

# Designing and Marketing Low Season Tourism Experiences

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# Content Page

This manual is organised in six key messages:

01



**Products, make way for experiences.**

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

p.4

02



**Different seasons, different markets.**

You will need to adapt your offer to different types of customer to balance changes in demand.

p.15

03



**There's something special about your place in the low season.**

We often take for granted what's on our doorsteps, so let's look at your resources with fresh eyes and see how you can turn them into something special.

p.25

04



**Let's design innovative experiences.**

You will need to create experiences that are great, even when it's cold, wet, and dark early. Co-create experiences with nearby partners and use events to drive demand.

p.35

05



**Time for marketing and storytelling.**

New experiences require a lot of marketing effort, but if they are truly innovative and you've communicated them well, consumers will share the messages for you.

p.50

06



**Be clear what benefits you expect.**

Visualising the results you want to achieve will help you have the determination you need to make changes.

p.60



# 02

## Different seasons, different markets.



The time you invest in learning about different markets will be directly proportional to your ability to reduce your seasonality and your understanding of how to be more inclusive of different groups that may have been inadvertently side lined.

High and low season customers are different. They seek leisure and travel experiences for different purposes; they seek different benefits, search suppliers differently and will be satisfied with different types and levels of service. So why do we often treat them the same?

The time you invest in learning about different markets will be directly proportional to your ability to reduce your seasonality and your understanding of how to be more inclusive of different groups that may have been inadvertently side lined.

Use the new knowledge you gain to adapt your offer to different types of customer and to balance changes in demand.



# We progressively diversify our product and markets.

Alexandre Tisné-Versailles is the Marketing and Development Director at the pirate-themed, historic monument of Le Château des Enigmes (FR).



## What we do:

Starting from a single product (a themed treasure hunt in a castle), we developed our offer with complementary products (unusual accommodation and an escape game) to generate activity all year round by targeting different audiences.

## How we do it:

We started with the acquisition of a castle as a backdrop to bring to life our themed treasure hunts. Despite the enormous success of this first offer, we mainly attracted families, who are subject to strong seasonality.

Now, we add complementary activities to reach a wider range of visitors throughout the year. Firstly, we decided to exploit the full potential of the 9 hectares of parkland belonging to the château by creating tree houses. The success was immediate, reaching a >90% occupancy rate all year round from the first year! In addition to the family market, the tree houses allowed us to reach young



## Our Tips:

Consider the potential of your site and its surroundings as a whole. Use these resources to consider product and market diversification from a complementary perspective: use your expertise, understand your target market and ensure that new products can complement each other, not compete.

professionals in their 30s as well as the 50-60 year old population, particularly when sold as a holiday package. The next step was to target the 18-30 year old market, as well as business clientele.

Because of our expertise in fun games, and our vast indoor and outdoor site, escape games were an obvious choice. Not only did this new activity take off immediately, but it also allowed us to generate additional business with companies, from November to February, for team-building activities.

Packaging services allowed us to move from the usual half-day visits to market 2-day/1-night stays: one activity per day plus one night. A win-win situation.

It is not necessary to start everything at the same time. Focus first on your core idea and expertise, build awareness, and then evolve as you go along, depending on financial resources and the evolution of the demand.





# Locals first.

## Your key to winter survival is to have a healthy, regular local clientele.



Selling to your local market is quite literally the opposite. If they don't know your business they certainly know your competitors and they have a keen sense of what's good value for money.

Selling to first time customers and repeat customers is very different.

First time customers rely on third party marketing and website searches, so you are likely to pay a commission to attract them. The products they buy will be stereotypical of what they perceive to be the “must do” attractions in your destination. As a result,



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they will follow a pre-specified route, staying in the most popular locations. They are more predictable, but also harder to influence, and they normally have a pre-specified time or day to leave your destination. They are more likely to visit as a group. They can be highly price sensitive but also use price as a sign of quality because they cannot judge quality in advance as they have no prior experience.

