

Attract off-season guests to your vacation home

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(Special)—It's that time again. Time to build crackling fires in the hearth, bundle up in your warmest sweaters, sip hot cocoa while you watch the snow – and start fretting over that unrented vacation home.

That's right. T.S. Eliot may think that April is the cruelest month, but for many vacation property owners, any month between now and the end of May would qualify. That cabin or condo that renters clamour over all summer tends to sit depressingly (and expensively) empty all winter. If only there were something you could do to make your off-season not quite so, well, off.

There are actually many things you can do, says Christine Karpinski, author of *How to Rent Vacation Properties by Owner, 2nd Edition: The Complete Guide to Buy, Manage, Furnish, Rent, Maintain and Advertise Your Vacation Rental Investment* (Kinney Pollack Press, 2007, ISBN: 0-9748249-9-2, \$26.00).

She says it's often the little touches that draw "winter renters," delight them, and keep them coming back for more.

"Obviously, more people vacation during peak season," says Karpinski. "That's why it's peak season! But there are still plenty of people who prefer to travel during the cooler months. Maybe they want to avoid the crowds, maybe they want to take advantage of the lower rates, or maybe they just want a break in the February doldrums.

"Your mission is to make your vacation home stand out from the many others that are available to potential renters. It's that simple. You have to go the proverbial extra mile."

Here are some of Karpinski's tips for making your vacation property appealing to winter renters:

- First and foremost, "winterize" your marketing. Play up features like hot tubs and fireplaces. When you advertise your home, sprinkle copy with words like warm, cozy, cocoon, snuggle, and cuddle. Add a few "off-season" photos of your property to your website. Photos of the home framed in brilliant autumn leaves or dusted with snow will speak louder than a thousand poetic words.
- Consider off-season specials. Everyone loves a bargain, and in the winter, they expect one. "My favorite off-season booking magnet is 'rent three nights and get one free,'" says Karpinski.
- Add "warm cozy" touches. Put thick, warm comforters on the bed and fleece throws on the sofa. Place a few spice-scented candles on tables or countertops. Leave savoury winter treats in the kitchen: cocoa mix and marshmallows, spiced apple cider, ginger cookies, chilli fixings, and a crock pot.
- Plan for snow! If guests should happen to get snowed in at your home, you want to make the experience as pleasant as possible. Make sure to have a snow shovel, ice melt, and a windshield ice scraper on the premises.
- Consider adding a hot tub, sauna, or ventless gas fireplace. If your vacation property is a "summer home" with no winter appeal, such additions can make a world of difference. You may be thinking that these are pricey upgrades, but you'll be amazed at how fast they pay for themselves via increased off-season bookings.
- Make your home baby- and toddler-friendly. You've probably noticed that people with very young children are more likely to travel off-season. (After all, they're not constrained by school schedules.) Appeal to these people by including baby and toddler paraphernalia. A high chair and a porta crib should cost less than \$150 combined, and can drastically increase your off-season bookings.
- Accept pets. Vacation properties that accept pets increase their occupancy by 10 to 50 percent. When you accept pets, it's okay to take an additional \$20 to \$25/night or \$140 to \$175/week. This extra (which pet owners would have to spend anyway on boarding fees) is enough to pay for any carpet cleaning that needs to be done.
- If all else fails, offer a "customized" special to repeat guests.

Karpinski also offers a word of caution: exercise moderation.

"It's great to spend some money on things to attract winter renters," she says. "Just don't go overboard. I knew a guy who would do tons of extra advertising and equip his place with all these bonuses for his off-season renters. Yes, he ended up booking the place for all of January through March – but his bottom line for all three months was only \$500!" She advises that a little effort goes a long way.

“Do one or two things on the list, not all of them. Otherwise, do a good job with the basics and be a friendly, hospitable host. As word gets around and your guests become 'regulars,' your off-season problem will solve itself."