d recommend anyone to invest in getting their site just right.”

The site also contains a photo gallery for guests to upload their own snaps, which has proven very popular. The Gregorys engage with their guests and potential customers via their Facebook page too, which brings in a lot of business. In order to keep on top of the success of their online activity, the family ask their guests how they found out about Springhill Farm and use Google Analytics to monitor their website.

When it comes to paid-for advertising, the Gregorys report that they get the best results from the sites www.ukcampsite.com and www.visitnorthumberland.com. They also allocate a small budget for PR activity. This enables them to use a local PR professional to put out press releases for when they do something new or a bit quirky.

With the possibility of hosting a large music festival at the farm in the pipeline and a ‘can do’ attitude from all the Gregorys, it seems likely there will be plenty more press releases to come for this family-run park. ■



Top: A room in the bunkhouse
Middle: The bunkhouse balcony
Bottom: The bunkhouse lounge

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Attention to detail at every level pays off at Tracey-Anne Cook and Lesley Russell-Dean's boutique B&B in Hastings

A review in the *Guardian* said that Black Rock House has "all the comforts of a hotel without the disadvantages". In other words, owners Tracey-Anne and Lesley have managed to achieve the highest standards while maintaining a more personal touch at the five-bedroom business they set up in 2008.

Having worked in the hotel industry for 14 years, Tracey-Anne was well placed to set up what she and her business partner Lesley call "a luxury boutique bed and breakfast with hotel standards". These standards include providing an honesty bar so guests can have an alcoholic drink, as well offering a later-than-standard check-out time of 12pm. The personal



Finishing touches

Black Rock House, Hastings
www.black-rock-house.co.uk
★★★★★ Guest Accommodation

touch stems from the couple's attitude that "guests shouldn't be treated as room numbers, but very much as individuals".

As Tracey-Anne comes from a hotel background, she has experience in working with structured systems and so has adapted them to fit the smaller scale of her and Lesley's business. This sort of efficiency means that great care and attention goes into every aspect of the business, which is the key to their success.

Tracey-Anne's and Lesley's attention to detail begins before their guests have even arrived. Realising the importance of knowing your market, not only do they ask people where they found out about them when they book, but they also use Google Trends to monitor where people are viewing their website from. They also never overlook the importance of the website itself.

"I think search engine optimisation (SEO) is so important. 'Optimise, optimise, optimise' is the mantra, really," says Tracey-Anne. "It's all well and good having a singing and dancing website that looks fantastic, but if people can't find it, then they won't find you."

Tracey-Anne and Lesley used to manage their SEO themselves, using Google Analytics, but started to outsource it to a company in 2010. For a modest fee, the company sends them monthly reports and makes any required changes to the site.

In addition to the website, Black Rock House has a presence on online reservation sites Booking.com and laterooms.com. Seeing paying commission to such sites as "a necessary evil", Tracey-Anne says they can't deny how much business the sites bring in, especially from abroad. She makes the good point that they would always rather receive "85% of something than 100% of nothing".

Although the booking sites bring in about half of their reservations, Tracey-Anne understands why some proprietors are wary of signing up; however, she believes that it's definitely worth it in such a competitive market.

"You're not only fighting with other accommodation providers for optimisation but also booking agents. After all, they're the ones that pay for click-per-views," says Tracey-Anne. "I think you need to jump on board unless



you're confident enough to think that you don't need them."

Tracey-Anne may be willing to embrace different ways of attracting business. However, she and Lesley feel it's important "not to dilute your product". Although they provide some special offers in addition to their seasonal rates, they keep this to a minimum to maintain their standards. "I think if you start giving big discounts you can sometimes attract a different market and it can make people question why your rate is normally what it is," says Tracey-Anne.

The work that goes into attracting customers pales in comparison with the effort that goes into making their stay special. From offering guests the opportunity to pre-order afternoon tea on arrival to providing homemade biscuits in the rooms, Tracey-Anne and Lesley ensure that they always go the extra mile for their guests.

Although the rooms are beautifully decorated and contain Wi-Fi internet and the latest technology, such as iPod docks, little touches such as providing fresh flowers and stationery are what really give Black Rock House the edge. Tracey-Anne and Lesley ensure that things such as these are always in place by 'taking the guest's journey' before the guest arrives. They provide highly informative room directories to make guests' lives even simpler. They can also make taxi and restaurant bookings and guests can book in advance to have little extras such as champagne in their room as part of the 'Finishing touches' service.

"Guests shouldn't be treated as room numbers, but very much as individuals"



“Our breakfast time is very flexible; in fact, guests can have it when they want it”

> Despite the fact that many of the extra touches that the pair provide don't involve alcohol, being able to offer things like an honesty bar and a complimentary drink on arrival do help to give Black Rock House the edge and for a relatively small cost.

