

Designing and Marketing Low Season Tourism Experiences

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This manual is organised in six key messages:

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Products, make way for experiences.

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

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Different seasons, different markets.

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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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Be clear what benefits you expect.

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

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03

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



Seasons are like a kaleidoscope: they allow us to see a place in different lights, inspiring different emotions. Having four seasons is an opportunity to offer just as many reasons for your visitors to come experience something that is unique both to your place and that specific time of the year.

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.

Seasons are like a kaleidoscope: they allow us to see a place in different lights, inspiring different emotions. Having four seasons is an opportunity to offer just as many reasons for your visitors to come experience something that is unique both to your place and that specific time of the year.

If you cannot find something special about every month of the year in your local area, do not expect that your visitors will do so. It's for you to take the initiative.



What are your seasonal assets?

Think about what you like to do in your area from November to March.



So, what can you offer that your visitors can enjoy most when not limited by time? Leisurely activities such as access to a great second hand bookshop, a local café with comfy sofas and excellent coffee, or activities such as cooking lunch with a chef, or going to the local market/in the forest with the chef to get the ingredients to cook and, then, (finally) eating the meal itself.

Understand your assets and then think about how they can be meaningful to create new experiences or to enhance current experiences.

- **Natural environment.** Each season calls upon different senses. The colours, smells and sounds are unique to specific times of the year and you need to bring out your inner poet to see, hear and smell through your visitors' eyes. The sound of the wind in the branches, the moving trees mirrored on the water, the smell of wet earth. In winter there may also be specific migratory birds or animals, or flowers that cannot be found in summer.
- **Emotions.** Now that you have turned up the sensitivity of your senses, how do they translate into emotions? You must show the link to your customers: braving the rain or the tumultuous sea becomes an adventure, the outdoor coolness reinforces the sensation of cosiness and serenity when cuddled up by the fireplace with a hot mug of tea.
- **Access.** Visiting an area off season also means having access to places usually off-limit during crowded summer seasons. Go behind the scenes of nature conservation with park rangers, visit the restoration area of a museum, walk your dog on the beach.
- **Time is different.** When you holiday during the low-season, time always feels slower. Maybe because it is less crowded, or maybe the weather stops you from packing your day with an unlimited number of activities. Yet taking a break means slowing down. So, what can you offer that your visitors can enjoy most when not limited by time? Leisurely activities such as access to a great second hand bookshop, a local café with comfy sofas and excellent coffee, or activities such as cooking lunch with a chef, or going to the local market/in the forest with the chef to get the ingredients to cook and, then, (finally) eating the meal itself.
- **Specific events.** Slowing down allows you to go local. What local events take place in your area? Is there a patron saint associated with a local craft celebrated during those months? A carnival? A food or art festival? But also, are there specific natural phenomenon taking place then?

We help local stakeholders to develop their skills in a high value-added product in low season.

Béatrice Rénaud, Head of the Tourism and Brand Unit, Landes de Gascognes Regional Nature Park (FR).



Our Tips:

Regular training of stakeholders, based on scientific and technical research, with constant monitoring of the evolution of the elements of preservation and enhancement of this heritage resource, is the key to real added value in the long term for the local tourism economy.

What we do:

We recognise a high value-added product, the wintering of Grey Cranes from November to mid-February, that has a particular resonance with birdwatching enthusiasts and we offer a unique experience, based on respect for the species and an in-depth customer approach thanks to the mobilisation of stakeholders.

How we do it:

The Grey Cranes are the largest migratory wader in Europe. While most migrate from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, some winter in our territory thanks to its favourable ecosystem. This unique natural event attracts a large number of enthusiasts during the traditional off-season months. We develop knowledge of this phenomenon among local tourism actors (accommodation and restaurant owners, tourist offices, nature reserves, guides, etc.) and, together, we work to preserve the reception conditions of the migratory birds and to promote the birdwatching experience.

