

# Designing and Marketing Low Season Tourism Experiences

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# 01

## Products, make way for experiences.



Because travellers are both rational and emotional beings, an experience should aim to stimulate the five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) and/or arouse positive emotions (happiness, fun, surprise, joy, contentment...). To design such experiences, you need to be clear what you want your customers to achieve when they are with you.

Products are so yesterday, and customers want to engage with your offering with all their senses.

Academics have investigated why, when, and how experiences are sought and created. Economists, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and neuroscientists have all contributed to inform the transition for international brands.

Companies such as Apple, Microsoft, Nike, and Starbucks have integrated into their management process their intention to provide a participative and customisable experience rather than a finished product to customers. We'd like to share with you some of their learning, so that you can apply it to your leisure and tourism business.

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# What is a sustainable tourism experience?

It is active, participatory, authentic, and respectful.



Sustainable experiences convey a genuine willingness of travellers to encounter authentic and memorable events. Most travellers are losing interest in destination-based, pre-packaged tourism. They want to enjoy bespoke and unique experiences they can share.

An experience is a product or a service that triggers **pleasure**, or positive **emotions** or **senses**, enables the acquisition of new manual or intellectual **skills** and/or fosters beneficial **interactions** with others.

Experiences can be sustainable when they respectfully address the **needs** of various stakeholders such as visitors, the industry and host communities while improving long-term economic outcomes, socio-cultural benefits, and environmental preservation.

Sustainable experiences convey a **genuine** willingness of travellers to encounter **authentic** and **memorable** events. Most travellers are losing interest in destination-based, pre-packaged tourism. They want to enjoy **bespoke** and unique experiences they can share. Thus, there are as many possible experiences as there are travellers and the same provider can offer multiple different experiences.

An increasing number of people seek sustainable experiences. Some prioritise

their **wellbeing** via the practice of outdoor activities or detox holidays or days out. Others look for fun during special festivals and events that celebrate the natural and cultural local resources. Others seek to live like a local and benefit from unique tips to travel off the beaten track. Others want to **learn** or improve a manual skill (cooking lesson) or an intellectual skill (meditation) that will contribute to **transforming** them for the long term.

A sustainable experience is a genuine and special event that is anchored in daily life, highly **exciting** and **participative**. It is an experience that **respects** host communities and their cultural and natural heritage. A sustainable experience targets, first and foremost, people's wellbeing and then it benefits the environment where it takes place.

Sustainable experiences do not have to be expensive, but customers may be willing to pay more if sustainable offerings fulfil their needs better than other experiences.

# Engage your customer's five senses.

## Experiences are multi-sensory.



Multi-sensory experiences are inclusive and accessible because they provide a range of opportunities to engage, which allows for individuals with disabilities, or limitations in some senses, to have their senses aroused.

A multi-sensory, integrated approach is a key component of experience design since sensory experiences influence decision-making, brand experience and destination imagery. A person's perception of an experience is determined by whether their five senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste) are aroused.

As a rule of thumb, the more stimulation there is the more chance you have to provide a successful experience that reaches more people, more deeply, with more lasting

effects. But, equally, you can stimulate senses by deliberately encouraging users to enjoy the darkness or the silence, for example.

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**Aesthetics**, colour and light are the primary contributors to experience perception, so it is crucial to control the setting where an experience occurs, particularly if it is outside. For example, poorly-maintained paths could impact negatively on a customer's perception of aesthetics.



Experiences can be enhanced by **music**, and other natural or artificial **sounds**, provided there is a link with the theme.



**Textures** improve a traveller's engagement with their surroundings so touching trees, interacting with elements, or having different textures on an educational excursion are all good ideas. New technology provides opportunities for remote experiences through 3D touch/haptics.



**Odours** and **tastes** are essential to gastronomic and tasting experiences, but they are also used increasingly in museums and attractions to enhance visitor engagement.





# We use our local and seasonal assets as motivation for a visit during the low season.

Laurence Francart is Director of the Compiègne Tourist Office (FR).



## What we do:

We know there is a strong desire from visitors to rediscover what nature has to offer in its primary form so we create a unique experience, with special discoveries from Autumn to Spring, by setting up a wild-plant themed tour with a forest expert within the Compiègne forest.

## How we do it:

Following an excursion with a sylvotherapist guide in the Compiègne forest, we decided to explore the idea of creating excursions that would highlight the unique discoveries that can be made in our local natural environment during the low season.

The forest of Compiègne, being the fourth largest forest in France, gives a real treasure of biodiversity just waiting to be discovered and interpreted in a playful way. The range of experiences that we offer goes from "forest bathing with friends" to "botanical treasure



## Our Tips:

The key to the success of such an experience is its fun aspect. Few holidaymakers want to feel like they are going to school on a tour, but most are looking for memorable experiences while learning interesting, and sometimes even practical, tips.

hunting with the family" to "discovering the culinary flavours of wild plants".