“Having a licence isn't a massive revenue generator, due to the small size of the business, but it does mean we can provide something extra and it definitely justifies the expense,” says Tracey-Anne.

The cost of obtaining and renewing a licence depends on the size of the business. However, as a rough guide, Tracey-Anne and Lesley paid less than £150 for Tracey-Anne to attend a personal licence course, £190 for the application fee and their annual renewal fee is £125.

Here Tracey-Anne takes us through a typical day at Black Rock House.

6.30AM

Our breakfast time is very flexible; in fact, guests can have it when they want it. We tend to find that in the week, when we've got more business customers, we have to get up at, say, 6.30-7am. At the weekend we usually get a nice lie-in until about 8am.

We need to give ourselves about an hour to get ready before the guests come down because, as well as our cooked breakfasts, we do a buffet, which includes fresh fruit, granola and yoghurts.

8.00AM

Lesley and I have recently started working on a week-on, week-off basis, taking it in turns to do the front and back of house jobs, so one of us cooks breakfast while the other serves it. We have a couple of people who work for us as and when we need them, so if we're full, Jamila or Lenka will also help with the service.

Not only have we achieved the VisitEngland Breakfast Award but we're also a member of the 'Sussex Breakfast' initiative from 1066 Country Marketing. This showcases establishments that use at least 60% local, seasonal ingredients, so we're very proud of our breakfasts. We offer a wide range of options for everyone and try to do something a bit different in addition to our standard English breakfasts. One of our most popular dishes is our halloumi with potato-and-thyme bread and roasted tomatoes – vegetarians and meat-eaters alike love it.

11.30AM

As we're finishing cleaning up after breakfast, guests start to check-out. Our check-out time is from 11.30am-12.00pm so it's quite relaxed. We could have insisted on a 10.30am check-out to make our lives easier but if people are coming away on a leisure break, it's nice to be able to give them more time.

12.00AM

During the hours between check-out and check-in, we'll be doing anything and everything, from answering the phone and doing admin to going food shopping and doing the laundry. In our first year, we used to do all the room cleaning but we decided to hand it over to Jamila and Lenka, which gives us a bit more time to ourselves – after all, that's the main reason we went into this type of business. It's so nice to be able to go for lunch with friends or take my two dogs Pacino and Lilli for a walk on the beach or in the country park.

2.00PM

Although we have cleaners now, I still inspect all the rooms myself before check-in, and I put in all the extra bits, like homemade biscuits and water carafes. I think it's really important to keep an eye on everything and it's good to give yourself at least half an hour before check-in to do your final checks.

3.00PM

Check-in starts from 3pm so on a busy day we'll spend the next few hours welcoming guests, as well as catching up with more office work. As some people pre-order afternoon tea, we'll often be serving this too. We also have to make sure the bar is well stocked.

10.30PM

Before we go to bed we lay out anything we can for breakfast, blow the candles out on the bar, and put the night lights on.



Getting technical

Having the latest technology can be a real selling point for guests, but going overboard with complicated gadgets and gizmos may turn some customers off. Zoë Slater discovers how to get the balance right

In an age when it can appear that as soon as you've bought the latest gadget it becomes old news, it's important that you're aware of technological advancements – even if you don't choose to install them. Gone are the days when a tiny portable TV in the corner of the bedroom would cut it for guests. WiFi and widescreen TVs are now expected as standard.

A recent survey conducted by the retailer PC World found that, on average, people spend up to two hours a night surfing the internet, playing computer games, playing on their mobile phone and watching television online while in bed. So it's no surprise that the survey also found that when it comes to the lounge, the average household has £1,200-worth of technological kit in it.

The big chains and top hotels are aware of this and so have made sure that they have their finger on the pulse and can offer their guests the latest in-room technology. Many new hotels make technology their main selling point. A perfect example of this is the newly opened Eccleston Square Hotel in London, which offers 3D TVs, Blu-ray players and iPod docking stations in every room, along with iPads (a first for Europe).

VisitEngland Quality Assessor Mark Robertson says: "Proprietors need to remember that customers want at least what they have at

home. This is not only true in terms of general quality, but it extends to the technology you provide – people just aren't going to be happy watching a little square box any more."

A DIFFERENT VIEW

This is a fact that John Serginson, who owns the Lakeland Cottage Company with his wife Claire, can certainly attest to. "In the old days, we used to take TVs out of the pictures of our cottages as they looked ugly, but now they've replaced the fireplace as the focal point of the room," he says. "In fact,

if you don't show a TV in the picture, people start ringing up to check that there is one. It's sad but true – and size matters.

"WiFi is also a must for most people. Sometimes it's because they need to check their emails and work, but we've had a couple who moved to a different cottage as their 16-year-old son needed WiFi to stay in touch with his girlfriend."

