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Farm and station stay : an alternative industry, not a hobby!

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Hillside Country Homestead on the outskirts of York has the ambience of a bygone age.

Farm and station stay—
an alternative industry, not a hobby!

When product prices are low, or after bad seasons, it is tempting to look for a fix. But farm and station tourism is not that short-term fix. Before going into such ventures, landholders need to examine all other alternatives that might be available on their properties. GARRY PALMER’S advice could save a lot of heartache for prospective hosts.

If you think tourism is a possibility, then you need to go through a number of steps including detailed research; evaluation; some planning; and finally marketing.

But first, you must ask your whole family an important question: Do they like people and enjoy helping and hosting them?

If the answer is yes, then go ahead with your research. If not, forget it and find something else.

Farm stay is not just another accommodation alternative. Crucial to success is a very close relationship between the host and the guest at the farm or station. Hospitality is the key to success.

Farm tourism has grown rapidly in Western Australia from less than 50 properties 10 years ago to almost 300 farm and station stays today. But we are still in our infancy compared with Europe where Austria alone has 28,000 farms offering accommodation.

Like any locally-owned and operated businesses, farm tourism generates a flow-on to the community which is significant for local shops, galleries, fuel outlets and special events.

On the negative side, the potential for visitors to spoil the countryside is high. More people mean increased pollution and disturbance. But with proper monitoring, management and control, this should not become a significant problem.

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Profitability
A 1992 survey of Victorian operators indicated that on average 30 per cent of farm revenue came from farm tourism. But tourism was contributing less than 12 per cent of income on half of the 78 farms surveyed.

Some individuals in the farm tourism industry are doing well, others not so well. Each operation is different, so you need to prepare a budget for your planned operation, then have it checked by professionals. Many smaller enterprises have been able to develop without major investment, by modifying existing buildings. Where new buildings are required it is best to plan for a progressive development, as this will allow you to develop skills and knowledge in the business as you go. Well planned, well managed operations where the operator has good interpersonal skills, are profitable.

Marketing vital
Many small businesses fail because of poor marketing. Experience shows that unless you are very lucky it will take two to three years to build up a business. By then you will have a clear idea of its exact features and how you intend to run it. You then need to develop a strategy to market that product.

Spend considerable thinking time deciding what particular sector of the market you and your property can cope with best – backpackers, free independent travellers (local or overseas), bridal couples, sporting groups, hunting groups, young, old, rich, poor, ‘yuppies’, international incentive groups, or whatever. The key is to have a clear idea of your main market and the product you have to promote and package.

Knowledge of the business you are in and the clients you are attempting to attract is the basis of sound marketing. Although the overseas market has received much publicity, research shows that nearly 90 per cent of clients come from Western Australia.

Evedon Park Bush Resort
Burekup

Hosts Marilyn and Tony Jenour were dairy farmers before they took up farm tourism in 1982. Evedon Park is an ideal family resort with timber cabins and two-storey chalets on the edge of a large lake. It is one of the larger operations in Western Australia, able to accommodate up to 60 people, and includes a convention centre.

The location, adjoining the Collie River and jarrah forest, offers both relaxation and the possibility of walks along the Bibbulmun Track. The property is used as a base camp to explore the surrounding region.

Visitors can enjoy canoeing and other attractions in nearby centres, while also having a glimpse of farm life at neighbouring properties.

Guests come from two main groups: independent travellers mostly from Western Australia, and overseas bus groups, mainly from Singapore.

Developing a brochure
Other operators have been down this track, so collect all the brochures that you can locate.

This is not plagiarism, just common sense. There is no point in re-inventing the wheel. See how others promote their enterprises.

It is your decision on what to highlight in your brochure, but it should include a clear indication of phone/fax number, a location map and brief list of what clients can expect to do on the property and/or in the region.

Although farmers are inherently individualistic, now is the time to look at the possibility of cooperating with others in your area.
Charges are generally based on industry practice for properties with similar facilities. It is hard to evaluate hospitality. You need to look at farm stays as well as practical issues.

**Insurance**

Talk to a few brokers or insurance companies to establish a suitable level of insurance cover. Don’t neglect public liability insurance and clearly specify to your insurer exactly what activities will occur on your property. Where activities change, notify your insurer and request an acknowledgment of the change in writing. The key to success in insurance is adequate disclosure.

**Practical issues**

**Quality control**

Hospitality is the key. Aussi Host is a training system aimed at better service and better business. Supported by the Inbound Tourism Organisation of Australia and sponsored by the Commonwealth Department of Tourism, Qantas, and the Australian Tourist Commission, it is a very professional training course suitable for operators and staff.

Its objectives are to provide better communication skills; enhance confidence; achieve greater job satisfaction; create greater awareness of customer needs and expectations; and to provide better customer service. Overall it provides an understanding of the business and the need to take care in handling difficult customers.

Potential customers require some objective evaluation of facilities. The Royal Automobile Club (RAC) provides such a rating, but many items that are rated are not seen as important by operators. These include phones in bedrooms, alarm radios, television, and bed headboards.

