



5 Ways to Make Money in Agritourism

Agritourism offers a variety of agriculturally based experiences, ranging from seasonal festivals, educational tours to “pick your own” produce farms and on-farm accommodations. Learn more about the benefits of agritourism.

In This Article Pick-Your-Own & Farmers' Markets Seasonal Events A Vacation Ranch Bed and Breakfast Educational Tours Help is Available By Barbara Sheridan

Agricultural tourism, or “agritourism,” is one of the fastest-growing trends in the travel industry. It combines agricultural settings, services and products with a unique tourism experience.

Long recognized as a valuable business type in Europe, agritourist spots have become a popular destination across the farmlands and rural settings of North America.

Many people look forward to vacations as a break from life in the city and suburbs. Whether it's just a day trip or a weeklong holiday, people are increasingly turning to rural settings for relief. Agritourism offers a large variety of agriculturally based experiences, ranging from seasonal festivals, educational tours and “pick your own” produce farms to outdoor adventures and on-farm accommodations.

Given the wide variety of innovative products and services that are available on a farm, an agritourism business can provide both the full-time and hobby-farmer with added benefits such as extra income and employment for family members.

1) Pick-Your-Own & Farmers' Markets

Also known as “U-Pick” throughout America, “pick your own” farms provide customers with the opportunity to pick their own produce at a savings to both the customer and the farmer, who would normally have to pay for the labor involved. At the same time, this business can offer visitors an education in agriculture, including how crops are grown and which crops thrive best in a given climate. In addition to pick your own, many farmers sell their produce right on the farm, either through simple stands or through larger-scale country markets, to entice visitors with the concept of one-stop produce shopping in a simpler setting.

Baughner's Orchard and Farm is a 100-year-old, family-operated farm located in Westminster, Md., that offers “pick your own” from June through October. With two market locations—one on and one off the farm—as well as a bakery and small restaurant, Baughner's has a lot to offer.

“We're basically a fifth-generation family business that started out with Mrs. Baughner baking pies out of her basement and selling them door-to-door on a little cart,” explains Cheryl Vural, Market Manager at Baughner's.

“Those pies are still made in our bakery located right here on the farm, which is run by her granddaughter.”

Vural adds that when starting up an agricultural business, getting the entire family involved can certainly be beneficial. However, as any marketing textbook will tell you, it helps to find a special niche and expand on it.

“Find something unique that no one else is doing,” she says. “There are a lot of farms that do pick your own, but there aren't any in this county, for example. So we have a large customer base. Likewise, there's some produce we grow that others don't. People come from three and four states away just for our sour cherries because no one else offers them.” Once you've identified your niche, make sure you promote it in all of your marketing materials, whether it's newspaper ads, billboards or just a roadside sign.

Top

2) Seasonal Events Attract Tourists

Seasonal events such as harvest festivals, Easter- or Halloween-themed activities and Winterfests are a unique way of attracting tourists to your farm during specific months of the year. This option benefits farmers who don't want to be open



to the public year-round or who simply want to bring in income during a slower part of the season.

Dan Pawlowski and his wife, Diane, operate Pumpkinville, the oldest original pumpkin farm in New York, located outside of Great Valley. Catering to families with their motto, "Your family's fun is our business," Pumpkinville not only offers a limitless supply of pumpkins, but fall harvest attractions such as hayrides, pony rides, farm animals, a cornfield maze, picnic pavilion and a pick-your-own pumpkin patch as well.

With a passion for agriculture, Dan Pawlowski left a position in business 11 years ago to pursue a career in growing pumpkins. "We originally started out just selling pumpkins; since then we gradually evolved into an agricultural entertainment farm," he says. "We discovered that there's never much money in growing anything; the box stores have seen to that."

Pawlowski has carved his niche by operating an entertainment center that offers families the opportunity to spend a day taking part in fall harvest activities on his farm during September and October.

"It's a fun business, but it can also be quite competitive; you have to work hard to stay on top," explains Pawlowski.

"If you don't want to work 14-hour days for at least two months straight, then this isn't for you. And the rest of the year, you're growing your crop and getting the place ready for opening day. You might have to work long, hard hours, but you still get to be your own boss and you can get a lot of satisfaction out of the job."

Of course, the lure of working for oneself is one of the strongest incentives for this kind of hobby-farm venture. But the more you want to offer, the more likely you are to need help. A typical fall-harvest farm might require 10 or more employees for such non-farming activities as traffic and parking management, ride operation and ticket sales.

Planning ahead for that two-month spike in expenses like payroll and employee taxes will help you get the most from your agritourism business.

Top

3) A Vacation Ranch Offers a Unique Getaway

© Courtesy Black Mountain Ranch With the expanding population of urban America, many tourists are looking to ranch vacations as a way to fill the need for a taste of the great outdoors, a relaxed atmosphere and a different way of life. The possibilities for guest ranches are limitless, offering a variety of specialties including cattle drives, horseback riding, cook-outs, rafting, rodeo activities, and hunting and fishing.

Nestled in the foothills of the Wind River Mountains of western Wyoming, Black Mountain Guest Ranch offers tourists a chance to get away from all the hustle and bustle with a true American West ranching getaway.