Whatever technology you install, ensuring that your guests can actually use it is vital. "The secret is to make sure that your guests are familiarised with the equipment," says Mark Robertson. "Whether you personally explain how to use things or create an easy-to-read guide for them, it doesn't matter. Just don't leave them with the manual that came with the appliance and expect them to get on with it."

It's worth noting that even things like iPods, which are hardly cutting edge now, can still be difficult for some people to master if they're not used to them. So you always need to think about your market and how savvy they generally are about technology.

£1,200

The average value of the technological kit that people have in their lounges

STAYING SAVVY

The Crown Spa Hotel in Scarborough is full to the brim with the latest bits of kit but the hotel's Director David Frank has a fail-safe way of ensuring that it's all easy to use. "It sounds a bit patronising, but I normally think of the least technically savvy person I know and make sure that they can use the equipment I want to install," he says.

David and his brother Richard, who is the hotel's Managing Director, are certainly smart when it comes to buying technology. "You should always look at which markets you attract and which ones you might be able to go for in the future, and keep the customer in mind when choosing new technology," says Richard. "We like to do things that are a bit

different here. We've installed TVs and mood lighting in some of the bathrooms and we're going to erect a 'seagull cam' on the roof so that guest can watch the birds nesting from the comfort of their rooms."

Although such ideas may sound quite extravagant and expensive, David and Richard prove that they don't have to cost the Earth. Tireless research on the internet has meant that they've been able to get some great deals, especially from abroad, and creative thinking has helped them no end. "Our guests can now connect their iPads and laptops to the TV so they can watch internet TV.

All we had to do was put in a bit of extra wiring and a few cables," says David.

The pair has also found that installing newer, greener technology not only saves the environment but also has a hugely positive impact on the balance sheet. "Our LED TVs only use 60% of the power of our old ones and we're now lighting a corridor which used to cost £1,500 a year for only £170 as we've moved to SMD (surface mounted diode) bulbs," says Richard. In total, they have saved £500,000 on energy bills in the past six years.

Richard and David have a great bit of advice for any proprietor: 'Don't be a lemming and get technology for technology's sake.' This is a

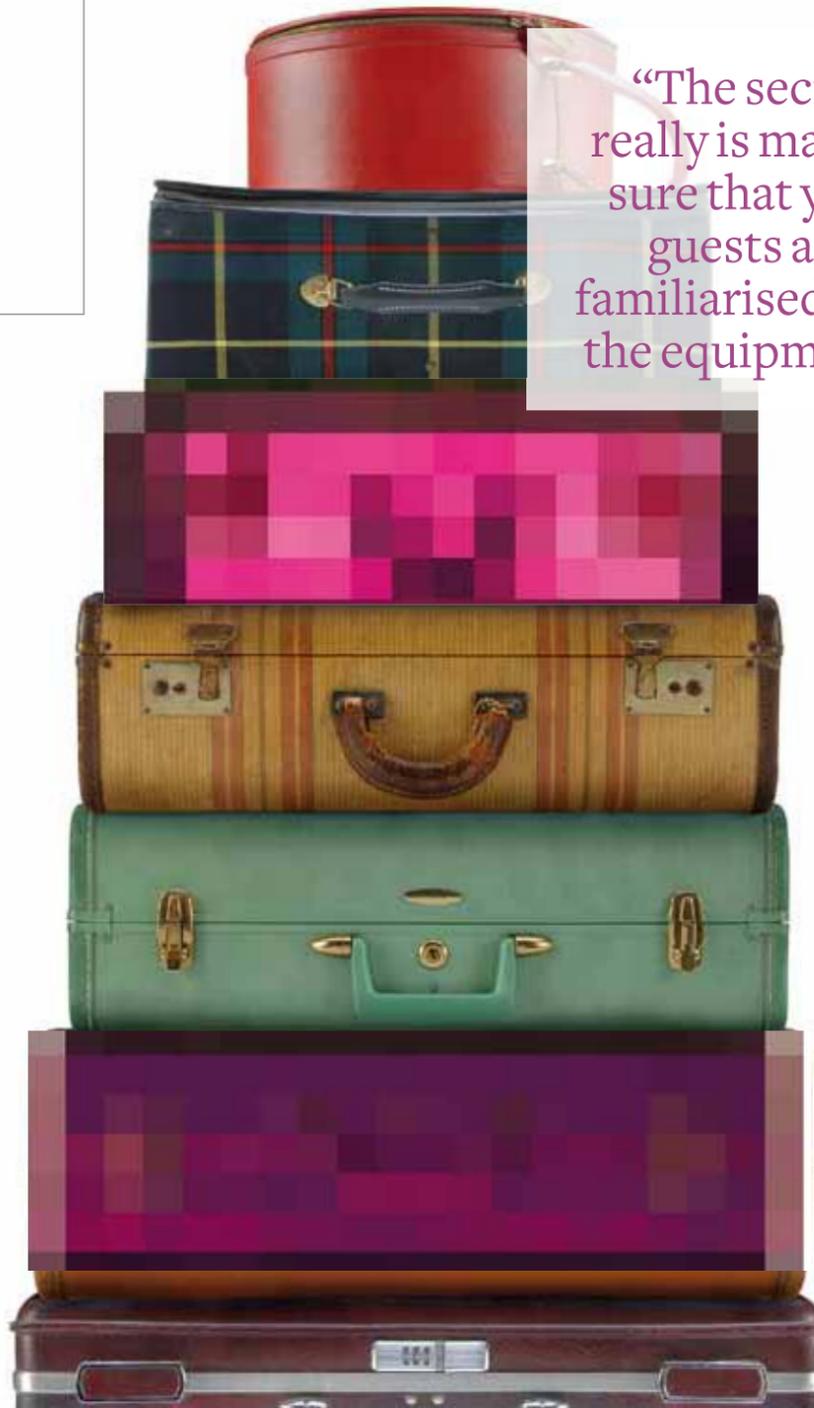
sentiment that the owners of Edwardian Dreams in Worthing, Brian and Olive Lennox couldn't agree with more. Last year their guest house featured on Channel Five's *The Gadget Show*. In the programme, one of the bedrooms in their elegant Edwardian home was given a technological, and thankfully temporary, makeover. Gadgets, including a bed with a TV inside it and industrial hand-driers, were installed and they left Brian baffled.

