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Every dog has its holiday

Welcoming dogs to your property can really boost your business and taking a few practical steps will ensure there are wagging tails all round, says *Jill Hopper*

agency's website. "A very large proportion of guests want to bring their pet on holiday with them, and 357 of our 927 members promote themselves as dog friendly," he says. Lesley Lawrence, Marketing Director at Shorefield Holidays, says the company sold 14,000 'dog nights' in the first nine months of 2013, across five of its six holiday park sites in Dorset and Hampshire. So popular have these breaks become that dogs are now permitted in some of its top-of-the-range lodges with hot tubs, rather than being restricted purely to the more basic accommodation. "It is extremely popular and 50% of our guests return year after year," she says.

With a canine population of eight million and rising, it's no surprise that the UK has a burgeoning market in dog-friendly holiday accommodation. From B&Bs and campsites to luxury hotels, more and more establishments seem keen to embrace four-legged guests. Many holiday accommodation websites such as homeaway.co.uk, cottages4you.co.uk and nationaltrustcottages.co.uk now have a 'pet friendly' search filter, and there is also a plethora of specialist sites including dogsinvited.co.uk and dogfriendly.co.uk.



Alistair Handyside, Chairman of the self-catering agency Premier Cottages, says 'dog-friendly holidays' is one of the top three search terms all year round on the

While there is a legal obligation to welcome trained assistance dogs (see *Take the lead* insert), you may want to pause before you put out the 'Pets welcome' sign. Although assistance dogs are highly unlikely to intrude or cause damage, pet dogs do not come with the same guarantees. Having pets on the premises can bring certain pitfalls, such as accidental damage, wear and tear and more arduous cleaning routines. Nor is it necessarily a sure-fire way of growing your business; while attracting some visitors, it may deter others, particularly families with young children, allergy sufferers and those who are simply more fastidious. The RSPCA advises that if you're thinking about accommodating

> pet dogs you shouldn't take the decision lightly – consider carefully what you are committing to and do some research on what will be expected of you.

So what do dog owners look for in their holiday accommodation? Commonly mentioned requirements are: an area of fenced outdoor space; secure doors or stair gates so the dog can be confined to the kitchen or the ground floor of self-catering accommodation; clear 'house rules'

Images: (Below left to right) A couple enjoying a holiday with their dog at one of Shorefield Holidays' parks; a couple having fun in the sun with their dog in Cumbria

Link up with your destination website



Many destination organisations encourage visitors to bring their dogs and display helpful information for dog owners on their websites (see examples below). If you are going to accept pet dogs, getting your business listed on your local tourism website is a great idea.

- www.visitworcestershire.org/accommodation/Pets-Welcome.aspx
- www.visit-hampshire.co.uk/plan-your-visit/dog-friendly-hampshire
- www.visit-dorset.com/plan-your-visit/dog-friendly-dorset

Following a visitor survey it conducted in 2012, in which it found that one in three parties that come to Cornwall in winter, and one in six that come in summer, bring a dog, VisitCornwall has set about making the county even more attractive to dog owners. In fact, it has just produced a guide called 'Dog friendly Cornwall' containing information for dog owners about the best places to stay and visit in the county. For more information, visit www.visitcornwall.com/dogslovecornwall.

and policies on cleaning; and facilities for washing and drying off after muddy walks.

A winning formula

Someone who seems to have the right formula is Margaret Snaith, who owns the three-star Gold hotel Titchwell Manor in Norfolk with husband Ian. When they started their business in 1988 they set out to provide a haven for dog owners, equipping seven ground-floor rooms with tiled floors for easy cleaning. Canine visitors, who are charged at £10 per night, receive complimentary biscuits, a comfy basket, towels and even a wrapped gift at Christmas time, while their owners get a map of local walks and a welcome letter outlining doggy etiquette (including 'No pooping in the chef's herb garden!'). Pets are welcome at breakfast and dinner at pre-bookable tables in the bar area. "One owner said to me, 'My dog loves coming to the hotel, and is so excited when we get here!'," says Margaret.