Initially, we brought together six founding partners for this project, each with their own area of expertise: the Ligue de la

Protection des Oiseaux (League for the Protection of Birds), the natural reserve of Arjuzanx, the local authority of Les Landes and the Landes de Gascognes Regional Nature Park, but also la fédération des chasseurs (the hunters' federation) and la Chambre d'Agriculture (the chamber of agriculture). We created a charter that dictates the commitments of the partners according to our three key principles: diffuse knowledge amongst local stakeholders, preserve the natural conditions and promote a unique birdwatching experience. As coordinator, the Park approaches tourist actors in the area that wish to become involved in the initiative and provides them with annual training courses, exchange opportunities and access to technical resources on the subject.

As a result, our service providers welcome a clientele of both enthusiasts and curious novices during the winter season, which they retain through a premium experience and which favours an increased return throughout the year. All of this is possible thanks to the increased technical knowledge of the service providers and the multidisciplinary collaboration of the actors in the area.

We involve local communities in the identification, and enhancement, of their local ecosystem.

Marie Duverger is the Site Manager at Port des Salines (FR).



Our tips:

Two elements are key to the success of such an operation: make it fun (a short-ish format, led by an expert, with a relaxed time of togetherness afterwards to share experiences, without forgetting the local snack treats); and encourage a diverse group, both in terms of interests and age range, to encourage more dynamic exchanges and a more unique experience.

What we do:

We organise a “Sel à Vie” outing for the residents of the island of Oléron, to carry out a participatory inventory of the biodiversity of the site and its salt marshes. While we neither have the time nor the right conditions to do it during peak season, this kind of activity in low season enables us to make the local community aware of their environment in a pro-active way, which encourages them to take ownership of it and creates a desire of preservation to be applied and shared both in the low and peak seasons.

How we do it:

In collaboration with the nature office of the Borough Council of Oléron Island, we launched this campaign to involve the local communities. As a destination with a high level of (seasonal) tourism, it seemed important to us to unite our local population around an appreciation of the richness of our land by giving them the opportunity to learn to recognise its ecosystem, conduct an inventory of its diversity and learn how to preserve it.

The low season offers the optimal conditions for such an activity, with the crowds being away and the fauna more visible. We reach out to passionate individuals but also to people who wish to be initiated in this kind of knowledge, or who are simply curious to discover their local environment.

Not only does this anchor our activities in the heart of community life but it also develops a sense of pride and belonging. Equally, it means that best environmental practices are shared with friends and visitors that come to the area.

The Borough Council helped us to communicate locally in each village as well as in the local press and on the radio. We opted for a light and fun format: between 2 and 2.5 hours, including an initial presentation of the species and the census methodology to be used, with accompanying information sheets, then at the end of the outing, a sweet or salty snack and a free visit to the exhibition “Salt for life, a pinch of biodiversity in our marshes”.



Assess the readiness of what you offer in advance of November to March.

Make sure you have the right people, infrastructure and equipment in place.



One of the biggest fears for visitors about the low season is the weather conditions. What indoor alternatives can you offer? Do you have a playroom, a reading room or a space for indoor activities? It is essential to identify activities that are not weather dependant

It's a chicken and egg situation: you may only be prepared to make the investments once you know there is demand, but there will be no demand until you take the risk. So whether you like it or not, you will need to take the initiative and get your resources in place.

Offer an indoor space. One of the biggest fears for visitors about the low season is the weather conditions. What indoor

alternatives can you offer? Do you have a playroom, a reading room or a space for indoor activities? It is essential to identify activities that are not weather dependant. If you cannot offer indoor spaces, provide some sheltered places outdoors and use poor weather conditions as a fun/new way to experience things.

Provide suitable equipment. Anticipate your customers' needs by offering weather-proof equipment: wellington boots for scenic walks on muddy paths, umbrellas for in-between transfers, warm blankets in the rooms, driers for dripping clothes. Use these to show your customer care and make customers aware of your added service compared to competitors.

Guarantee weather-proof access. Is your place accessible in muddy conditions? If you want visitors all year round, you will need to ensure that your place remains accessible under any weather conditions, particularly for customers with limited mobility. Whether it is your parking, driveway or the access between different focal points in your grounds, you need to make sure it is safe for visitors to drive/walk/wheelchair around.