"Most of the things they installed were too clever by half," he says. "What *The Gadget Show* demonstrated was how some technology can make life easier and be really useful, but it also showed how sometimes what works for the big chains isn't necessarily good for smaller places."

One of the ideas that Brian did like was a mobile phone-activated door key. "It's not something we'd use here, but it's a great idea for a larger place as it's handy and very safe." Using mobile phone technology in general is becoming more prevalent in hotels. Premier Inns is just one organisation that sends text message confirmations to its guests before their stay. Although this will be done via a computer system in large hotels, it is an idea that can be easily adapted for any proprietor with a mobile phone. So that's just one quick and cost-effective way of incorporating technology into your business. ■



"The secret really is making sure that your guests are familiarised with the equipment"



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Lamp Cream: 209-1555, Finest Tea Cup and Saucer: 207-9176, Finest Wine Glass 4 Pack: 206-9430, Tesco Lomond Cutlery 16 Piece Set: 207-7887, Tesco 3 Cup Banded Stainless Steel Cafeteriere: 209-2257. Chair, curtain and bed throw are for styling purposes only. Subject to availability. Selected UK stores. Delivery charges may apply online. For latest pricing call customer services on 0845 600 4411 or check online at tesco.com/direct. Double Clubcard points. Second point awarded per £1 spent on qualifying products. Exclusions apply. See in-store or www.tesco.com/clubcard/doublepoints for full details & terms. Standard Clubcard terms & conditions apply, minimum spend to qualify for Clubcard points is £1.

Update

Cutting through the red tape

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



The Tourism Minister's Regulation Taskforce has begun work on analysing the hundreds of entries that were received from the public, businesses and trade associations as part of the recent Red Tape Challenge. The sheer weight of submissions has meant that three sub-groups have had to be formed to analyse them. The three categories are: Food and Drink, Infrastructure and Travel.

These sub-groups have undertaken a preliminary assessment of the submissions and have prioritised suggested changes for further analysis. Each of the Taskforce sub-groups will now look at what regulation can be recommended for repeal and what needs to be amended to reduce the regulatory burden on businesses. Where the current regulations need to be amended rather than repealed, the sub-groups will enter discussions with the relevant government department to try to develop an agreed solution that can be presented to the Minister.

Examples of regulations that the sub-groups are currently working on include:

- Removing the need for 'no smoking' signage

Energy Performance Certificates

Further progress has been achieved in overturning the requirement for self-catering properties to gain Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs). Although this requirement technically came into force on 1 July, Assistant whip Bill Wiggin gave this reply to a question from Andrew Stephenson, MP for Pendle, in the House of Commons:

"I have investigated this and it seems to be a classic case of gold-plating. We have made inquiries to establish the position in other European Union countries and it seems that, as my honourable friend said, EPCs are not required for holiday lets in a number of other member states, including Germany, Sweden and Denmark – he also mentioned France and Scotland. It gives me great pleasure to tell the House that we should have a clearly defined position on this within the next few weeks."

That the Government acknowledges the proposed requirement is 'gold-plating' opens the door for a solution to be found, which will either remove the need for operators to gain EPCs or introduce an exemption when a property is let to the same person for more than three months.

