



THE HYTTE, NORTHUMBERLAND

Case study: self-catering accommodation

With occupancy rates more than 40% above the region's average, The Hytte has carved out a unique niche in the Northumberland tourism industry.

It is not just the special design – recreating a traditional Norwegian timber hut (a hytte, pronounced 'hutta'), facilities including a sauna and hot tub, and location that are behind its success as a large, five-star rated self-catering property. It is the deliberate development, sales and marketing policy of targeting families and friends who need accessible accommodation that has driven this remarkable performance.



Local market research and the early impact of Welcome All training convinced owners, husband and wife team Simon and Sonja Gregory, of the opportunity to tap into an undeveloped market in the North East.



Simon, previously a sheep-shearer, and Sonja, a professional midwife, bought land bordering their own rural home near Hexham, with the aim of building a very distinct self-catering property. "We soon realised there wasn't any accessible accommodation around, so we decided to go the whole way – building a property and developing our own knowledge to give us a unique selling point," said Sonja.

She attended a Welcome All training course at the very outset. "I have experience of nursing, working with people who have spinal injuries, are deaf or visually impaired, but the training really made the difference," she said. "I picked up so many tips, and an understanding of the huge variety of accessibility issues. With a new build, we could design and construct our property with accessibility in mind, as well as making sure we offered the additional services that would really make people feel welcome."

The couple identified some clear target audiences, including groups of families and friends who wanted to holiday together in an environment where disabled members of the group would be totally comfortable. The Hytte sleeps eight people, and some 70% of bookings have included at least one member of the party with some form of disability. Customers have been drawn from all corners of the UK with high numbers of repeat clients, including a group of friends from Scotland and Cornwall, who meet up “around half way” for a week.

The single-level property is fully accessible, with facilities including a shower room, mobile electric hoist, garden and children’s play area, plus accessible information, all helping earn it National Accessible Scheme ‘Access Exceptional’ and Level One Visual and Hearing status. A comprehensive access statement is available on The Hytte’s website (www.thehytte.com).



Through highly targeted online advertising, joining specialist and local tourism organisations and an increasing number of word-of-mouth recommendations, The Hytte has enjoyed occupancy levels rising to 97% in the last financial year, compared with the Northumberland average of 55%.

The Hytte mainly provides for week-long stays through the key seasons and weekend breaks during winter.

Featured as an example of best practice by the regional development agency, One NorthEast, and winner of the Access for All Tourism category at the England for Excellence Awards in 2009 the Hytte is also now highlighted on other Welcome All courses. Sonja continues to spread the word about making the tourism industry accessible to all. However, The Hytte retains a huge niche regional marketplace advantage as an accommodation provider.

“Welcome All also taught us the importance of learning from our customers and being committed to continuous improvement. We have recently purchased an electrically-operated chair, an overbed table and kitchen steps, all to meet specific customer needs. We want people to feel comfortable and simply to focus on having a great holiday.”