



Cottage in the Dales: many small luxury touches contribute to the premium feel

The laws of Luxury

Plenty of providers describe their accommodation as luxurious, but is it really? **Emma Field** asks what premium is, and how achieving it could benefit your business

Ask any two people what luxury is and you'll probably get two very different answers. To start somewhere, let's paraphrase AA Gill, a renowned restaurant critic, who put it very well at the Independent Hotel Show 2014: 'Luxury is better than I have at home.'

But what's luxurious for AA Gill is likely to be very different to what it is for you and me. And this flexibility in the term means that accommodation doesn't need to have five stars for its guests to consider it a cut above. There are many ways to add special touches to every kind of accommodation, and doing so can help differentiate your business and bring real rewards. These might include glowing online reviews, word-of-mouth recommendations, returning customers and above-average occupancy rates.

So what factors are considered typical of a superior experience nowadays?

Be complimentary

For many, complimentary elements are essential. They are physical reminders of value for money, and are frequently a key talking point on review sites. Ian Laffin, a VisitEngland moderator, says, 'To the

wealthy and those that can easily afford a certain type of hotel, complimentary might not be as important as other factors. However, for those who have saved up to go somewhere special, these items will be a lasting memory. Take somewhere such as Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons – one could not fail to be impressed by the abundance of luxury branded toiletries, but the hand-tied lavender or rosemary sprigs picked from the garden are a really special touch and will have a lasting impact.'

The bed, the breakfast

Sleep is the basic business of accommodation providers and it's critical to get it right. As Diane Howarth, owner of the five-star Gold self-catering Cottage in the Dales, in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, points out, 'When you go away, if you don't get a decent night's sleep you won't enjoy yourself.' Among the most important luxuries at Cottage in the Dales are the 4,300-spring mattresses. Investing in super king-size beds, quality mattresses and linen, and black-out blinds will make a noticeable difference. On top of that, for B&Bs and hotels, reliable wake-up calls as

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Photos: Cottage in the Dales

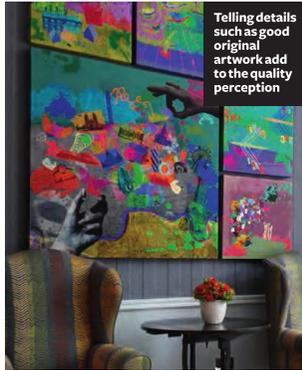
A comfy night's sleep, thanks to super-king-size beds at Cottage in the Dales



The opulent drawing room at The Covent Garden Hotel in London



Telling details such as good original artwork add to the quality perception



Why not offer a small gift to departing guests



» well as late breakfast and check-out options help create a soothing, indulgent environment with the guests' quality of shut-eye clearly a priority.

Breakfast also leaves a lasting impression. Barbara Sleep is the recently retired national chairman of Farmstay UK and owner of Copper Meadow, a four-star Gold B&B near Launceston, Cornwall. She says, 'My breakfasts include top-quality local produce and they're always nicely presented.' And they've gone down well, too, winning VisitEngland Breakfast and Taste of The West Gold awards.

It's all about the detail

Small, thoughtful touches can also make a big difference at the time of the stay and create a lasting memory, helping breed those effective word-of-mouth recommendations. A case in point:

VisitEngland moderator Brian Roberts recently stayed at a hotel that made a real impression. He says, 'On the second morning, housekeeping had put a bookmark in my book! I thought this eye to detail was impressive, particularly in a large property. Similarly, they provided rose tea in the foyer while I was waiting to check in; again I was impressed, and have told this story several times – gestures like this have an impact out of proportion to the cost and effort.'

And how does less than a pound a throw sound for cost-effective luxury? The Somerville, a five-star Gold guest accommodation in Torquay, gives departing gifts of chocolate dachshunds modelled on their two dogs, Oscar and Hector, capturing the business's personality. The gifts are made by local Devon producer The Chocolate Orchard for just 60p, but the

returns are priceless: delighted guests and warm recommendations.