- The removal of requirements for liquor licences for businesses that sell very small quantities of alcohol
- Ending the need to record the address and passport details of overseas visitors and to hold them in case of police inspection

This process will continue until the end of November when a final report, with associated recommendations, is due to be presented to the Minister for the Government's consideration. It is expected that the Government will respond to the report in the new year, with the agreed recommendations on regulation to be

repealed or amended then entering the legislative programme. The earliest it could reasonably be expected that new legislation will be passed and the regulatory burden on businesses will decrease will probably be the end of 2012 (new legislation is generally only brought in twice per annum – 1 April and 1 November).

Consultation on Regulation Enforcement

One of the main issues that came out of the Red Tape Challenge consultation was that many of the problems that tourism businesses have with regulatory burden is the implementation of the legislation at the local level. Each local authority and regulation enforcement agency tends to interpret legislation in different ways. This means that two identical businesses in two different locations can have significantly different levels of regulatory burden, even though the regulation under which they operate is the same.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) is therefore undertaking a consultation on how best to reduce regulatory burden associated with the administration and enforcement of regulation at the local level by:

1. Making enforcement agencies more accountable to businesses
2. Promoting best practice in enforcement
3. Making enforcement procedures and decisions more transparent.

OWNERS OF HOLIDAY ACCOMMODATION

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CASE STUDY

A survey was undertaken on a Cornish holiday letting purchased in 2009 for £315,000. This identified £74,726 of qualifying expenditure, which will produce tax savings of £29,890 (for a 40% taxpayer). A tax refund of £10,239 was received from the Revenue in 2010, a further £13,717 will be received in 2011 and the balance will be received in subsequent years.

- **Do you own a Furnished Holiday Letting, B&B, Guest House, Hotel or Holiday Park?**

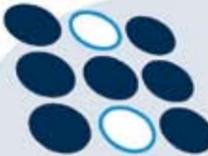
...if so, you could be missing out on substantial tax savings through the claim of capital allowances.

It is not something that the Revenue likes to publicise, but most owners of business property (which includes holiday lets) do not claim their full entitlement to capital allowances. Typically between 15% and 30% of the purchase price of the property can be allocated to fixtures inherent in the fabric of the building such as electrics, sanitary ware, heating, air conditioning, hot and cold water (and even swimming pools!), all of which qualify for capital allowances. It does not matter when the property was acquired – as long as you still own the property then a retrospective claim can be made.

These capital allowances can be offset against other property profits, and can also be offset against other income, including your salary or pension income, giving rise to potentially substantial tax refunds. There is also scope to carry the losses back and obtain a tax refund for earlier years.

Most accountants do not have the specialist skills to identify capital allowances embedded in a property. We combine building surveying know-how and taxation expertise to maximise your claim for capital allowances, and can then work with your accountant (or act as your accountant) to lodge your claim with the Revenue.

With the announced changes to the tax treatment of furnished holiday lets, time really is of the essence in lodging your claim. You simply have nothing to lose, so please call Tom Haslehurst on 0121 308 7773 or email info@haslehursts.co.uk today for a no obligation chat to see how much tax the Revenue potentially owes you.

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We live in a time where there are more ways to get in touch with each other than ever before. Technology is enabling new online communities to spring up and people are building networks of relationships. As with normal relationships, when you want to join these communities you have to understand their rules and modes of communication. So how does this affect the way you build a reputation for your business?

Like with 'real' networks of friends, recommendations, referrals and peer-to-peer connections are crucial. If someone likes you they'll invite you out with the gang. That's the way it works! These communities are also consumers of your brand, your services, offers and experiences – with one critical difference. The rise of online networking means that people can, for the very first time, take control of your messages – and in a very real sense, they own your online reputation. It is crucial to understand this key point. Other people will decide what your online reputation is and managing that requires a whole new set of skills. You only have to go to TripAdvisor and check

“Other people will decide your online reputation”

out the photos. Not the glossy ones the hotels take, the real ones customers have taken – warts and all. Online communities can and will talk about you – and what they say will be honest and sometimes brutal. People are talking to each other more and more and in our brave, new digital world they not only talk about you – but they actively rate and recommend you.

In the old world order you were your own brand – you had some degree of ownership of your own reputation. That's all changed now. People will spread news about you quickly, whether it's good or bad. And there's very little you can do to control that!

