

# Welcome home

Everyone knows that first impressions count, but what's that elusive quality that makes a guest feel instantly at ease? **Elly Earls** asks the owners how they do it

**A** guest's first impressions of a venue sets the tone for the rest of their stay. With 81% of bookings made online, according to the most recent data from the Association of British Travel Agents, the welcome is also the first chance an operator gets to form a relationship with their guest.

If they're greeted in a positive, warm, engaging and professional way, a guest will immediately relax and settle into the experience. Whereas if they have trouble finding your hotel, can't find a parking space, the entrance is difficult to find and nobody answers the doorbell, they will start their holiday with completely the wrong mindset.

## A seamless process

Woodlands Farm Thimbleby was named AA's Friendliest B&B of 2019. For Amy Callin, who owns and runs Woodlands with her husband, Paul, it starts with making sure you're there to meet people personally.

"We don't have key codes for doors or keys under mats or anything like that – we always make sure we're there to greet people and that everything's organised and ready. There's no last-minute rush to tidy the rooms," she says.

According to Andy Banner-Price, co-owner of B&B the 25 in Torquay, it's also important to make sure the check-in process is as smooth as possible: "We have discreet CCTV, so wherever we are in the building we can spot when someone's arrived. And because we've already done the groundwork, we have a rough idea of when people are arriving, so we can welcome them by name," he says.

"I hate arriving at a hotel or B&B and the first thing they do is give you a piece of paper and ask for your name and address. We've already got all the information we

need through the booking system, so we don't need them to start filling in forms."

Dan Rose-Bristow, co-owner of the Torridon in Wester Ross, agrees. "It's really about sweeping the guest off their feet. Once their feet touch the tarmac outside, you sweep them up and you carry them all the way through the hotel to their bedroom – as if nothing's too much trouble and you make it seamless.

"We have a very quick check-in using an iPad. We just have to flip two pages, the guest recognises everything is there, they sign their name with their finger and they're checked in. There's no form filling; no more details. It's very seamless and then they're straight to the room. In the meantime, the bags are brought in, they go up in the lift and they are in the room before the guests arrive."

And it's not only at hotels where guests appreciate a seamless process. At Oakdown Holiday Caravan Park in Devon, the service starts from the moment guests arrive with a warden helping them to their allocated pitch.

"We feel that's a better experience than simply providing people with a map and a set of instructions from reception," says the park's Melissa Woolland. "We get a lot of positive comments about that service, and it's so simple. It's then up to us to maintain that standard throughout their stay."

## Simple things matter

The appearance of a venue is crucial. "Our park looks immaculate from the moment guests arrive," Woolland says. "The lawns are mowed, the hedges are neat and the reception area has that wow factor. People come here because they know they can rely on us for cleanliness. It sounds simple, but it's huge in terms of meeting and exceeding expectations." >>

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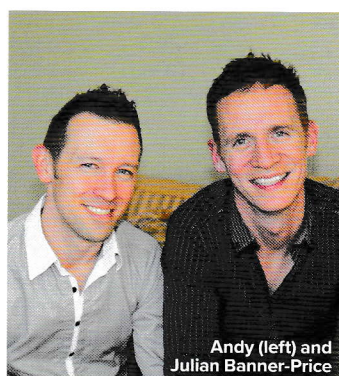
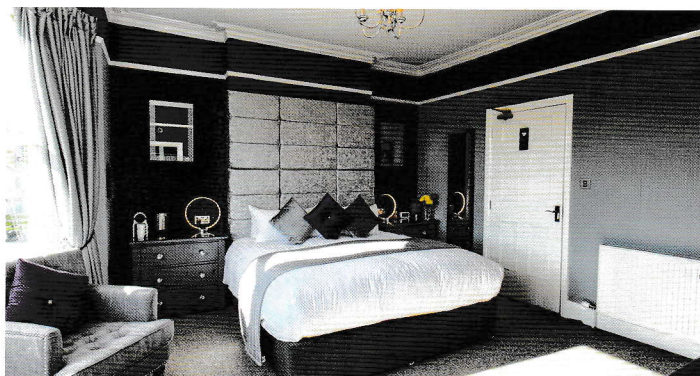
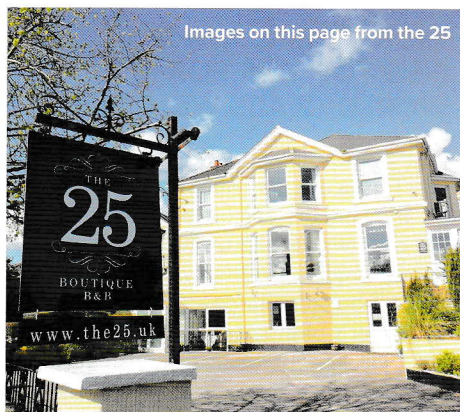
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Andy (left) and Julian Banner-Price

« It's a similar story at the 25. "We've got easy parking and good signage, with an extra sign just in case you're not sure which door is reception," Banner-Price explains. "We've just re-rendered all our pillars, had new railings and everything has been painted. We clean the coffee tables every day on the terrace so that there are no fingermarks or rain marks. Everything's really smooth."

## Genuine and generous

Logistics and practical considerations aside, Rose-Bristow says the most important thing is that the welcome is genuine and generous. "Everybody can say hello, but not everybody can mean it – that's the difference," he says.

Callin agrees. "We really care about people having a nice time and we're passionate about what we do. My husband was brought up in an award-winning B&B and I've worked in hospitality for most of my life. It's that natural passion – you've got to be a people person."

Of course, in slightly larger venues – such as the Torridon, which has 30 rooms – it's not only the owners but every member of the front of house staff that needs to have the right personality to deliver that warm, genuine welcome.

"Recruitment is very important," Rose-Bristow says. "You can tell within 10 seconds whether someone is going to be the person you

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Melissa Woolland

want to meet your guests – you can tell by their smile, their eyes, their warmth and generosity.

"We employ people who are friendly and welcoming and have a big smile, but we also drill into staff that appearance matters. First impressions count, and that if we get it right from touchpoint one, it makes all the other touchpoints so much easier for everybody else.

"It comes from the top. If the owners and managers walk the walk and talk the talk, the other staff will too. They'll feel relaxed and confident in their role if they're supported."

## Start with a treat

At both Woodlands and the 25, a complimentary drink and homemade treat are an important part of the welcome. "It's a great

way for people to relax when they've arrived and to set the tone for the stay," says Callin.

The timing is everything, according to Banner-Price, who always shows guests to their room before bringing out his famous chocolate brownies. "It's a really good opportunity to check everything's OK with the room and give them the chance to give you feedback, so if there's any kind of issue you can nip it in the bud," he explains.

This is also a great chance for operators to impart their local knowledge to make sure guests have the best possible time. "People can Google as much as they like, but really it's local knowledge that has the top tips," says Callin. "So, you can advise guests not to park on the grass verge next to the reservoir as they will get a parking ticket. Or that they should choose a particular table in the pub because it's got a really lovely view over the village – all those little touches that you won't get in a guidebook or on the internet."

That said, not everyone will be keen to sit down for a half-hour natter. "You have to appreciate that you don't know what people's circumstances are. It's easy for you to assume they're just there for a weekend break. We've had people stay with us for funerals or family bereavement," Callin says. "You have to make a judgment, and you learn that with experience and by picking up on people's signals."