At the five-star Broadoaks Country House in Troutbeck, Cumbria, there is a £25 per night 'doggy dinner, bed and breakfast' deal, with a menu including slices of grilled chicken breast, cubes of roasted beef, homemade gravy and chew sticks. Most places won't want to go to such lengths, but thoughtful touches are always appreciated. For example, in your welcome folder you could include information such as maps of local walks, lists of dog-friendly restaurants

and pubs, and vets' contact details. Shorefield provides a helpful list of local beaches with the dates when they are open to dogs.

Of course, it's not a one-way transaction: if guests expect a relaxed stay, they have a responsibility to keep their dogs under control and ensure they do not cause nuisance to others. It is usual for properties to make a charge for pet dogs, and impose limits on the size and number per room or per cottage. Most will lay down basic ground rules such as not allowing dogs on the beds or furniture and not permitting them to be left unattended. But the law makes it clear that assistance dogs are not pets and no charges can be made for these dogs.

Alistair, who is the owner of three dogs himself and proprietor with wife Lorna of three five-star self-catering cottages at Higher Wiscombe in Southleigh, Devon, says most problems can be avoided with a bit of common sense. "Businesses should make sure it's easy for people to comply with what's expected of them," he says, "for example by providing throws for sofas, towels and brushes for washing, and bags and bins for dog waste." Their website sets out a detailed 'code of conduct' for owners, spelling out what is and isn't acceptable.

Margaret Snaith of Titchwell Manor stresses that problems are rare. "Human guests cause more damage than dogs!" she says. "Very occasionally things do happen and if we feel it's over and above normal everyday damage we'll make a charge." She cites a recent example where a guest left his

dog locked in the bathroom. The animal became distressed and caused quite a lot of damage, and the owner was given the bill for repairs, which he was happy to pay.

Keeping cleaning up to scratch

Of course, for anyone considering welcoming dogs, cleaning will be an issue. It's usual to impose a supplement to cover the costs associated with clearing up after pets, such as dehairing, carpet shampooing and disinfecting, although it is illegal to charge extra for assistance dogs.

Providing good equipment will also encourage self-catering guests to keep on top of things: at Shorefield, for example, all the units that accommodate dogs are equipped with a Dyson dog-hair vacuum cleaner.

"Very occasionally things do happen and if we feel it's over and above normal everyday damage we'll make a charge"

Dos and don'ts



Do

- Ask for details of the dog's age, breed and any special requirements when you take the booking.
- Give your guests a list of guidelines so they know what is acceptable.
- Make clear any policies you have on cleaning and damage.
- Provide suggestions for local walks and recommend pubs, restaurants and attractions nearby that welcome dogs.
- Give emergency contact details for a nearby veterinary practice and a number for the local dog warden, who can assist with finding lost dogs.
- Set up a dedicated relief area for dogs to keep them away from other guests.
- Consider signing up to VisitEngland's 'Welcome Pets!' scheme. Contact Quality in Tourism for details.