Train your staff accordingly. Since in winter you will typically have fewer visitors, there is more time for your personnel and customers to bond over substantial conversations. This is an opportunity to build long-lasting relationships with your customers to increase repeat business and loyalty. To do so, make sure your staff knows all there is to know about low season activities, local specialties, traditions and your local environment.

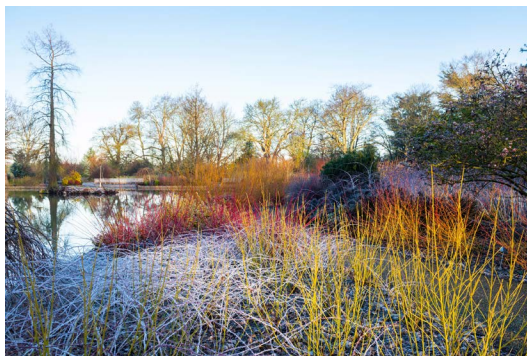


We redesign our experiences specifically to meet our customers' needs in winter.

Andrew Jasper is the Programme Director of RHS Wisley (UK), a vast garden including a glasshouse with three climatic zones, a learning space and a Growing Lab.



©RHS/Joanna Kossak



What we do:

We spent time identifying different customer needs and behaviours in winter compared to summer. Then, we upgraded our infrastructure, gardening programme, events, visitor flows and marketing to provide an optimal winter experience.

How we do it:

Visitors in winter are likely to be members of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) who visit regularly and are, therefore, already familiar with the plant collection and layout of the gardens. With this in mind, we make the most of our horticulturally themed calendar to provide year-round entertainment value to our visitors. On our website, the “What’s looking good at Wisley?” page showcases the must-see areas of the garden specific to that month, placing emphasis on the plants that are looking their most beautiful, a message subtly reinforced with month-specific photography on the website. On site, our receptionists and signage emphasise what is in season. This creates a sense of novelty.



Our Tips:

Think about your customers' needs in winter and how to cater for them, rather than expecting the customer to adapt to fit around you.

In winter, we design dusk and darkness activities to extend visiting hours. We have improved visitor safety by installing welcoming lighting and improving our path infrastructure. We have designed an event calendar, including Glow winter lights and we invite local choirs to sing outdoors at one end of the garden, providing a focal point that draws visitors towards otherwise less visited parts of the site. We know that winter visits are shorter due to the lower temperatures so we sell mulled wine and hot chocolate from a small kiosk next to the choir.

The booking system instigated due to COVID-19 has also helped with visitor flows. We now need fewer parking wardens and we avoid queues because visitors have an allocated arrival time. This has improved the visitor experience.

These activities have allowed us to maintain the interest of our core audience, while expanding our appeal beyond traditional gardeners to be more inclusive of younger audiences.



We tap into the misconceptions of a winter wedding.

Charlotte Hutchesson is the Office Manager at The Wellbeing Farm, a sustainable events venue located in Edgworth (UK).



Our Tips:

Never underestimate the power of understanding your customers' fears. This is a gap in the winter events market that is often overlooked, creating a blue ocean of untapped potential.

What we do:

We create unique, low season wedding packages that change perceptions of winter weddings. This frees customers from restraining the dates of their weddings to the spring and summer.

How we do it:

We recognise the two main reasons why couples are hesitant to choose winter experiences:

- 1) bad weather can lead to disruption or cancellation of the wedding, and
- 2) guest comfort in the cold climate. We tackle these fears by communicating extensive proof of our preparedness to battle poor weather conditions, which includes an onsite snow plough, our own supply of grit and a heavy-duty heater run by power generated from the farm's wind turbine.

In addition, we also emphasise features that would not be as successful in a standard summer wedding, thereby differentiating the experience for the guests as well as the couple. While the theme of Christmas is always a favourite, the longer winter twilight, coupled with the views from the farm, are equally persuasive. To top it off, we add our best, whimsical, snow-covered pictures of our farm to show them endless possibilities of how magically unique their wedding could be.

