Truly all-inclusive holidays

By embracing accessibility, a Lake District business found itself winning new customers well beyond its obvious demographic.

Time seemed to have run out for time-share developments. Wildly popular in the 1980s, these schemes seemed to have been left behind by tourism trends, with younger travellers valuing the freedom to vary their holiday locations.

Langdale Leisure in Ambleside has been able to transcend these trends, however. Owners of its 100 time-share properties bought the resort 20 years ago. The addition of luxury hotel, spa and leisure facilities has created the Lake District’s largest single-site hospitality business, and lured in a wider mix of customers that includes a high number of affluent young professionals.

Throughout these developments, Langdale wanted to continue meeting the needs of the original time-share owners, explains Nick Lancaster, Langdale’s MD.

Access and independence

“Our owners bought when they were in their 40s and 50s. Now two-thirds of them are over 65,” he says. “We needed to ensure we could keep them safe and allow them access, both within the properties and out on the fells.”

“The ramps we fitted to help guests who struggle on their feet or use a wheelchair are really useful for pushchairs too.”
Langdale’s focus on accessibility started with a 10-year programme for the time-shares, but was quickly extended to its other facilities. “We wanted to provide accessible facilities to hotel guests too, and we’re seeing more demand as people get to know that we will always try to manage any issues they have,” Nick adds.

“For example, the ramps we fitted to help guests who struggle on their feet or use a wheelchair are really useful for pushchairs too.”

**Why box-ticking isn’t enough**

Nick admits Langdale’s initial attempts at accessibility were “very much about ticking the box” and focused largely on Document M packs for accessible bathrooms.

“We very quickly realised, however, that this wasn’t doing the job properly,” he says now. “The biggest penny-drop moment for us was that disability and wheelchairs are not the same thing.”

This understanding meant Langdale’s initiative being extended to support customers with poor eyesight or hearing, and those with mental health issues. With input from the Alzheimer’s Society, Langdale teams are also trained in dementia awareness: “If somebody seems aggressive, staff appreciate there may be a reason for that and are able to support them.”

Other changes to support accessibility range from simple adjustments – such as ensuring menus are printed at a font size of at least 12 points – to the installation of a fully-accessible hotel bedroom.

**From defensive to competitive**

The next step will be a leisure changing area with a bench, hoist and variable-level WC and vanity unit. That aligns with poolside aids: “It’s all very well having hoists in the pool, but people also need to be able to get changed with ease and dignity,” says Nick.

“Every adjustment has a knock-on impact. For example, we introduced all-terrain mobility scooters, provided by Lake District Mobility, so that guests who struggle with walking can get out independently on the bridleways of our estate, but now we need to be sure they can also reach the leisure desk.

“**We just need to ensure we are capable of looking after any guest who comes to us.**”

“It’s an incremental programme: there will always be more we can do.”

Having started as a form of “defensive investing”, the focus on accessibility has added a competitive edge to the business. “We don’t do it for income-generating reasons, but everything we have done has returned on its investment,” Nick says.

**Constant refreshment**

Like many Lakes businesses, Langdale enjoyed a record season in 2018. By regularly updating its offering, customers can sample new experiences on every visit, helping it achieve a striking 70% repeat business statistic.

Nick also makes a point of looking for emerging new trends. “For example, we recently made the decision to swap wine suppliers so we could get the wider range of spirits that we needed for popular cocktails,” he explains.

Besides the leisure facilities it offers on site, Langdale tempts customers with discounts on other local experiences, through joint marketing with organisations such as Lakeland Arts Trust and Windermere Lake Cruises.

Using online-only promotion, the business does not target specific demographics, aiming instead to provide something for everyone through its diverse mix of facilities and awareness of accessibility. “We just need to ensure we are capable of looking after any guest who comes to us,” Nick concludes.