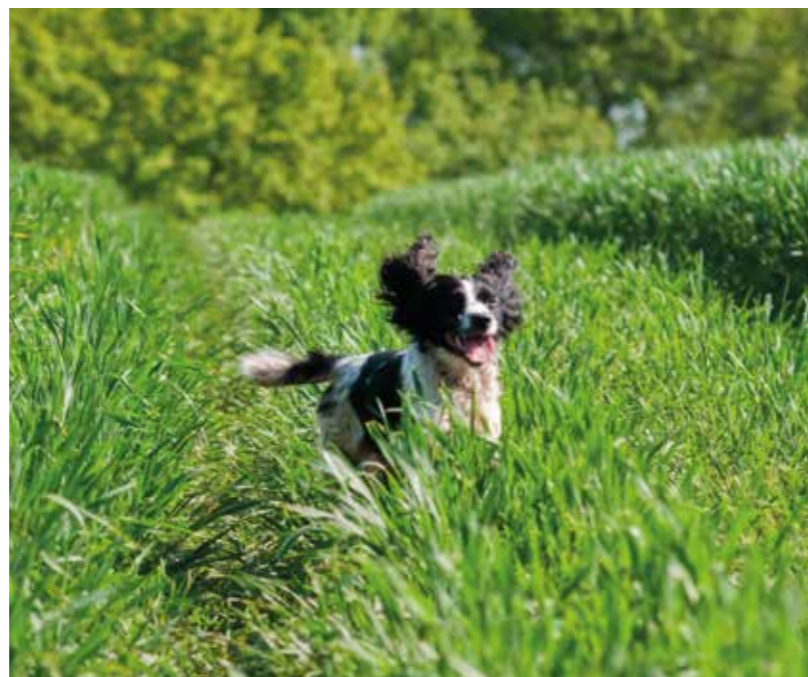
Don't

- Fill your property with lots of soft furnishings and knick-knacks that could be easily damaged or chewed.
- Require that dogs be confined to the car – the RSPCA states that this should never be done.
- Allow pets to become a nuisance to your neighbours, particularly farmers with livestock.



Things to consider providing

- Comfy bed and blanket
- Washable throws to protect sofas
- Bowls and feeding mats
- Hose/watering can, old towels and brushes for washing and drying muddy fur
- Map of local walks
- Spare leads and collars
- Holiday tags with address of accommodation
- A cage or crate
- Biodegradable poo bags and waste bin



which has involved making the pet-friendly message obvious on the website and getting the accommodation listed on various dog-friendly websites such as weacceptpets.co.uk. “There are a lot of farmhouse B&Bs around here, but they don’t tend to take dogs because they have livestock,” she says. “We are an arable farm and welcoming dogs has become our USP. We are not a tourist area, and many of our guests use us as a stopover on the way down from Scotland to Cornwall, or when visiting family locally. They really appreciate the chance to bring their pets.”

Of course, the best PR you’ll get will come from the wagging tails of the dogs themselves. “Offer a really good service so you develop a good reputation among dog owners, because many will go by recommendation from other owners rather than just doing an online search,” says the RSPCA.

Margaret Snaith finds that showing personal attention, such as greeting the dog by name when it arrives, is a great way to win favour with guests. She says: “A happy dog is a happy guest!” ■

Take the lead

VisitEngland has partnered with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to produce a guide to welcoming assistance dogs. *Take the lead* helps tourism operators understand why assistance dogs should be welcomed and details the applicable legal obligations. Look out for your free copy in this edition of *Quality Edge*.

> Pippa McLuskie, of the four-star Blue Bay guesthouse and three-star self-catering lodge in Newquay, has invested in an industrial bacterial carpet cleaner which is used to shampoo bedroom carpets after every doggy stay; pillows and duvets are washed each time too. “Mawgan Porth is one of only six year-round dog-friendly beaches in Cornwall, so dog owners are a big part of our market,” Pippa explains. “But we don’t want guests to be able to tell if there has been a dog in the room before them. In fact your room is probably cleaner than in a no-dog establishment, as rooms undergo an extra thorough clean after a dog has stayed.”

Show off your canine credentials

Since many properties still do not allow pet dogs, if you decide to accommodate them you may find it’s a good selling point. You’ll probably want to create a dedicated page on your website, flagged up clearly

“We are an arable farm and welcoming dogs has become our USP”

on the home page and listing what you offer. It’s good to include pictures of happy hounds enjoying your facilities and comments from satisfied customers. You may also want to seek a ‘Welcome Pets!’ accreditation from Quality in Tourism, the official assessment service for VisitEngland. You will undergo an assessment against a set of criteria, after which you will be entitled to use the ‘Welcome Pets!’ logo in your marketing material, on payment of a fee.

Gill Stubbs, proprietor of two-star farmhouse Astle Farm East in Cheshire, has welcomed dogs since she opened the business in 2000. In the past few years, Gill has stepped up marketing activity,

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