Traditionally, winter may not be a conventional season to get married in but, for us, it has become just as busy as summer because of the dedication we have put in to understanding our customers.



Collaborate with your local network.

Anchor your offer amongst the seasonal specialties of your area.

Customers often do not visit a destination in the winter for fear that there will be little to do. Every business needs to cross-sell the availability of other things to do nearby, in order to increase the desire of tourists to travel there in the first place and, importantly, to stay longer. Don't assume that visitors will independently go and find this information; make it easy for them as a way of becoming the hub of knowledge.

Research your local area.

Look for activities or traditional production methods that only take place between November and March. From wild mushroom picking, to truffle finding and meat drying, a number of local specialties only occur during the low season.

Identify your local partners.

Reach out to local craftsmen, farmers, small producers and people with a unique savoir-faire who either only have time to share with visitors in the low season or have a craft that is specific to that season. Work with them to create unique experiences for your guests and increase the destination's appeal as a whole.

List things to do.

Prepare a list of options of activities for your customers. Make it available on your website to encourage longer bookings but also in a well-designed folder in your accommodation, so visitors know what to do during their stay.

Inspire your guests.

Put at your guests' disposal a collection of guidebooks about the seasonal local fauna and flora or novels set at that specific time of the year from local authors to further inspire them. You can equally host a photo/art exhibition from local artists depicting the current season's scenic beauty or local festivities. Your aim is to create an environment for your visitors that is also an invitation to further explore the unknown gems of your area.



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We highlight our seasonal resources with a solid sense of place.

Eliane Grimaldi is the Owner of the holiday cottage A Malba, in Corsica (FR).

What we do:

During peak season, local producers barely have time to give you the time of day as their sales are booming. The low season offers a unique opportunity to go behind the scene and create meaningful experiences. This why we offer our guests a range of unique experiences from an introduction to botany, to behind-the-scenes gastronomic discoveries directly with our local producers. It is little known that meat-curing or cheese-making are mostly done in the winter season. To make the most of the low season's slower pace, we also encourage our visitors to take part in local restoration/preservation projects of the local heritage (natural and/or cultural).

How we do it:

Our passion and professional training have led us to form close links with our immediate environment, both natural and cultural.



Our Tips:

Make your accommodation offering secondary to a full immersion experience in your local heritage. These unique experiences are the real reason to generate a high customer return rate.

Our dream is to not even open in high season, in order to fully concentrate on a clientele that comes primarily to seek a unique experience of the Corsican terroir, its nature, history and know-how, rather than an image reduced to its seaside assets.

The low season gives us the opportunity to take time with our visitors and offer them “authentic” experiences in complete privacy. My husband is a former environmental expert at the Corsican Natural Park, author of a book on ethno-botany and member of the jury of the Mele di Corsica (Corsican honey), all of which are diverse skills that we like to pass on to our visitors: fine tasting of Corsican honeys, excursions in the forest, discovery of our orchard, visits to local farmers and craftsmen, provision of a botanical explorer's kit for children (homemade), sensory games in recycled or upcycled materials in our garden, and much more.





Task 3:

Identify low season resources that are valuable to your organisation.

The importance of giving meaning to seasonality.

Identifying the specifics of seasonality in your area and, most importantly, how these can be reflected in your customer experience, is not always as obvious as it sounds and it may require some brain squeezing. The following steps will help you get some perspective:

Reflect on your personal interpretation.

In your own words, what does autumn and/or winter mean to you? Translate your thoughts into images. What are the mental images you associate with either late autumn or winter?

Research how these materialise in your area.

Identify at least three “events” that only take place between November and March in your area, for each of these three categories:

- Natural (fauna and flora)
- Regional specialties (historical heritage, season-specific savoir-faire, gastronomic specialty)
- Cultural (national/regional/local celebrations, community events, arts, sporting events, entertainment)

Turn negatives into positives.

Classify your list of winter thoughts and images into positive and negative. For the positive ones, reflect on how you currently use them in your experience design and marketing practices. For the negative ones, think how you can change your services to either turn these into a strength, or how you can overcome pre-conceived ideas that they are actually negative.