

## Come rain or shine

From rainy days to unexpected heatwaves, we all know how changeable the English climate can be. As accommodation providers and attraction owners, it's always good to be prepared for all eventualities and make the most of every type of weather, says *Sophie Mackenzie*

Although you can't control the weather, you can make sure you have facilities in place to ensure that a wet, windy or snow-bound holiday isn't a wash-out for your guests. Some places, such as the Headland Hotel in Cornwall, go even further and turn bad weather into a bonus by offering storm-watching packages.

However, if your business is more geared towards sunshine than storms, don't despair. VisitEngland research suggests that holidaymakers are pretty resilient when it comes to changeable weather. Out of those surveyed about staycations in 2010, 85% of people who experienced mixed weather on holiday would still describe their experience as 'excellent' or 'very good' – only 5% less than those who had good weather – revealing that most people have a pragmatic approach to the English climate. Indeed, one family in a 2012 survey remarked that there's "no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing", suggesting the quality of the experience – and, therefore, what businesses can offer – is more important to guests than the surrounding skies.

Despite these positive results, you would probably still expect campsites to be negatively affected by bad weather, but Marie Smith of Alde Garden, an accredited campsite in Suffolk located in an acre of wildlife garden, takes it in her stride. "That's camping in the UK!" she says. "We've got two yurts, a tepee, a bell tent and a gypsy caravan as well as the campsite, and they

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all have wood burners for use in cooler weather. We also have a covered shelter with kitchen facilities, lit by solar lanterns, where people can sit if it's too wet, although they prefer being outside around the campfire in all but the worst weather."

Because Alde Garden is a green campsite with a low-impact policy, guests are encouraged to leave their cars at home and come by public transport. This means that jumping in their car and heading for the nearest shopping centre isn't an option on rainy days, but Marie has planned for that, too.

"We have an arrangement with a local taxi firm, which offers a special rate to our guests, and there is an on-demand local bus service, which costs the same as a normal bus. There's plenty to do in the area, and we have welcome files with hundreds of >



> indoor and outdoor activities. Our local spa is very popular in wet weather – guests can spend the entire day relaxing there.”

### Child's play

As any parent knows, one of the biggest challenges on holiday when the weather is at its worst is keeping the kids happy – entertained children usually means happy and relaxed parents.

Angela Bunting, owner of Spindle Cottage, a four-star self-catering holiday home in Somerset, has it covered: there are three handcrafted playhouses in the grounds, which keep children captivated for hours.

“My husband is an amazing carpenter and joiner,” she explains. “He built the first little house, Ruth’s Cottage, for our first grandchild 12 years ago. It’s based on an old gothic window and built from beautiful local stone, with electric lights and a tiny spiral staircase. When the second and third grandchildren came along, we built Tom’s Lodge and Charlotte’s Post Office, which is a Victorian-style shop with a counter, post-box, till and even pretend fruit and veg.

“They really inspire children to play. They leave their computers and the television, and even on fine days they want to stay in the playhouses. We had one little boy who hid upstairs in the lodge when his parents wanted to take him to the beach! The parents get enticed in too, having tea, doing their shopping in the Post Office and so on.”

### Embrace the elements

Located in the heart of Hadrian’s Wall country, within yards of the Pennine Way, four-star Kellah Farm is a natural choice for keen walkers. The property has B&B accommodation as well as two self-catering cottages and welcomes visitors all year round. Many guests plan their holidays in the hope of seeing snowy weather and owner Lesley Teasdale offers plenty of home comforts for those who don’t like to venture out.

“We have a big lounge with a log fire and a selection of DVDs,” she says. “There’s also a games room with a pool table, where

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teenagers can sit and chat and play music. There are games for younger children too, and family board games. Locally, there are lots of visitor attractions and soft play centres for the children. If people want to explore further afield, we offer lifts to the station in our Land Rover.”