With each season offering a specific set of accessible wild plants and unique surroundings in which to set different experiences, the forest offers a wealth of opportunities perfectly aligned with our desires to return to a deeper connection with, and understanding of, nature. By highlighting the particularities of a season through this type of product, we give visitors a clear motivation to visit during the low season amongst others.

We aim to make the experiences unique and personal; for example, on our "Discovering the Culinary Flavours of Wild Plants" excursion, we provide a guidebook with plant cards to help them in their research, with a few blank pages at the end to record the guidebook's "secret" recipes.

# Experiences are co-created. People are at the centre of experiences.



The quality of interactions between travellers and stakeholders at the destination directly affects the travellers' overall satisfaction levels.

Driven by a sense of meaningfulness, travellers want to engage with local people to encounter authentic experiences. Sometimes it is important that the experience itself is genuine while sometimes what matters is that the relationships between people are genuine even though the experience is staged.

- **Hospitality and tourism businesses:** front-office workers such as receptionists, guides and waiters are those who engage the most with travellers. It is crucial that they provide bespoke services and answer various needs with flexibility rather than provide the same experience to everyone.
- **Other businesses:** stakeholders (such as artisans, crafters, artists, farmers, local shops and foresters) have an important role to play through their interactions with travellers.
- **Locals:** travellers may want to experience an off-the-beaten track existence and live like a local. Airbnb experiences and the various Greeters networks are examples where such an interaction is possible.
- **Travellers:** travellers exchange information and tips before, during and after their trips. Promoting that travellers share their experiences about you on social networks, forums and on-site, is fundamental to your success.

The quality of interactions between travellers and stakeholders at the destination directly affects the travellers' overall satisfaction levels. Although destination management organisations wish to control the value chain to maximise the destination imagery and ensure tourist satisfaction, this may be harder for them to do with experiences due to the variety of stakeholders involved.



# We bring placemaking benefits, address seasonality and create a sense of pride and belonging.

Melanie Sensicle is the former CEO of VisitDurham, and one of the promoters of Lumiere Durham (UK).



and public spaces, changing the way we experience our urban surroundings.

The installations are of world class quality, and many are new commissions with artists invited for site visits prior to making the work. This means that the same installation can have both aesthetic value as well as cultural resonance. Through the commissioning programme BRILLIANT, new and emerging local and national artists are supported to develop their ideas and their installations are showcased in the main festival, alongside internationally renowned artists. A Learning and Participation programme engages with the local community who participate in the creation of several of the artworks, which adds to the sense of community ownership.



## Our Tips:

Develop low season activities with strong community involvement to ensure a deep significance for local stakeholders, who can engage more in low seasons than they would be able to in busy summer periods. In doing so, you can create a collective sense of pride and belonging for what is achieved.

## What we do:

Over 10 years, Lumiere has attracted more than one million visitors to Durham, and in 2019 generated an economic impact of over £8m. Commissioned by Durham County Council and produced by renowned arts production company Artichoke, it is also made possible thanks to the commitment of the local community to many aspects of its planning and operation.

## How we do it:

Durham County Council had the ambition to commission a cultural event that showcased the city to an international audience, that would extend the visitor season and generate a sense of belonging and pride amongst the local community. To succeed, the event also needed to create a sense of partnership in both public and private spaces. Lumiere Durham was introduced and is now the UK's leading light festival, inviting artists to create works that reimagine familiar buildings

The festival has also reached those that cannot visit in person thanks to extensive media coverage, and the documentation of all installations through film and photography made available through Lumiere and Artichoke social and digital channels, as well as Virtual Lumiere, a digital 3D model of Durham Cathedral with an interactive feature that lets users create their own artwork to share via their social network.

The impacts from the festival are captured in a comprehensive independent evaluation that includes an analysis of economic impact, including AVE of media coverage, and surveys of local businesses, residents and participants, artists and visitors; these show benefits across the region that extend beyond the month of November due to the lengthy year-round preparations. The event is biennial due to the logistics of organising such an extensive event including engaging world class artists, and to drive anticipation.





# Why low season experiences?

## Because healthy year-round business helps you and your destination thrive.



The approximate seasonality for rural tourism businesses is 10-15% of demand in January to March, 25-30% April to June, 30-50% July to September and 15-20% October to December.

A significant percentage of tourism and hospitality businesses has closed for the winter, particularly in rural areas. Others reduce their opening days (limiting to weekends only) or reduce their opening hours. The rest has remained open but reduced the activities and services they offer, and the personnel they employ, to reduce operating costs. In the future, no business will be able to survive with summer trade only, even less so as a result of COVID-19.

### Seasonality occurs for three very valid and real reasons:

- **Natural factors**  
(weather dependency, climate, location and access)
- **Demand factors**  
(holiday patterns, availability of leisure time, social norms)
- **Supply factors**  
(available activities, trading patterns)

Low season experiences cannot be exact replicas of summer experiences only sold to people who accept worse weather. Equally, you don't want simply to sell low season experiences to those customers who are only willing to buy them because you offer discounts. You need to find something unique about your low season that will help you design experiences that are particularly attractive.