When Black Mountain owners Rosie and Dan Ratigan decided 19 years ago to open up their ranch to domestic and international tourists, they were operating it as a full service bed and breakfast. But they soon found they had no time to themselves. With a small change to their business plan, they now offer a spacious, newly remodeled country guesthouse with a fully equipped kitchen situated on their property at the North Fork of the Popo Agie River.

"We no longer offer food services, as we were literally working from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. each day," says Rosie Ratigan. "But we found that if we offered them a lovely, clean guesthouse with a fully equipped kitchen, the guests were more than happy to cook on their own schedule. It's so important to offer vacationers a separate facility so that they have their own privacy and freedom."

With popular activities such as on-ranch trout fishing, local hiking and horseback riding, as well as numerous historical attractions nearby, Black Mountain Guest Ranch has proven to be a popular tourist destination with something for everyone in the family.

Remembering that location, as well as marketing, makes or breaks a business, it's important to promote activities that are easily accessible in your area. Trying to provide an all-inclusive, resort-style vacation is best left to the big companies. Travelers usually expect a ranch vacation to have some activities, but it doesn't hurt to advertise other close-by amenities as well.



Top

4) A Bed and Breakfast Can be Quite Profitable

Often referred to as a “B & B,” the practice of hosting overnight guests who yearn for a calm, nostalgic environment has been around since the 19th century. For the hobby farmer, agritourism businesses such as these can be quite profitable, whether run as a full-time or part-time operation.

Bill and Annette Hendrixson operate McCoy Place Bed and Breakfast in Crossville, Tenn. Situated in the 70,000-acre Catoosa Wildlife Management Area and surrounded by century-old towering oaks and lush gardens, this 1920s farmhouse is the only remaining house left in what was a thriving community in the 1800s.

“We started this business on a lark,” explains owner/operator Annette Hendrixson. “This was originally my parents’ farm; it’s been in the family since the 1870s. After my mother passed away, I really didn’t know what I was going to do with it, as we didn’t live here at the time.”

The Hendrixsons didn’t want to sell the 60-acre farm, but were well aware of the costs involved in its upkeep.

“I thought opening up a bed and breakfast would be the perfect solution,” says Hendrixson. “With a bit of planning and a lot of hard work, it’s been quite successful; most weekends I have guests.”

Pampered with gourmet meals, good local wine, and nearby recreational activities like golfing, canoeing and winery tours, visitors find McCoy Place a perfect retreat from the stress of city life.

While the bed-and-breakfast model typically requires more time from its owners in interacting with guests, few B & Bs offer any on-site activities other than a library or board games. Guests are encouraged to discover the area surrounding the B & B; having only breakfast included in the price of the room gives guests a gentle push to explore.

Having such operating procedures in place before opening will help you balance your work and personal life. “I’m only open Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights,” says Hendrixson, “So I still have time for myself and the things I enjoy, like gardening.”

Top

5) Educational Tours Builds Your Brand and Educates, Too

Many farming operations have begun to incorporate educational tours into their daily schedules, not only for the increase in visitors, but also to raise awareness of local agricultural products. Tours associated with on-farm productions such as making apple cider or maple syrup, or livestock production can help educate the public on the importance of maintaining agricultural lands at a time when many farming areas are being squeezed by encroaching development.

Tours are particularly attractive to schools that are looking for ways to teach children about agricultural life in an entertaining and engaging way; marketing to teachers and administrators can be profitable for any farming hobbyist. Because they are easily integrated into typical farming operations, additional overhead and manpower are low. In most cases, the tours can be run by the farm owners themselves.

Of course, having tours on an operational farm may require some additional homework on your part. If the farm is medium to large and the tour will include heavy machinery, it is important to know what safety laws are in place and how to implement them. While school boards typically insure their staff and students during field trips, it may pay to discuss the matter upfront, so that everything is in place and safe before the students arrive.

Top

Help is Available When Starting Up

Whether you’re opening a ranch in Montana, a B & B in Connecticut or a corn maze in Tennessee, remember that you don’t have to go it alone. There is plenty of help available for people starting a small agritourism business.

One such example is the Kansas Agritourism Advisory Council, a non-profit group that combines government resources and small business support to promote the industry. These groups not only provide expertise on specific areas of agritourism, but also list resources for business aspects from start-up and financing procedures to marketing tips and insurance.



While agritourism can offer farm owners benefits like a supplemental revenue stream or employment for family members, it's not for everyone. In addition to the challenges of any business startup, agritourism businesses typically require hard work and long hours, and should not be considered "get-rich-quick" schemes. However, with a little bit of planning, you can provide both your guests and yourself with a very unique and lucrative experience.

"It may be a lot of hard work, but I wouldn't trade it for the world," says Dan Pawlowski of Pumpkinville. "I may make half the living, but I now have twice the life."

Top

This article first appeared in the September/October 2006 Hobby Farms magazine. Pick up a copy at your local newsstand, bookstore or tack and feed store. [Click Here](#) to subscribe to HF or buy a copy online.

About the Author

Barbara Sheridan is a freelance writer, photographer and 2005 American Horse Publications award winner who resides in Ontario, Canada.