



We're the reinventing *landladies!*

The phrase 'B&B' used to conjure up visions of dreary places to stay. But these women tapped into the growing trend for characterful holiday pads – and their businesses are booming...



'Our guests want to see a different side of London'

Kerry Cowmey, 42, is an Airbnb host and lives in Crystal Palace, London, with her husband, Simon, 45, and their children, Sadie, 16, and Louis, 14.

When I received my first booking through Airbnb last May, I couldn't resist saying "I told you so" to my husband, Simon. He was sceptical that anyone would want to stay in our converted summerhouse in the suburbs, a 35-minute train journey from central London. Now that

we're fully booked for most of the year, it's safe to say I was right!

We bought our five-bedroom home in 2014, and with it came an unfinished summerhouse and a converted garage on the side of the house. I planned to use the spaces as a granny flat for my mother-in-law during her visits. But in January 2016, I quit my job as a deputy head teacher. I knew I wanted a break from teaching, but I still needed to have an income. Seeing those spaces sit empty, I began to formulate a plan.

After doing some research into Airbnb – a website that matches holidaymakers with accommodation – I could see there was a huge demand for cheap and comfortable rooms, and a trend for experiencing destinations like a local. I spoke to as many people as I could about their own experience of booking through the site, and looked at what was already available in our area. I was convinced that this could be a great way of generating some extra income, providing I could keep my costs down.

I spent around £5,000 – using money from savings and from selling old children's toys and clothes on eBay – on renovating the two spaces to turn them into functional, comfortable studios. In each one, I had a small kitchen fitted and created a separate bathroom by sectioning off part of the room. I bought two daybeds and convertible armchairs on eBay, so each studio could sleep up to three people.

It took around six weeks to get the summerhouse, which we called Little

Venice, ready to be advertised in May 2016. The second space – The Snug – was finished in the September.

To become an Airbnb host, you have to first register with the site and then upload photos and information about your property. I paid a photographer friend £50 to take some estate agent-style photos and I wrote a detailed description – down to the square footage – so guests knew exactly what to expect.

MEET AND GREET

At first, I charged £35 a night for each studio, but that's since risen to £42 a night, and it's always the same price, whether it's one person staying or three. Guests pay via the website, which deducts a 3-5% commission from the nightly rate before the money is transferred to my account.

Within days of my first studio being on the site, I had a booking. I always include a welcome pack of essentials and I also offer to pick guests up from the station. Both spaces have a private entrance at the side of the house, so guests can come and go as they please. After they leave, I do the cleaning myself, unless I'm working as a supply teacher, in which case I hire a cleaner for a few hours.

Now, 15 months since I started using the site, we have an occupancy rate of 80-90% and an annual turnover of around £22,000. I love meeting our guests who hail from all over the world – from backpackers in their twenties to pensioners who want to see a different side of London, that's off the tourist trail!

• airbnb.co.uk/rooms/13619311



KERRY'S B&B BUSINESS TIPS

- There are thousands of properties on Airbnb, so amazing photos will help yours to stand out.
- Decide what you're going to charge per night and kit out the space accordingly. You don't need to blow the budget for a cheap rental.
- The Airbnb website has advice and tips on becoming a host, and you can connect with other hosts to learn from them, too. ➔

'I'm thrilled when I read a glowing review!'

Pat Greenwood, 56, runs the Seaflovers B&B in Frogmore, South Devon, with her husband, Anthony, 59.

Every time a new guest comes to stay, I have the same ritual: I give their room one final check to ensure everything is perfect. I'll arrange freshly cut flowers in a vase by the window, which looks out over the stunning Frogmore estuary, and hope our guests enjoy the view as much as I do.

My husband Anthony and I fell into running a B&B almost by accident. We decided to move to Devon from our home in Gloucestershire in 2011, to help care for Anthony's elderly parents. Our plan was that I would spend Monday to Thursday in Cirencester working at a further education college, then commute to Devon every weekend.

We began converting my in-laws' home into a new house for us with an annexe for them, using the money from the sale of our home. But it wasn't long before the six-hour round-trip began to take its toll. I hated being apart from Anthony, too. We wanted to launch a business we could run in the area that would bring in an income, while also allowing us time to spend with the family.