Selling to your local market is quite literally the opposite. If they don't know your business they certainly know your competitors and they have a keen sense of what's good value for money. This means they will recognise quality as they can distinguish between fake and real products. They are more likely to seek variety, but will also develop a list of favourites (cafes, restaurants, places to visit...). They are more likely to visit independently and more flexibly. For this reason, you are less likely to pay for a third party to bring them to you so, instead, you can devote your marketing budget to your social media activity and other locally-focused forms of marketing, and focus on strengthening customer relationships.

The local market is more likely to repeat, recommend and upgrade. The person that visits you in a group of friends today can return for a family reunion next month or book for a team building retreat next year. Therefore, you need to show your local markets how you have multiple offerings, to show that they can do something different when they come back.

Your reputation depends on what your local community thinks of you. How you welcome the local community to your premises says a lot about your business and how you want to be remembered.



# We change our market priorities in the low season from tourists to locals.

Françoise Le Moine is the Director of the Beauport Abbey (FR).



## What we do:

During the low season, we move from a “tourist” event calendar to a cultural programme for our local communities, as well as making our premises available for community workshops.

## How we do it:

We increasingly became aware that tourists had appropriated the heritage that ultimately belongs to the locals, who end up detaching themselves from it rather than being its primary beneficiaries. We have therefore recalibrated our approach and budget management to optimise our summer income and reinvest in the low season.

Instead of spending most of our budget on grand communication campaigns nationwide and a host of



## Our Tips:

To make this in-depth change of approach, it is essential to convince local authorities to reorient political discourse and funding logics away from the promotion of the territory’s assets in high season towards an awareness of the value and public utility of a heritage assimilated and carried by its residents and, thus, achieve a better balance and an optimised return on their investment for all, and all year round.

big name acts to attract visitors over the summer season, when in reality we are already suffering from over-tourism at that time of the year, we work on our low season offering by creating an inspiring cultural programme.

During winter, we reorganise the space that is usually set up for large concerts, to instead have smaller workshop areas. This allows us to host and run reflective workshops on attachment to the living environment through the preservation and enhancement of its cultural and natural heritage. We support projects for the transmission of traditional, local know-how, such as the rehabilitation of a wicker grove from the planting of willows to the pruning of wicker and the art of basketry.





# Encourage repeat visits.

## Low season is the time for loyalty.



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Provide discount vouchers for next purchases that are time-limited, for example, in your café or the car park, so that customers are encouraged to make more regular repeat visits.

### Think ahead

Businesses tend to get fewer first-time visitors in winter and, instead, rely on repeat markets. Hence, look for ways to encourage customers to return. In particular, incentivise loyalty of your most valued customers. Here are a few ideas.

**Tell customers what to look forward to.** On their way out of your venue, tell customers what's on next week (or next month).

**Create an annual pass.** Many visitor attractions nowadays have annual membership or their one-day ticket is valid for multiple entries. You can further learn from the techniques used in leisure centres to manage demand: create an autumn to spring membership, a midweek membership, or a 9 to 3pm membership.

**Create a sense of belonging.** Create a club of regular users; give them status and reward their loyalty with new offers, such as being able to experience things before others do (from seeing an exhibition the night before it opens to being invited to sample a new cake or dish before it is added to the menu). This is, in itself, a great way for you to test new ideas with a more forgiving audience that will give you feedback.

**Run clubs.** You can have a parent and toddler group, a grandparents and grandchildren group, or work with specific community groups to increase occupancy of your premises; elderly loneliness is fast increasing and opportunities to meet socially help immensely. Weekly groups at low occupancy periods provide groups with a sense of ownership and belonging to your venue and, often, meeting at a less crowded time is beneficial to these target groups.

**Discount or upsell.** Provide discount vouchers for next purchases that are time-limited, for example, in your café or the car park, so that customers are encouraged to make more regular repeat visits. Provide upgrades for visits Monday to Thursday (e.g. buy cake and you get a coffee for free) to encourage higher expenditure. Offer a large group discount or an upgrade. Make sure that the discounts are on items that have a low cost of production.

**Provide loyalty gifts.** Loyal customers or annual members could be given a birthday gift, in the form of one free pass to bring a friend or a recommendation voucher to invite someone with a discount.



# We create a sense of community by gamifying the discovery of local heritage.

Laurence Pourageaud is the Quality and Geocaching Coordinator at Charentes Tourisme (FR).