It's important to remember that a bad business or service will never have a good reputation so you need to focus on making your business a great business in every aspect. But a good reputation can never be built on glossy pictures alone or dodgy service, so make sure your services are as good as you can make them. Be honest and invest in excellence. Make sure your people are properly trained and understand how important everyone is to a company's overall reputation – and how one mistake can quickly create a global problem. And remember your online reputation is conceived within your own organisation. ■



HOW TO MANAGE YOUR ONLINE REPUTATION

Post positive stories: You need to build success stories about real customers and their experiences that can be used throughout your communications

Share everything: These days it's easy to put information and images online so make sure you keep customers and potential customers in the loop

Post your guests' reviews: Ask guests to leave a review. If you control the ratings and proactively seek feedback there's less chance of people finding another, more public platform to do so (see the next page for an example)

Don't over-promise and make sure you manage expectations: Your website should accurately reflect the experience that people will get when they stay with you. For example, don't use the word 'luxury' to describe your accommodation unless it really is. Use honest images instead of clever ones and don't mislead people about your room sizes or location. Be enthusiastic: maintain a positive tone about your business

Crow about your credentials: Highlight your commitment to things such your community and the environment – be seen as nice people who care

Spread the word: Make sure people can find you online by using media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to get your messages out there (see the next page for some great tips)

Have fun: Create an element of fun around your brand. People react best to content that is amusing and engaging and they are more likely to share it

Never be too careful: Always double-check anything you put online to ensure that it is spelt correctly and written with the right tone of voice

Don't feed the trolls: If you do get a negative review or rating be careful before you respond or comment. Most people understand that there's 'always one' and will take a balanced view of your reputation. Being drawn into a conversation online with a particularly upset customer can often make it worse. It may be worth checking with the moderator on the website to find the best way of dealing with a negative comment

Ultimately, the key message here is very simple: Credibility (of your offer) + Trust (in your relationship with the customer) = A great reputation. Also remember to be the best that you can be, whatever your style/price band/star rating!



When it comes to managing your online reputation, it's worth remembering the saying 'bad news travels fast' says Dave Wilson, owner of Helsbury Park self-catering cottages





A GREAT REVIEW

If a guest has written a great review in your visitors' book, why not upload it for the world to see? Posting real reviews from guests is a great idea as it gives visitors to your site something positive, insightful and objective to read about your business. Whether you upload a screen grab of your visitors' book or just re-write the reviews on your site, they can become a real talking point.

"Since we put up a review which said 'the bread and butter pudding is to die for', we've had so many people ask about this when they book or come to stay," says Bernice Studley of the two-star Aviary Court Hotel, Cornwall. "Although it means I've had to make far more puddings, it's nice to be able to make a personal connection with guests before they've even stayed. Guests have remarked on how they've read the reviews before booking and I know that the guests who have been quoted on the site are delighted."

For more information, visit www.aviarycourthotel.co.uk

"It's nice to be able to make a personal connection"



ON THE GRAPEVINE

Using the web, especially sites such as Twitter, to spread the word about your business is not only a great idea, but completely free! General Manager of Redcar Racecourse Amy Fair is in charge of their online marketing and she has some great tips.

- Don't be afraid to dive in online – Facebook and Twitter don't bite!
- Think about what personality you want to put across, e.g. always be appropriate but also be human, as no one wants to read a tweet or message from a faceless business
- Don't try and constantly sell. Sharing interesting news or a fun fact about your business or local area is far more interesting for people to read
- Share the love with your local area by 'bigging up' other businesses and events. Nice guys certainly don't finish last in the hospitality business
- Stay on the ball and be positive. Only post something online if you're in the right frame of mind – a tweet written while grumpy, half-asleep or after a glass of wine will make you sound like a twit!

For more information, visit www.redcarracing.co.uk

DON'T TRIP UP

Many proprietors are wary of TripAdvisor because they've encountered the problem of having people post a bad review – regardless of whether they've actually stayed in the property or not. The news that some hoteliers are hiring people to write fake reviews for their sites, as exposed in *The Sunday Times* in July, certainly doesn't help its reputation either.

However, if used properly, the site can really boost your business. "Potential travellers appreciate the advice of like-minded people, which is why user-generated content is so highly valued," says TripAdvisor's Emma O'Boyle. Therefore avoiding the site will probably prove foolish.

As for the problem of people posting negative comments, Emma says: "Hoteliers always have the option of posting a management response to any review, which gives them the opportunity to thank the good and offer their perspective on the bad. We encourage all hoteliers to take advantage of this. Since reviewers are not able to reply to management responses, proprietors effectively get the last word."

One proprietor who has taken this advice on board is Pat Francioni of the two-star Alumhurst Hotel in Blackpool. Having attended a TripAdvisor masterclass, Pat now responds to every single post that the hotel receives on the site, regardless of whether it is good or bad. "The course encouraged us to keep a flow of information going with our guests," she says. "The way I see it is if you're competing against hundreds of other businesses, it pays to make the extra effort. TripAdvisor is open to abuse, but if you use it properly, it can be a wonderful tool."

For more information, visit www.tripadvisor.com/masterclass and www.alumhursthotel.com

NEW FOR THIS SEASON!