Anthony is a trained chef, and we both had experience working in the hospitality industry. Together, we came up with the idea of setting up a B&B, drawing on influences from previous holidays to South Africa and Canada. We wanted to emulate the type of B&B we'd stayed in: luxurious, airy and modern – a world away from nylon sheets and uninspiring breakfast buffets.

We amended our building plans to create three en suite guest rooms, along with fire doors and fire alarms. In total, we spent an additional £15,000 on the renovations, furnishings and fixtures for the three rooms, on top of what we were already spending on the rest of the house.

We paid a website designer £500 to create our site and took a food hygiene course run by our local council, who also inspected our kitchen.

In April 2012, we opened for business. When our first

booking came in, just days after opening, it felt wonderful. All the hard work had been worth it.

Five years on, we're generally full from May to October, so we've had to learn how to manage our cash flow to prepare for the quieter winter months. We charge between £120 and £140 a night, and there's a minimum two-night stay.

INVESTED IN THE FUTURE

My day begins around 6.45am when I get up to bake fresh bread. It's little touches like that which, I hope, set us apart and make guests feel cared for.

Anthony and I prepare breakfast together. It's a sociable affair, served in the communal dining room, and we often chat to our guests. I love seeing people relaxed and enjoying our food.

A cleaner helps me service the rooms, but I manage all the admin and bookings myself. It's not a chore – keeping the business ticking over and well-run is very satisfying because we benefit from it!

The evenings are our own, which we spend with my father-in-law, Raymond – sadly, my mother-in-law, Evelyn, passed away in 2013. We have our own quarters, and it's good to have that space to relax.

It's impossible not to become personally invested in a B&B – it's important to me that guests leave happy. When I read a glowing review online, I am thrilled. Their satisfaction is what I strive for every day.'

• seaflovers.co.uk

'We're very proud to be part of the community'

Louise Oldfield, 46, and her husband, Liam, 52, run The Reading Rooms B&B in Margate, Kent.

Since we opened our boutique B&B in 2009, this part of the hospitality industry has undergone a transformation, with a growing trend for special and unique places to stay.

Liam and I bought the five-storey, Grade II-listed property in 2007 for £330,000, at the height of the pre-crash market. At the time, it was laid out as 10 bedsits and needed a complete renovation.