## Our Tips:

The quality of the routes is absolutely essential to the success of this initiative. Every year, more and more cities and tourist offices apply for the creation of Terra Aventura routes and only institutions with particularly interesting content are selected. It is also important to offer only free tours, with no commercial commitments; although suggestions can be made to encourage visits to sites or museums, the clues should always remain in the public domain. Beneficially, 50% of users say they spend at least one night away from home on each tour.

## What we do:

We co-developed a region-wide treasure hunt that invites users to venture into the most unexpected corners of the destination, in complete autonomy, through a geocaching mobile application. The fact that none of our hunts are season-dependent combined with the added benefit that users can explore them in their own time, means that we see increased activity from November to March.

## How we do it:

The Destination Management Organisation (DMO) of Limousin thought about how best to get visitors to radiate throughout the region, including to the most remote communities, and how to encourage repeat visits throughout the year. They introduced Terra Aventura, which is a life-size treasure hunt, for young and old, run autonomously by a telephone application using geocaching. It consists of looped circuits from 1 to 10 km of geolocated enigmas that invite

the discovery of particular sites, with a reward for each successfully completed cache. Terra Aventura is enhanced with its own fictional and endearing characters, the "Poi'z".

As a result, a strong user community has been created around the game, with players setting ambitious targets in completing as many caches as possible, thus pushing for repeat visits, including during the low season, and to collect as many "Poi'z" badges as possible that they in turn compare and share both online and offline, nourishing its own marketing buzz.

Today, the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region has 500 Terra Aventura routes throughout its territory, with 3 million users annually. Each city/Tourism Office contributes financially to the creation of its Terra Aventura routes, which are first verified by the counties DMOs and then coordinated by the regional DMO Nouvelle-Aquitaine.





# We offer a bundle of activities to promote low season travel.

David Isern i Casanovas is the General Manager of Cerdanya Resort (ESP) and an innovative eco-tourism entrepreneur.



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## What we do:

We offer “Cerdanya Kids” – a bundle of 50 nature challenges for families to do together and have fun in nature. The idea is based on the concept of the UK National Trust’s “50 things to do before you are 11¾” challenge. This family activity aims to increase loyalty, satisfaction and word of mouth, and also to reduce seasonality in our resort.

## How we do it:

The challenges are based on our understanding of a happy and wholesome childhood, such as flying a kite, stroking a donkey (from our farm) or making a den in the forest. This might seem very normal but the busy city life of today often disconnects us from nature.

All the activities can be done locally to the resort, not requiring transport and the activities are completed as a family without requiring staff involvement, hence they are free for us to offer.

Families love the variety of activities, and also love receiving prizes: a baseball cap after 5 challenges, a medal pin after 10 challenges, a T-shirt after 25 challenges and a night of adventure in a yurt for the whole family after completing all 50 challenges.

The family passport has no cost, since the purpose of this exercise is not to increase expenditure per day, but to increase repeat visitation, satisfaction and word of mouth. Completing all 50 challenges requires multiple visits to the resort.

The passport has worked specially well to increase repeat visitation in low season, which for us is spring and autumn, since in winter we have demand for ski tourism. 10 challenges were specifically designed to be best achieved in the spring (identifying certain flowers) and another 10 in autumn (e.g. making an “angel” but in autumn leaves rather than in the snow, which is more typical).



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## Our Tips:

Identify experiences that have emotional and entertainment value to your customers but that cost little for you to offer, and design them to promote visits during low season.



# Aim for equality, diversity and inclusion.

## The world is a mosaic: design experiences for every market.

Is your business implicitly biased by targeting white, Christian, middle class, heterosexual couples with two children, who will drive and have no disabilities? You may feel uncomfortable with this question and yet the photography you use in your website speaks volumes.

We often think of stereotypical consumers and design products for their needs. Think about the age, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexuality and religion of the consumers you want to attract. Targeting a diverse community is not only the right thing to do, it also gives you excellent business opportunities. Nowadays, not being inclusive is a greater risk. Consumers want brands to be braver at showing more diverse people and they want adverts to accurately reflect society.