Generally the RAC provides an objective, uniform system that people can rely on. Unfortunately it does not rate hospitality and other extras provided on farm and station stay.

There is need to project a clean, green image. Image is a delicate thing and must be close to what people experience. Think about what your guests will perceive and experience. Don’t spray near the house or start the tractor at 5 am when guests are present.

Check if local farm stay associations are already operating. If not, look at forming a small cooperative group.

Local tourist offices can be very helpful in advising on brochures and other advertising techniques. Word of mouth is your best marketing tool.

**Setting charges**

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*Tony Jenour and son Christopher feed Angora goats at a neighbour’s property.*
Peter and Pamela Kenyon relax in the 'gingerbread house' where guests take afternoon tea.

The homestead and surrounding area were developed for tourism by Pamela and Peter Kenyon in 1992. Hillside Country Homestead was part of York's most historic farming property on the edge of the town, and offers a unique bed and breakfast/farmstay experience.

Accommodation is in luxurious rammed earth ensuite units, the only four-star accommodation in York. The units offer a sitting room with television and video, combined with antiques and memorabilia of a bygone age. Communal rooms in the homestead can also be used and guests can share a full English breakfast "just like grandma served".

The Homestead is surrounded by large formal gardens and the 16 ha farm provides some wonderful walks plus farm animals and a range of historical collections. The property is within strolling or cycling distance of York with its many historic and cultural attractions.

Customer service is the key word for the Kenyons, who had the first Aussi Host business in Western Australia. Hillside Country Homestead is the perfect location for those seeking heritage combined with decadence, or just that special time away with a special friend.

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Our three examples illustrate the wide range of farm tourism operations developing in Western Australia. They reflect the impact of the people, property and location in shaping the style of business. There is no simple formula for success.

Giralia provides an example of the teamwork necessary to hold a station together, with the parents, two sons and their wives all working very closely to operate the station and tourism venture.

Insurance for hire cars on gravel roads is another problem. Overall, farm and station stay is a small but developing industry with great potential. Improved market research and more co-operation between operators will help in its development.

Hard data on customer requirements are lacking. Improving this is critical for future development.

Transport can be difficult, particularly for backpackers and some other overseas visitors.

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To the east of Giralia is the Karijini National Park and the Kennedy Ranges and Mt Augustus are an easy day's drive. Cape Range National Park with rugged scenery and the coral reefs of Ningaloo Marine Park are also within reach.

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Operators to align with that regional development and take advantage of any initiatives.

Industry problems
Farmers and station operators tend to be individuals wanting to act independently. There is a need to improve co-operation.

The industry is still too small to demand recognition by government at any level or corporations. Sponsorship and co-operative marketing will develop as the industry grows.

Seeing sheep being drafted was something new for German visitors to Giralia.

Giralia Station and outback stopover

The Blake family took over Giralia near Exmouth in 1921 and Rae and Denver Blake have been operating it since 1972. This working sheep station normally runs about 25,000 Merinos, and offers accommodation ranging from cottages within the homestead gardens, to shearers' quarters and camping and caravan sites.

Cottages are air-conditioned and meals are served in the family dining room. Shearers quarters are more basic with communal kitchen, showers and toilets. These facilities are also used by campers and caravanners.

Guests are welcome to join station activities but no 'tourist events' are arranged. Games of croquet on the homestead lawn, bush walking, bird watching or inspections of the unique local fossils are possible.

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Essential steps for potential operators

1. Talk with the Farm and Country Holidays Association WA (Inc.). It can provide you with local contacts who will help evaluate your options. The organisation is happy to assist new operators, who are potential members.

2. Check with the Western Australian Tourism Commission, either the head office or eight regional offices, depending on convenience. Staff have a wealth of information about tourism and are particularly strong in planning, evaluation and marketing. The service is free.

3. Approach one of the 25 regional Business Enterprise Centres. Their strength is in business planning and budgeting.

4. Talk with local operators and get the good and bad news about the tourism industry.

5. Compile a detailed list of things a visitor might enjoy doing on your property, in the district, or around the region. Continue to develop this list as it will be important later when you are looking at packaging and marketing your product.

6. Talk with your accountant, farm adviser and bank manager. Prepare a detailed budget and business plan. The information gained from local operators, the Tourism Commission, the Farm and Country Holidays Association WA (Inc.) and Business Enterprise Centres will help you prepare a meaningful budget.

7. Prepare a preliminary plan of the type of operation you intend. If possible, have plans sufficiently flexible to allow you to test the water. Start small and minimise your investment to see whether this industry is really for you and your family. You are planning to go into the people business. They are much, much more demanding than sheep, cattle or even dairy cows.

8. Now go and stay on some farms and stations and see what it is like to be a consumer. Use all the information you have gathered to re-evaluate your plans.

9. If it is still looking good – go for it!

Further reading


Getting into host tourism: B & Bs, Farmstays, Guesthouses, Station Stays. (1994). Western Australian Tourism Commission, Perth.


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