

Sojourn FEATURE

RENTING OUT YOUR CABIN

It can be a moneymaker if done right

Leah Dobkin



Money doesn't grow on trees, but for me it sort of feels like it does. Pine trees, to be exact. My husband built a log cabin from pine trees, a haven we intended to use for our own recreation and retirement. That is, until the economic downturn forced us to alter our plans.

With other income sources declining or disappearing, we decided that the monthly \$1,500 in mortgage, taxes and utilities for our cabin was more than we could handle easily. With quite a bit of reluctance, perhaps even terror, we decided to rent out our dream vacation home to strangers. Despite the butterflies in our bellies, the experience so far has been surprisingly joyful and, more importantly, profitable.

How profitable? Our cabin rental has completely exceeded our expectations. In the last 12 months, we made approximately \$43,000! My husband and I spend 14 hours a week managing the property, which comes out to about \$52 per hour. Our occupancy rate is 100 percent during the summer and 90 percent during the available weekends throughout the year, plus numerous rentals during the week.

It's a nice supplemental salary for people experiencing unemployment, underemployment, shrinking nest eggs or deteriorating retirement income.

The first thing you need to do is get your property in front of potential renters. To market my cabin, I joined three rental vacation sites: Vacation Rental By Owners-VRBO (www.vrbo.com/321719), HomeAway (www.homeaway.com/346936), and Flip Key (www.flipkey325331) I also created a web site (www.buckhornlakecabin.com), joined the local Chamber of Commerce, and created a brochure that the Chamber displays. I put a lot of care into writing the description of our log cabin, and included great photos so viewers could understand what is special about our cabin.

I have a steady stream of queries, and reply personally to each one. I try to make the visit so memorable that guests will want to return. There are chocolate mints on each pillow, high-quality linen, and no electronics, except for a music player.

Screening your guests is also important. Although I communicate by e-mail with most of my guests, I always talk to them at least twice on the phone. I also collect the date of births on the rental agreement for the guests staying at our cabin, so I can do criminal searches, if needed. The dates of birth are also useful if I want to send a postcard reminding guests that they could celebrate their birthdays at the cabin. I collect a \$300 refundable damage deposit. My housekeeper checks out the cabin after everyone leaves, and lets me know if there are any damaged, broken or missing items.

Some vacation rental web sites are international. We have received guests from as far away as Germany and New Zea-

land, but most of our guests come from the surrounding states, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin.

If you are open to accepting guests from abroad, you need to be able to identify, and then ignore international scams. I have received requests to rent my cabin from four nuns and four priests, six newlywed couples, and seven businessmen, all supposedly from other countries. I could write an entire chapter about how to avoid scam artists, but I can distill it to four things you should never do.

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1. Don't cash a check from someone you declined, but they sent a check anyway.
2. Don't send refunds for cancellations until your checks have cleared your bank.
3. Don't accept more money than the amount due, and
4. Don't send money back for overpayment.

So far, the vast majority of our guests have been wonderful. They have appreciated the love and care we put into designing, building and decorating the cabin and appreciate our "no electronic stress zone." We have received wonderful reviews, and now that we have moved beyond the first year, we are starting to get more repeat visitors. We have facilitated many family and friend reunions. The peaceful environment has been a perfect place for guests to get reacquainted with themselves, family, friends, and nature. We just wish we could visit more often.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Good local housekeepers, backup housekeepers and handymen are essential for success.
- Every few months, research the vacation web sites to get to know your competition, and their pricing and policies.
- Invest in furnishings that make your vacation home feel unique.
- Become the "hostess with the mostess." Get to know local entertainment, recreation, restaurants and special and seasonal activities, so that you can share this information with your guests.
- Enjoy your guests and yourself. This is a happy business.