VisitEngland assessors will now review your website as part of your annual assessment before they visit or stay. They will be looking at how you market your business and what you are telling your guests they can expect if they choose to stay with you and checking whether there is any risk a guest might be disappointed.

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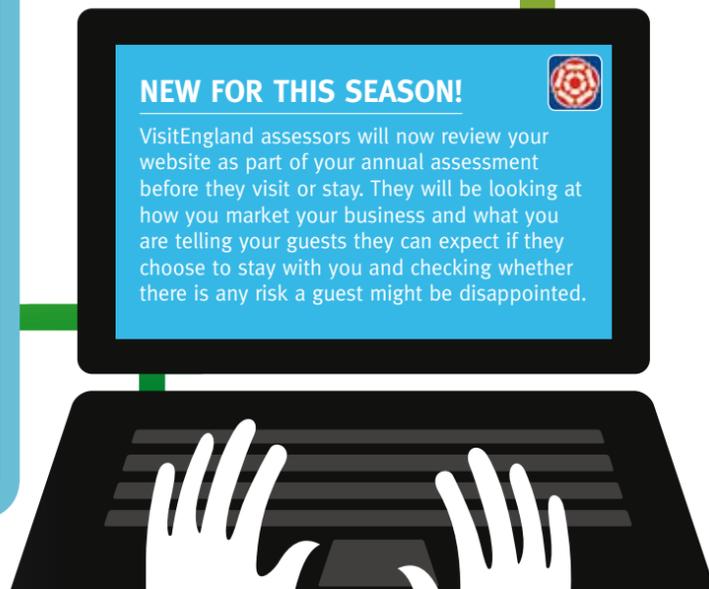
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YOUR Letters

Please contact the Editor with any comments or ideas, or to share your experiences:

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Our next star letter wins an iPod nano

Star letter

Playing by the rules

I am emailing to enquire if you can help me please, with some information.

We at Browns have been part of Nottinghamshire Tourism since 1990 and of Experience Nottinghamshire since it began. For this current year, Experience Nottinghamshire has been allowing accommodation providers to advertise with it in its brochure and webpage who are not quality assessed (QA) with either VisitEngland or the AA. This was never the case; they only used to accept QA establishments, of which we are proud to be one.

Have the rules been relaxed? Is this part of national tourism policies? We would be very interested to know.

Robin and Joan Brown,
Browns, Holbeck, Nottinghamshire
★★★★★ Bed & Breakfast

Editor: Nottinghamshire is retaining its 'assessed only' policy, but widening it to include accommodation that has been assessed under its new local scheme, which follows VisitEngland's new guidelines for an 'entry-level' scheme. We have developed this framework to help destinations that want to expand the network of businesses they work with, in order to maximise marketing/membership revenue and present consumers with a wide choice of accommodation.

Nottinghamshire has chosen to deliver its local scheme through Quality in Tourism, so any accommodation business that applies will receive a pre-arranged day visit from one of our assessors. The assessor will review the property website in advance of arrival to make sure the description and images are not misleading and no out-of-date signage or logos are being displayed. The assessment concentrates on the regulatory aspects, so as with a full star rating, the assessor will ask to see the Fire Risk Assessment, check that the cancellation policy is being communicated clearly, etc. The assessor will look round the property and check it is clean and meets minimum standards. His/her role is to reassure the Nottinghamshire tourism team that they can be confident to promote the accommodation. No star ratings are awarded and the VisitEngland quality rose marquee cannot be used by the business. Assessments are annual and a fee is payable. By using Quality in Tourism assessors, who can indicate what star rating might be achievable, some may decide to go for a full star rating in the future.

Charged up

I read the article 'Guests Behaving Badly' and contributors spoke about charging guests' credit cards for cancelled bookings. I have only done B&B for two years but have had a couple of 'no shows', including some wedding guests. I stayed up until 1am but they didn't turn up. I asked my terminal provider if I could take the balance of the night's stay from the guest's card and I was told 'no' as that would be illegal. Could you clarify the rules and regulations around this for me please?

Bev Fieldsend
Bowsden Bed & Breakfast
★★★★★ Bed & Breakfast

Editor: Yes, the security rules (PCI DSS) are very strict and potentially you risk a big fine if you do not comply. Best practice would be to take the full payment of the first night as a deposit, then destroy the card details and the three-digit PIN immediately. You must also advise the customer at the time of the booking of your cancellation terms - i.e. they will forfeit the first night's payment if they do not show, or they cancel within 24 hours, or whatever your terms state. You might also want to make this policy clear on your website.

Going the extra mile

We sometimes take for granted just how much visitors value our staff when they go that extra mile to make a visit memorable.

