

Hideaways and homes

Premium experiences - as well as help for staff - are key to success

When Jamie Oliver's Fifteen Cornwall restaurant closed its doors for the last time in December 2019, the owners of Watergate Bay Hotel were determined to turn this loss into a positive. They spent the darkest days of the pandemic converting the site into seven 'beach lofts' to complement the 73-bed hotel's existing offering.

With stunning sea views, direct beach access and sustainable designs – including reclaimed timber and upcycled furniture and bathroom tiles – the lofts are pitched at the premium end of the holiday market.

The £1m-plus investment was a bold move at an uncertain time. But according to Group Finance Director Chris Naisby, the business was confident that demand for high-quality holiday experiences would persist after the pandemic had passed.

That has proved to be well founded. The lofts are particularly popular with intergenerational family groups, which appreciate the flexibility of self-contained accommodation and the opportunity to bring their dogs along. Some combine their trip with surfing, swimming or yoga sessions.



Case studies

"Demand was strong during the windows of opportunity we had during the pandemic, and has continued at a high level since," says Chris. "Our take on 'active relaxation' and wellness have always been at the core of our model, and we have many loyal guests who may return at other times to take different types of breaks."

Beach ski chalets

Watergate Bay likes to style itself as a "ski resort on the beach". It's a concept that is attractive to the team as well as holidaymakers. During the pandemic, the company's gap-year programme attracted students who might have travelled abroad in other years.

"Our approach was, 'you wanted to do a ski season – come to the ski resort on the beach instead,'" says Chris. "These are paid roles, with opportunities to gain experience across the range of hospitality, from food and beverage and welcoming guests to back-office roles."

Discounted surfing, sports and other activities are part of the attraction. More widely, the company's benefits package has included seasonal bonuses, extensive training and development, and the opportunity to work flexibly across both Watergate Bay and its related Lake District hotel, Another Place, in Ullswater.



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Cosy communal living

Like other hospitality businesses, however, the hotel has found staffing tougher of late, with the overheated Cornish property market compounding the fierce competition.

“Last year we faced a challenge sourcing people including chefs and front-of-house staff. We had to consolidate our three on-site restaurants and curtail their opening hours,” says Chris.

In response, the company leased 24 cabins to accommodate team who found it difficult to secure affordable rental accommodation in the area. Occupation last summer was high.

“The cabins are self-contained one- or two-bed units, each with a kitchenette and bathroom,” says Chris. “But we see those as a short-term measure. The long-term strategy is to acquire local residential properties which can be developed into houses of multiple occupation. The first one has been acquired and is currently being converted.”

Shepherd's huts

The staff accommodation situation has been slightly less acute in the Lake District. But Watergate Bay's related hotel, Another Place, has also acquired the rental of local homes for staff use.

The diversification strategy adopted for the Cornish site is being replicated in Another Place. Here the out-of-hotel accommodation includes a treehouse and handcrafted shepherd's huts, equipped with log burners, free-standing baths and stargazing roofs. The units, representing a further £1m-plus investment, will come onstream for the summer season.

The company's confidence is clear: it is currently seeking planning permission to convert a third site, a stately home in Hampshire, into a 50-bed hotel with two restaurants, swim club, studio and treatment rooms.

Watergate Bay's holiday-letting subsidiary, Beach Retreats, is the only part of the business that has seen growth level off slightly as the economic environment has changed, says Chris: “Elsewhere, demand remains very high – and, critically, we expect to have a full complement of staff this year.”