

# The Hospitality Mindset

from Cornwall's award-winning  
self-caterer, Diane Knight



2020/21 Cornwall Tourism Awards gold winner  
for Self-Catering Accommodation of the Year

**Compiled by ACT Studios**



# About

Cornwall is one of the densest areas in the whole of the UK for holiday rental properties. To win this award is no easy feat. Cornwall Tourism even used mystery shoppers as part of the judging criteria.

Sara's Cottage is a 3 bedroom self-catering cottage set in the heart of Cornwall. Beautifully described as "in the middle of nowhere yet close to everywhere". Sara's Cottage is run by husband and wife Terry and Diane Knight.

Terry and Diane bought the farm on which the cottage is situated in 2001. They later transformed an old barn into a holiday rental property in 2009. They live close to the cottage.

In the 11 years that Sara's Cottage has been in business, guest satisfaction has always been at the centre of everything. Sara's Cottage provides the very finest self-catering experience for their many guests. To achieve that requires an incredible amount of commitment and dedication from Diane and Terry.

The hard work and effort put in by Diane and Terry was recently recognised at the Cornwall Tourism Awards, when they achieved the gold award in not one, but two categories!

Sara's Cottage secured gold in both the 'Self-catering Accommodation of the Year' and in the 'Accessible and Inclusive Tourism' categories.

Sara's Cottage was also awarded the Visit England Rose Award in 2019. It's a highly-prestigious award that recognises service excellence in the tourism industry.

*Guests know from the moment they arrive at Sara's Cottage that everything is perfect for them and there are no unwelcome surprises. They can simply relax as soon as their journey is over.*



# Tip 1 - Go above and beyond

The Knights pay a tremendous amount of attention to detail to their property. Diane explained that holiday rental owners should not be afraid to go above and beyond when it comes to guest satisfaction.

When we chatted to Diane, she regaled many stories of collecting groceries or takeaways for guests who were arriving late. Diane and Terry go out of their way to make guests feel welcome in their home from home.



# Tip 2 - Highest standards



Diane's philosophy on cleaning is to pay her cleaners well and not rush them.

Diane's experience is that small details matter.

To give you an idea of the standard one can expect from a stay at Sara's Cottage, all the cutlery is individually cleaned after every visit *even if it is already clean.*

And this was pre-COVID!

# Tip 3 - Genuinely care

Investing in and running a self-catering property often begins as a second income stream for owners. Nonetheless, you need to commit time and effort to make your business prosper from the word go, regardless of your other obligations.

Diane and Terry opened the doors to Sara's Cottage in 2009 as a holiday rental property, when they were both working full-time. But it has been *the key focus* of their attention throughout those 11 years, and a true labour of love.



# Tip 4 - Welcome feedback

The most valuable advice you can receive is from the very people that keep your business going - your guests.

It's important to listen to what guests love and take heed. If you want to go a step further you can pro-actively speak to previous guests about what they'd like to see in the future.

Diane told us about her decision-making process when considering investing in a hot tub for the property. Her guests indicated that they were ambivalent about a hot tub but were very keen that they continue to provide a spotlessly clean, high quality cottage.



# Tip 5 - Think outside the box

Sara's Cottage is located in Cornwall, one of the most competitive self-catering markets in the UK. So standing out from the crowd is incredibly important.

For example, Diane puts the heating on well in advance of the guests arriving. Better still, she lights the fire to ensure they get the warmest welcome. This takes customer satisfaction to the next level!



*"Seeing guests arrive in  
a heap and leave  
looking stress-free  
and relaxed is the best  
thing about being a  
holiday rental owner"*

**DIANE KNIGHT**

Sara's Cottage owner

# Questions and answers

with Diane Knight from Sara's Cottage

## What advice would you give to someone new to the holiday rental industry?

- "Buy the best furniture and equipment you can afford. Guests love the luxury of using high quality items (such as Denby crockery and Dartington glassware).
- Place fresh flowers in the property. This is a lifting and refreshing welcome to guests who may have had a long journey. It makes them feel like you care.
- Ensure your property is spotlessly clean. Invest in good cleaners.
- Pay your cleaners well and allow them time to do a stellar job. They will be happier and you will get a better service - it's win win!
- Place a pint of milk in the fridge, an initial supply of tea bags and a tea tray out on the table. I also put a small display of flowers on the tray.
- Make sure any provisions you supply e.g. hand wash, shower gel, washing up liquid, salt, pepper and vinegar are all full and clean and not left with the dregs from the last guests. We have two supplies of everything and we swap them over each changeover. I then clean and fill them before the next changeover.
- Finally, make sure there is a full (unused from the last guest) roll of toilet paper and a spare - sounds obvious to me but not to everyone. Guests love the attention to detail and will rebook."

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with Diane Knight from Sara's Cottage

## **What is one thing owners should always work hard on?**

"Make the guest feel welcome from day one. Day one is not arrival, it is when they book. Stay in touch with them and be as helpful as possible. Two weeks prior to their holiday I write to guests with information about the cottage and places of interest in the area. On receipt of a booking I telephone the guest to thank them for choosing Sara's Cottage and to ask if I can be of any further assistance at that stage."

## **What is the most important lesson you've learned?**

"If we see guests out and about, we will always make the effort to stop and chat to them. We've learned to read the guest though as some guests want to chat with other people and some don't. The key is to be friendly, but not overbearing.

Simply waving from your front door can be enough. It shows the guests that you care."

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with Diane Knight from Sara's Cottage

## **What are the downsides to being a holiday rental owner?**

"There aren't many but we do struggle to fit in our own holidays. We make sure that we are here to greet our guests on arrival at Sara's Cottage and again when they depart, leaving us with a small window of opportunity for getting away."

## **What's the best feedback you've ever received?**

"We love hearing from our guests. One family told us that we 'took away all the angst that comes with booking self-catering properties'. They were so happy with our facilities, cleanliness and service - they knew they could get in their car at any point for a stress-free holiday ... they went on to book five weeks in one year!!"

## Which organisations have helped you succeed?

"We are members of PASC (Professional Association of Self Caterers) and Premier Cottages. We use SuperControl for our bookings and ACT Studios for our imaging."

## What value have you taken from these organisations over the years?

"The hard work and dedication of these organisations has helped tremendously in enabling us to get through the past year of restrictions.

The best decision we ever made was going with Premier Cottages – they provide us with so much support as well as bookings.

Alistair at PASC is so committed to what he does. We have no idea how he has the time to do all that he does.

We love the photography that we commissioned from ACT Studios and believe that it has helped us achieve extra bookings."



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- Help you make the most of your property management system (PMS) so you can streamline the day-to-day running of your business.
- Carefully collaborate with the best photographers to capture images that stop people in their search.
- Design and deliver a secure, mobile-friendly website and guestbook. We write the content and include clear and easy calls to action, making it simple for guests to click 'book now'.
- Promote your new website on social media and provide marketing support on launch.

Bringing everything together beautifully, to make your guests' journey as easy as possible so they want to return again and again. You can relax and let us re-launch your business.

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CLIENTS HAVE TO  
SAY...

"From the very start they listened to my ideas and the team at ACT Studios went on to create a website which far exceeded my hopes and expectations. Every member of the team has such an in-depth knowledge of their subject matter and they were always on hand to provide guidance and advice in the most patient and kind manner, which made for a very enjoyable experience."

I LONKA, OWNER OF SEXTONS PLACE