

Plan a festive staycation with Luxury Cottages: Interview with Alistair Malins

A domestic holiday is more affordable and more sustainable than catching a flight overseas. Luxury Cottages has a proprietary 100-point test for all its properties, which span Cornwall to the Cotswolds and Yorkshire to the Welsh Borders.

Maddyness spoke to Alistair Malins, founder of Luxury Cottages, which offers bespoke country houses and lodges for rental. We discuss his 'obsession' with customer service and the importance of a truly personal concierge service, and Luxury Cottages' contribution to Scottish reforestation projects.

[Maddyness] Tell us what Luxury Cottages does and how it came about in your own words. Did you have expertise and experience in the field you chose?

[Alistair] I've spent the last five years working in the vacation rental sector and

recognised a gap in the market for an enhanced service offering. I founded Luxury Cottages so that guests could not only browse and book an amazing selection of luxury homes, but we could also provide them with a level of customer service that is currently lacking in the industry.

We offer something that the traditional agencies and new entrants to the market don't have, a proper concierge service for valued customers. This has resonated with guests and property owners who have both faced a difficult year with COVID-19.

What differentiates you from other providers?

We recognised that the market had moved on from automated responses and call centres and have an obsession with our customer service.

We've built a team of experienced luxury travel experts that understand how to serve affluent customers and can build a portfolio of luxury properties that stand out from the crowd. Our luxury experts are knowledgeable, personable and always at the end of the phone for guests and owners.

We believe building long term relationships with both is all about trust and transparency and this is the bedrock of our business.

Did you start on your own or with any associates? If with associates, can you tell us more about the terms you negotiated and whether they remain the same today?

I founded Luxury Cottages in late 2019 and, shortly after, Michelle Sephton (former Managing Director at Elegant Resorts) joined the business.

She brings over 25 years of experience in the industry along with an enviable black book. We have a very flat structure encouraging innovation throughout the company and have carved out equity for key employees in order to retain them.

How did you manage the financial part? Family? Savings? Crowdfunding? Bank loans?

We have been privately financed with the majority of investment coming from the founding team. There aren't currently any external investors however we recognise the importance of outside capital in scaling any business.

How does the LuxeTest work?

The LuxeTest® is a proprietary 100-point test for all our properties that our luxury experts use to inspect our portfolio. It acts as a form of data collection so that our luxury experts have all the information they need about the property as well as ensuring a level of quality control.

Tell us about your 'Sustainable Cottages' group.

Domestic holidays remain the most environmentally sustainable form of travel and we encourage all properties in our portfolio to adopt sustainable practices to reduce their impact on the environment.

Our Sustainable Cottages collection showcases a number of properties across the UK that have a particular focus on reducing our impact on the environment. We also carbon offset our emissions so that we have a climate positive workforce by backing initiatives such as reforestation projects in Scotland.

What do holiday makers tend to look for in luxury cottages?

Time is the ultimate luxury. Our guests are often time-poor and want help finding the right property for everything from birthdays, anniversaries and reunions as well as their well-earned holidays.

Guests want to know they are going to be looked after and we provide a seamless user journey from start to finish. Looking after the little things, whether it's a birthday cake, arranging catering or organising experiences for guests, add to a truly personal approach.

How has COVID affected business for you? Is the staycation on the rise?

The staycation market was booming well before COVID hit. Once we were out of the first period of lockdown we saw a vast uptick in interest for domestic holidays as flights were cancelled and quarantine rules imposed.

Although travel restrictions are still impacting business, the market has been quick to adapt and we have been working closely with our owners to transfer bookings or make refunds when needed.

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

Do something you have a genuine passion for. That and a never say die attitude certainly helps when things aren't going your way.

What's your favourite part of the UK for a holiday?

Cornwall. I grew up spending summer holidays down in Port Isaac. I love the ruggedness of its coastline and the food is amazing.

We've started asking everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little more traditional?

I'd say a little more traditional. My alarm goes off at 7am and the first thing I do when I wake up is meditate.

Then I'm up and responding to emails and usually on the phone before 9am. I normally take the dog for a walk around lunch as it helps to have some thinking time. Other than that, I'm usually on the road at least once a week meeting owners and finding out more about their beautiful homes.

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