Portland Basin Museum in Ashton under Lyne recently had a visit from a group that included a couple in their nineties who had lived in the area years ago. One of the team offered to accompany the group to give information and, perhaps as important, listen as they shared stories and memories. A letter was later received: "the visit brought back memories to us all... and was even better as you shared your enjoyment with us." I know this experience is shared every

day by colleagues up and down the country, but I think these moments of magic are worth celebrating - particularly in the difficult times we face.

Cathy Fisher
Museums Business Manager, Tameside Museums and Galleries Service

A good night's sleep

At Linthwaite House we generally replace a few beds every year and each bed normally lasts about five years. The article in the January issue prompted us to try a new supplier, as our previous one did not deliver the quality we needed - we were having to send beds back after the mattress sides caved in.

The Hypnos beds we chose seem a much better quality and good value. But the proof is the comments from guests. Here's a couple: "And the bed... well, put it this way, I haven't slept so well in ages" (CP, London) and "Bed was comfortable and not rock hard like other places we have visited" (JW, South Yorkshire).

Mike Bevans
Linthwaite House Hotel
★★★★★ Hotel

Camping barn stars

When I did the assessment for Hudscales Camping Barn in Cumbria, the owner asked if there was any possibility of having a star rating for camping barns. The VisitEngland Standard only requires clean, dry, simple accommodation, but Hudscales - and others such as Richmond in Yorkshire and Fishergill in the Lake District - are offering cooking facilities, warm showers and other extras. If not star ratings, would VisitEngland consider a Silver/Gold award for camping barns?

Margaret McLellan
Quality in Tourism Assessor

Editor: Good idea, Margaret. We will look into this.

Have your say

Here is a sample of the feedback we've received in response to the Quality Update



SERVICED ACCOMMODATION

Q. "I hope that, whoever gets the new contract, it is made clear that we want/need consistency from the assessors. I would also like part of the new contract to be policing the use of star ratings and the rose symbol."

A. These two elements are fundamental to the new brief.

Q. "The Hotel and Guest House signs should be completely different. I have had several occasions where people have booked in thinking that the property was a 4-star hotel."

A. VisitEngland has already looked at ideas for a new sign for hotels, but the roll-out has been postponed until the new assessment contract has been awarded.

Q. "I am glad that the assessment scheme is continuing. However, I am concerned that some properties do not have the owners living on site: I have seen guests arriving at neighbouring properties sitting on the steps outside waiting for someone to come and let them in."

A. Assessors will see this as poor hospitality and so a lower score in this area would seriously jeopardise a 4-star (or 5-star) rating.

SELF-CATERING

Q. "My main concern is increasing the ratio of bathrooms to guests. Had our 4-star cottage been large enough for a second bathroom, we would have put one in on day one. Yes, 5-star should have two bathrooms. Losing a star rating would be disastrous for our business and our marketing."

A. The view of the 'Common Standards' Working Group is that this is not a good time to be introducing this change, although they all agree that guests' expectations are for more bathrooms. The final decision will be made by the Standards Review Group. There is still a possibility it will be introduced at 5-star only, but probably after a full review of the stock over the next 12 months to assess the impact.

Q. "The most important requirements guests tell me about are cleanliness, wi-fi (many of my guests would not come here if they could not connect to the internet - yet this is not a requirement even at 5-star) and space. They also really appreciate the friendly, 'on hand' personal service we

PARKS

Q. "The criteria changes appear to be totally biased towards the larger, 'commercial' parks and therefore are not suitable for ours. To bring ours up to the new requirements to continue to meet Grade 5, the costs would be inappropriate to the size of this park."

Q. "While we still fit most of the new criteria as a 5-star park, our hire fleet appears to be at 4-star quality. Am I correct in thinking that as long as we fulfil the 5-star criteria in all

provide, but this is not taken into account for self-catering?"

A. The Working Group is planning a few days of benchmarking in late November to review consistency of scoring across all the assessing bodies, with a focus on cleanliness. They will also consider expanding the 'Management Efficiency' section to include the extra services that many operators now provide and the level of back-up in place in case of problems, with a view to making this a key area. Wi-fi is likely to be strongly recommended at 5-star.

Q. "Only about four years ago, we had to throw out all our nearly-new fridges with ice boxes to purchase new fridges with 3-star freezer compartments to comply with your then updated requirements. Are you now suggesting that these will not be good enough and we will need to purchase separate freezers or a fridge/freezer?"

A. The Working Group is recommending that, at 4-star, access to a freezer is required, but it does not need to be in the unit.

other aspects of your grading system, then we would still be graded 5-star overall?"

A. The VisitEngland Park Assessors will be meeting in October to review feedback from operators. Some of the wording in the current Standard needs amending and there will be a full discussion about the assessment of the hire fleet. Any changes that VisitEngland proposes will be put to the national overseeing group in November.

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