

How to Get Started with Overnight Stays

Ten Question Assessment to see if farmstays or overnight experiences are the right fit for you:

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How comfortable are you talking with people you don't know? Can you share your experience of what it's like to be a farmer or rancher?

Can you see yourself (or a staff member) working as a guide, a reservation clerk, a cook, and a housekeeper?

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Do you know how your land is zoned and whether you are allowed to add lodging? Have you spoken with your municipality?

Do you have access to funding to invest in a new building or remodel, and to purchase the furniture and amenities required to host guests overnight?

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Do you know how many nights need to be booked, and at what rate, to break even on your investment and ultimately make a profit?

Have you researched the local competition: what they charge, what they offer, how often they are booked?

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Have you considered your legal structure and what insurance is necessary to cover your family, business, and guests?

Even if you don't have a website of your own, do you understand how the internet works and how to use it as a tool for marketing?

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Do you have any training in hospitality? If not, have you experienced enough to understand what is and is not acceptable for visitors?

Most importantly, have you included your partner and family members in this discussion? Is there a clear understanding of the commitment in terms of time, energy, and strain on your relationships?

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Booking and reservations

There are many methods for accepting reservations:



Phone



Email



Direct booking



Social media
booking requests



Helpful tips for managing your bookings

- Use a reservation system that tracks data for all site visitors, whether or not they book. Tracking data on site visitors is key to understanding opportunities for your business growth.
- If you use an overnight stay booking website, remember that you still must comply with zoning regulations, Department of Health inspections, and tax liabilities.

Setting accurate expectations is key to a great visitor experience:

Throughout the reservation process, you should communicate clearly about the available amenities, particularly if they are different from 'standard' overnight accommodations.

Unless you tell them otherwise, guests will expect clean linens, hot water and a sanitary, dust-free environment. You should ensure that your marketing materials and pre-arrival communications indicate whether you have:

- Cats, pollen or other common allergens on site
- Stairs or other barriers to mobility
- Air conditioning or heating
- Televisions
- Cell-phone service
- Wireless internet
- Beds of different sizes and types
- Farm-animal odors that may permeate the accommodations or the immediate surroundings



Photo courtesy of Greenfield Highland Beef, VT

Guest policies

When setting policies, think about how they will affect your life as a farmer as well as your guests' experience. You will need to set some rules in stone (e.g., rules that keep safety hazards off limits to guests), while others may be more flexible. Here are some example guest policies to get you thinking about what will work best for your business.

Rental contract Will you have guests sign a rental contract outlining the policies and terms of their stay?

Cancellation Will you charge your customers for cancellations? How much notice will you require?

Pets Will guests be permitted to bring pets? What types? Would you ask for a pet deposit?

Children Are children welcome to stay overnight, and would you implement a minimum age requirement?

Curfew Will you require that guests stay in or stay quiet during certain hours?



Photo courtesy of We Bee Keepin', TX



Photo courtesy of Verdant View Farms, PA

Check-in and check-out times How late are you willing to stay awake waiting for late arrivals? And how early will you need departing guests to vacate so you can reset the room?

Breakfast time and place (if served) Will you deliver breakfast to guest rooms? Do you have a dining room? Can guests choose the time they want to eat?

Smoking policy Is smoking allowed on the premises?

Payment How will you accept payment: cash, check, major credit card, PayPal? Will you charge a deposit to hold the room and reservation?



Your new venture may have a range of effects on your neighbors, from more traffic to people accidentally trespassing on their land. It is important to give your guests guidelines about where they can and can't go. If possible, share your plans with your immediate neighbors when in the planning stages.

Activities

The amenities and attractions you offer may be an extension of what your farm already does. Guests may enjoy walking through and learning about vegetable gardens or livestock pastures, or come specifically to milk a goat, ride a horse, or pick and eat sweet corn fresh from the garden.



Helpful tips for making your experience more memorable

In addition to the unique activities you might offer, some simple amenities can add aesthetic and functional value to a visitor's experience:

- Area guide to nearby attractions
- Bath supplies, such as salts, bubbles, or artisan soaps
- Beverages—tea, coffee, lemonade
- Bicycles for your guests to tour the countryside
- Fresh-cut flowers, produce baskets
- Porch swing, outdoor seating, or fire pit
- Shopping discounts for products from your farm

Note: Be sure to communicate any new activities to your insurance provider. Insurance rates may change depending on the activities available to guests.

If you're looking for a way to host guests overnight but don't have a spare bedroom or accommodations, camping is a great option. [Click here](#) to learn more about how to get started with camp sites on your farm.

What about overnight camps?

You may choose to host an overnight camp at your farm. If you do, refer to the [On-Farm Education section](#) to learn more about what activities might be of interest to your camp attendees. And remember: while you may not have to consider some elements of a traditional overnight stay, you'll still have to ask yourself a lot of the same questions and plan thoroughly for your overnight guests.

It's also always good to review the resources available from the American Camp Association. [Click here to learn more.](#)



Photo courtesy of Reviving Real Foods, TX

Overnight Stay Checklist

Ready to get started with your overnight farm stay? Developing a business can be a long-term project. This simple checklist will help you break down your planning actions into simple steps. Make sure to give yourself a reasonable timeline and set deadlines to help you stay on track.

- Visit several farm stays for research and development.
- Check in with the appropriate planning and zoning departments to identify any barriers to starting a farm stay.
- Develop a farm stay business plan. Choose a name.
- Describe concept and design. Plan operations.
- Develop a marketing plan.
- Complete financial projections.
- Secure municipal planning and zoning approval.
- Establish business structure (in consultation with attorney/CPA).
- Contact your Department of Health for permits and to ensure compliance.
- Contact your town's permit specialist to ensure you are getting all appropriate permits/licenses.
- Register a trade name and be sure you're registered to pay rooms and meals taxes.
- Complete renovations and farm stay design.
- Finalize all necessary operational, marketing and administrative details.
- Set up a reservation process and policies.
- Develop and launch website.
- Design marketing materials.
- Purchase insurance as needed.
- Launch your farm stay!