But for the majority of Lesley’s guests, bad weather is no deterrent from heading out into the countryside for a day’s walking. Even though they don’t mind getting soaked to the skin when they’re out there, it’s important to consider what facilities they need at the end of the day. “We have a heated boot room where people can dry their outdoor clothing overnight,” says Lesley. “People aren’t bothered how wet they get as long as they can put dry things on in the morning.”

Owner of four-star Coleridge Way Cottages in Exmoor, Devon, Emma Jobin agrees that the weather has little bearing on how much her guests enjoy their stay. “We have a lot of walkers come to stay,” she says. “They get up first thing, come rain or shine, and you don’t see them for the rest of the day. We also have lots of people who come for weekend breaks away from the city. They don’t venture out half as much, but they just love getting some peace and quiet and cosying up in front of the fire. Bad weather doesn’t really affect either group, which is obviously good for business.”

Since Exmoor was designated a Dark Sky Reserve, Emma says she has seen an increase in business, with plenty of people

bringing along their telescopes to watch the night sky. Emma highlights the fact that her business is located within a Dark Sky Reserve on her website in order to encourage more star-gazers to book.

### Back to the beach

For outdoor attractions, wet weather generally means lost income. But there are ways to salvage the situation with clever policies. Take Blackpool Pleasure Beach, which allows visitors to return the next day, free of charge, if it rains for more than three consecutive hours during their visit. The terms and conditions specify that wristbands must not be removed, to prevent them being passed on to other people and used again.

Similarly, Thorpe Park offers a 50% discount on return visits if it rains for more than an hour during a customer’s day out at the park. Other attractions offer discounted on-the-day bookings when the weather is wet, and accommodation providers often reduce rates if they have vacancies and the weather forecast looks gloomy.

Sometimes, however, it can be just as valuable to make sure your customers know about good weather as it is to compensate for bad. That’s certainly the strategy adopted by the Miller family who own and manage Adventure Island, the family fun park located on either side of Southend-on-Sea’s famous pier.

As the park’s Communications Manager Mike Pressling explains: “Essex is actually one of the driest parts of Great Britain, and we’re located in a particularly dry part of Essex. But that fact somehow never seems to get mentioned on the weather forecasts, so Phillip Miller bought his own weather recording equipment so he could keep track of how much sunshine we get. Then he bought the local radio station so he could tell people about it!”

Although buying the local radio station isn’t a viable option for most businesses, all accommodation providers can benefit from weatherproofing their business so it is a great place to stay come rain or shine. ■

Illustration: Daniel Frost/CN

## Be prepared for all weathers

Weatherproofing your business doesn’t have to cost a fortune – here are a few things to consider:

- Alongside games consoles and tablet computers, look at investing in board games – families who wouldn’t dream of playing them at home will love them on holiday.
- Offer drying facilities for outdoor clothing and shoes.
- For children, a little creativity goes a long way. Time invested in devising treasure hunts or just stockpiling craft supplies or old clothes for dressing up will be rewarded on rainy days.
- Negotiate discounts with local indoor attractions and taxi firms, so your guests can get out and about whatever the weather.
- Approach local beauty salons or alternative health centres to offer your guests in-room treatments.
- If you have an empty attic, cellar or barn, look into converting it into a games room – you might be pleasantly surprised by how affordable it is.
- Provide a library of books, music and DVDs to help ensure guests leave for home rested and recharged.
- Don’t be tempted to market your property on the basis of sunny weather and risk disappointing guests, even if you’re in one of the drier parts of the country.
- Don’t forget that unpredictable weather can also mean heatwaves! Offer fans, ice, coolboxes for days out and details of local outdoor swimming pools.
- Have a robust cancellation policy, so you won’t be left out of pocket if guests change their mind at the last minute on the basis of a gloomy weather forecast. Many businesses have a ‘no refunds’ policy if a guest cancels within 48 hours of their stay, although this must be made clear to the guest at the time of booking.