Half of UK consumers are more likely to buy from brands that show diversity, as they find this increases trust. Half of consumers stop buying from brands that do not represent their values and are turned off by adverts that negatively stereotype. This increases substantially for any minority groups.

Remember that there exists a range of disabilities and most of them are not visible: one in five UK consumers has a disability and this market has more opportunities to travel in the low season. Companies that demonstrate disability confidence achieve over 25% higher revenue.

When aiming for diversity and inclusion, think about the services you provide to this market and how you communicate these. For example, in most rural areas, it is often difficult to find halal food, which excludes

Muslim communities. Individuals with disabilities may feel uncomfortable to book with you when your disability statement is superficial or hidden on your website. You may provide directions based on the assumption that your target market owns a car, which discriminates against lower earning groups. Your pricing of family entry tickets may discriminate against divorced, separated or same sex couples because discounts are commonly based on the principle that a family is heterosexual with two children. The list is endless.



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# We design our facilities to offer inclusive experiences.

Sonja Gregory is the co-owner of The Hytte, an accessible self-catering cottage in Northumberland (UK).

## What we do:

We ensure our cottage offers the highest level of accessible enjoyment and entertainment. Despite our distance from most target markets, we have exceptional year-round occupancy and a hugely loyal client base. Our occupancy rate is over 80%, compared to a regional average of 55% annual occupancy for self-catering properties.

## How we do it:

We design our holiday experience to allow whole families to have a good time, without excluding those with learning or physical disabilities, or the elderly who will be naturally less mobile but will not think of themselves as disabled. We aim for effortless and convenient enjoyment.

Our open plan cottage is designed to offer the chance for everyone to be together, not separating those in the kitchen from the group conversation. The kitchen units, including the space under the sink, are designed to accommodate wheelchairs, while the low gradient ramps and sympathetic handrails are helpful and unobtrusive.



## Our Tips:

We understand that groups want to travel to spend time together. We have found that the weather and time of year are no object, providing that the facilities we offer enable that “togetherness”. Design your experience so that customers feel they can all partake in an effortless way and irrespective of the time of year.

But it's the fact that the whole group can participate in the fun that sells the place. Our outdoor sauna and jacuzzi make a big difference because they give everyone the chance, regardless of any disabilities, to partake in enjoying the outdoors.

We are fully aware that saunas and jacuzzies consume lots of energy so we have gone to great lengths to reduce our environmental impacts through a grass roof, a high level of insulation, an electric vehicle charging point and sourcing green energy for our site. Customers that use above “average” electricity are charged for any extra units used as “Pay Back” and these charges are donated to the Northumberland National Park Environment Association and The Great North Air Ambulance.

We provide details of local wheelchair friendly restaurants and tourist attractions so that the fun continues beyond our property. All this information is communicated on our website so customers can know what to look forward to.





## Task 2:

# Identify complementary markets.

Diversify your markets and learn how to respond to their different needs.

We have learned that low season visitors tend to be more local, stay for a shorter period of time and book late (or just turn up). They are also likely to be repeat visitors and therefore seek variety, compared to high season visitors that are more likely to be first time buyers.

Does it sound like a management nightmare? Not necessarily, but it does require you to be more flexible and it can provide new opportunities for you. Working with different markets also reduces your risk of dependency on a single market, which makes your business more resilient.

Prepare a day calendar, from your opening to your closing times. Write down which type of

customers you expect at each hour and what percentage of your maximum available capacity they represent.

Now do the same for different days of the week, noting any particular differences. Finally, do the same for November to March, noting specific monthly activity.

Next, colour code the different segments (in your day, week or months) according to the capacity figures: red for under 50%, amber for 50-75% and green for above 75%.

Make a list of the types of customers you get currently and group them in two columns: Group A are those that can change the time

and day when they come and Group B are those that cannot. For Group A: return to our list of tactics to encourage them to return and think how you can use these tactics to change the times at which your customers visit you, away from green (above 75% occupancy) times, towards amber and red times. For Group B: identify actions you can do to increase the number of people at that same time.

In addition, brainstorm who might be in a Group C: potential customers that are currently not patronising your business. Identify how you are not meeting their needs and what changes you would need to make to do so. Also consider how compatible they would be with your Group A and Group B clients that visit you at the same time.