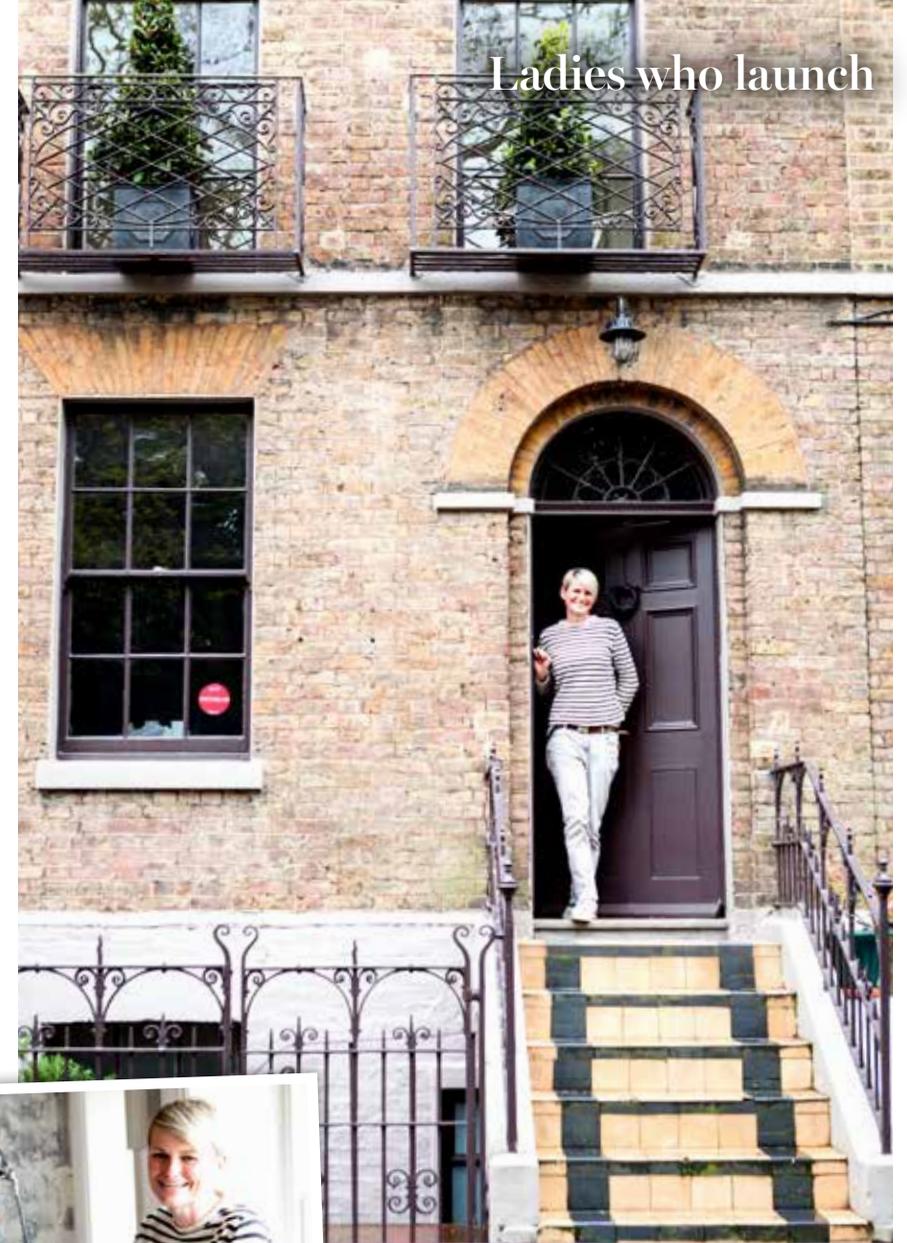
We'd chosen to move to Margate because of its proximity to London and beautiful coastline, and the town was undergoing a revival, with a growing arts scene and regeneration projects.

In the past, we'd run a small creative studio together – I looked after marketing and project management, and Liam worked in design – and before that we worked in the nightclub industry. We both enjoyed looking after people, so transforming the house into a B&B felt like a very natural thing to do.

JOB FOR LIFE

We decided to throw everything we had at the house renovation to create a three-room boutique bed and breakfast. We needed a new roof, central heating, bathrooms, furnishings, the works. In the end, we spent around £170,000, which was a huge financial commitment.

Because the property is a Grade II-listed building, we had to liaise closely with the local council's building control and conservation departments. Liam, who studied architecture at university, oversaw the renovations with a team of contractors, while I set out plans for running and marketing the business.



LOUISE'S B&B BUSINESS TIPS

- A successful B&B gives people something more that they don't have at home, so offer the very best you can – from food to furnishings. You can't skimp and give people less.
- Your local council is an invaluable source of information on the rules and regulations you must comply with.
- Be prepared for a job that's 24/7, 365 days a year. It's a business that's hard to switch off from.

Rather than cram in as many rooms as possible, we decided to have just three, each taking up an entire floor. Each one has a large bedroom and en suite bathroom with a cast iron roll-top bath.

We hit the ground running and have never looked back. We are busy all year round and full 70% of the time. Our rooms cost £170 a night for a midweek stay for two with breakfast. Liam and

I live in the house, and we have two housekeepers who help us keep everything running smoothly.

It's a full-on job and we only close for a few days over Christmas. But it's worth it. We love living by the sea, with no commute to work, and we're very proud to be part of the community. Moving to Margate is the best thing we've done.'

• thereadingroomsargate.co.uk



PAT'S B&B BUSINESS TIPS

- You'll need specialist insurance if you're running a B&B, so seek advice from your broker.
- Create the sort of B&B you'd like to stay in yourself, as that will keep you passionate about running it.
- Invest in multiple sets of bedlinens and towels so you always have spares.



Feature: Eimear O'Hagan Photos: Chris Lobina, Adji Brown, Andrew Hayes-Watkins