# We put people at the heart of our experience.

## Cécile Davidovics is the Owner of the B&B Le Clos des Tilleuls (FR).

### What we do:

During the low season, visitors can be wary of unpredictable weather conditions. By focusing on human interaction and offering an indoor space to create experiences, we take this concern out of the equation and give our visitors a reason to stay at our accommodation rather than going elsewhere. We target families by offering a room that can accommodate a couple and three children (rather than the usual two). We have developed communal living spaces that encourage human interaction, regardless of the weather, and that promote family activities available in the low season.

### How we do it:

We have a clientele from October to May who are primarily looking for a change of environment for

a few days, to take a break from the routine (and chores!) of everyday life and to enjoy their children without constraints.

This is exactly what we have built into our offer; the chance to share good times indoors, with generous and pleasant living spaces, a large table in the living/dining room, board games, equipment for children and a play area on the mezzanine. We also offer baking workshops for young and old. Outside there is a large garden, a trampoline, direct access to the castle park with its deer, which can be fed as a family, and the forest of Compiègne for re-energising walks even in the midst of winter.



### Our Tips:

It is essential to identify your unique selling proposition, and direct your efforts toward building a relevant and complete offer for a key target market. Note also that anything to do with animals (nature park, educational farm) is an attraction that works in the low-season and a huge success with families.



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# Be proactive in managing your seasonality challenges.

## Treat seasonality as a business risk.

Spend time understanding why your product/market combination is seasonal and consider options to reduce the business risks arising from seasonality:

### Avoid

Change plans to circumvent the problem, such as identifying new markets that you can serve that either complement your current markets or that are not seasonal.

### Control / mitigate / modify / reduce

Reduce the likelihood of winter conditions to negatively impact your business. Identify ways to upgrade your offering by addressing some of the shortcomings in low season, such as weatherproofing your current services and investing in infrastructure.

### Accept

Assume that your experiences will have limited demand due to uncontrollable events; reduce prices to attract demand; reduce operating costs to reduce losses; and budget the remaining cost via a contingency budget line.

### Transfer / Share

Outsource a portion of the risk to a third party (or parties). For example, outsource an activity, such as running an event, to an expert company.

Are you tired of mostly *accepting* the risk, rather than finding ways to *avoid*, *control* or *transfer* it? Then it's time to get creative.



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# We communicate year-round dynamism to boost low season occupancy.

Alix De Lauzanne is the owner of the guest house Villa du Chatelet (FR).



## What we do:

The Villa du Chatelet is a property full of history, having been built for the internationally renowned composer Léo Delibes. Our wish today is to make this house live as fully as it did at the time of its famous patron. As a result, we have a high occupancy rate throughout the year.

## How we do it:

Firstly, we ensure that the musical and artistic heritage of the villa is kept alive by welcoming artists from all over the world to perform in the privacy of our living room, mainly between October and March, for a local audience.

Then, as much by personal passion as by conviction of the human link that can be created around gastronomy, we regularly lead cooking workshops for residents and visitors, or as special events. We offer table d'hôte for our residents to further enhance the comfortable feeling of "being a guest at a friend's home".

Lately, we have been working with companies to host seminars and create a team-building offer. These are particularly popular during the winter months of December and the start of the new year.

All of these activities are well promoted on our website, supported by quality photos of our accommodation in all seasons of the year, illustrating each season's own appeal.

It is not uncommon to hear from our guests that they have booked a room in our establishment because of our table d'hôte offer or because of the concerts, which they do not go to but which are, for them, representative of the 'hospitable spirit' of the villa and its hosts.



## Our Tips:

Invest in unique experiences to be noticed. Activities such as artistic performances, and even sometimes our table d'hôte, are not intended to be financially profitable. They are usually not profitable as a stand-alone activity, but they do contribute significantly to the quality image of our accommodation, which in turn increases our occupancy rate all year round.







# Task 1:

## What do you want to achieve?

Prioritise and develop plans to achieve your objectives.

Simply wanting to grow your business is not enough, you need to be clear about what you want to achieve. Here are five common objectives:

### Generate first time sales.

Which markets are available, or more easily identifiable, for low season and what type of incentive do you need to attract those markets?

### Increase customer loyalty and repeat sales.

What do you need to do to tempt past customers back? Do you need to remind them of a favourite experience, provide a new experience or offer a discount?

### Increase the volume of the same service purchased.

Your target may be to get customers to stay longer or to buy three souvenirs instead of two.

### Increase the number of services purchased together.

Bundling different services allows you to tailor-make experiences and to upsell. It also makes planning the experience easier for your customer. Who can you partner with to cross-sell?

### Increase the size of the group.

Your strategy may be to get loyal customers to return, but with family and friends. What incentives can you provide your loyal customers to do so?

Can you think of a sixth objective that is specific to you, that we did not include?

It is best not to say “I want them all”, because each objective requires a different set of actions. Instead, prioritise these objectives based on: 1) feasibility, and 2) importance. When you brainstorm ideas on what to do, try to relate your ideas clearly to these objectives.