In this spirit of small touches, Diane from Cottage in the Dales suggests applying The Theory of Marginal Gains recommended by Sir Dave Brailsford, the British cycling performance director. He believes you can achieve optimal performance by finding, to quote Sir Dave, 'The one per cent margin for improvement in everything you do.' This might involve small changes such as better photos on your website, bigger towels,

ADDING SPECIAL TOUCHES

Could several of the following bring your business up to a luxury standard?

- **Pocket-sprung or memory-foam beds.**
- Fresh bed linen with a sky-high thread count and goose down pillows.
- **Pillow menus.**
- In-room coffee machines.
- **Plenty of breakfast options to choose from.**
- Good-quality breakfasts using ingredients sourced from local suppliers.
- **Original artworks adorning the walls.**
- Powerful showers.
- **Controllable heating.**
- Large fluffy towels.
- **Luxury candles or**



- **bath products.**
- Well-designed and well-made fixtures and fittings.
- **Anti-allergy bedlinen.**

well-researched local recommendations, or a thorough and effective feedback form in a stamped, self-addressed envelope. For Diane, that extra one per cent adds up to a real improvement. 'It's the sum of it all rather than one thing,' she says. And it's a formula that works: Cottage in the Dales was fully booked in 2015.

Changing expectations

But it's important to remember that the goalposts are constantly moving. What was impressive 10 years ago may now be run of the mill. As Brian Roberts says, 'Luxury should be the highest standard of comfort and service available now. A property built or refurbished in 2001 to what was then high spec is now 15 years old; unless it has been updated, it is unlikely to be considered exceptional today.'

Wi-Fi is a prime example. This once-essential service is now considered an essential. In fact, not providing free Wi-Fi is tantamount to inviting the customer to go elsewhere in future. On a similar note, large flatscreen TVs and high-quality en-suites are all common nowadays, as are king-size beds.

Marketing the 'L' word

Crucially, experts agree that if accommodation is to really delight, it should exceed what is promised. And that means it is important to manage guest expectations and not over-sell. In fact, because describing something as 'luxury' can lead to close examination by 'enthusiastic' critics, it may

be advisable to steer clear of it in marketing materials altogether. On a similar point, the phrase 'boutique', an accommodation favourite, also raises concerns. It's a weighty word but vastly over-used, meaning anything from small and stylish to modern or unique. Use the term with care.

Of course, it's perfectly permissible for someone else to call you luxury or extra special. And that's where awards can be a great way to market your offer. Often, they require an investment in time but little money. It's an approach that has worked for The Somerville, according to co-owner Adam Millward. 'After getting our five-star grading, we realised it was essential to consolidate our luxury positioning and we actively sought out awards to enter. We were fortunate enough to win regional awards and were able to make use of these in our marketing. By pursuing a luxury market, we have managed to get occupancy levels of 80% or more, set against a local average which can be as low as 20%.'

Finally, don't forget the basics. Says Ian Laffin, 'Sometimes, it's the simple things that affect the perception of quality: the loo flushing properly; near-instant hot water; or appropriately positioned, well-lit shaving mirrors. And attention to detail matters. Speaking from personal experience, if a couple books using different surnames, staff should get those names right!'

A truly luxurious experience includes great hospitality, too. Turn to page 32 for our feature about customer service.



To maintain a luxurious atmosphere, you'll need to regularly update rooms

'The details really count'



General manager **Helle Jensen** has worked at the five-star Gold Covent Garden Hotel in London for 25 years

THE HOTEL opened in 1996 and has 58 bedrooms and suites, a restaurant and bar, drawing room, library, two events rooms and a screening room. Helle says, 'For me, luxury is all about experiencing something that is handcrafted, personal and designed for the individual – not only in terms of surroundings and interiors but also service. We have fabulous interior design by the hotel's owner Kit Kemp, who also designed our bespoke range of bath and body products, Rik Rak. Our bathrooms are solid granite and mahogany with all the usual luxuries, but it's the details like the steam showers, freestanding baths and anti-misting mirrors that really count. Also, having everything exactly where you'd expect it to be is important: for example, a comfortable stool at the end of the bed for putting on shoes.'

Photos: simonbrownphotography.com; Helene Sanberg; Somerville