

How to Develop a Farm Stay



Future
Generations
University

Agritourism has grown as a way to add income to current agricultural operations, as well as provide an opportunity for people from all walks of life to have a unique farm experience.

Hosting farm stays is best suited to those who enjoy spending time with people, like explaining their farming practices, and don't mind answering a lot of questions. Many guests will have no prior experience with agriculture and some may have little experience with rural living.

What makes a successful farm stay?

- Providing an authentic farm or ranch experience.
- Providing an educational experience.
- Providing excellent customer service.
- Providing adequate public facilities.
- Maintaining a safe and accessible environment.
- Creating good community relations.

Why host a farm retreat?

Farm stays are popular for landowners because rather than learning a new skill or starting a completely new business venture, a producer can successfully expand their current farm operation by simply building on what they are already doing. Sharing skills, knowledge, and regular farm procedures not only makes for an authentic retreat experience, there is no new equipment needed or new skills to develop when it comes to sharing these activities with guests.

Setting long term goals:

Whether it is providing extra income, teaching workshops, sharing a unique farm or recreational

area with others, serving a specific community, or a combination of goals, determining your long term goals will help in developing a farm stay plan. The following guide is based on a successful agricultural retreat model that has grown and developed over several years and will help you assess if a farm stay is a good fit for you and your farm operation. It is a guide and not meant to serve as legal advice.

Financial Resources

It is necessary to determine how much money you are willing to spend, and also how much you are able to earn in return. Be realistic about your financial goals and situation. Assess the costs, benefits, and risks of hosting agritourism retreats. Use what capital you have available to you to achieve your goals. It is critical to keep clear and concise financial and tax records. Good record keeping will help you evaluate where your business is incurring profits and losses.





Chris and Melissa Grimes own and operate Mountain-Cajun Getaway, a retreat for combat veterans, nestled in the beautiful mountains of Circleville, West Virginia. Their retreat is a passion project, one that offers a healing space where veterans can reconnect with their families after the experience of service-related separation and trauma. Drawing from his own experience returning home after a deployment, Chris saw first hand how difficult it was to reconnect with his wife and sons after being immersed in military life with his Navy family and its rigid structure for long periods of time. This is a challenge faced by many military members and their families, especially when transitioning back to civilian life. The Grimes' saw how much their friends enjoyed spending a weekend at his family's homeplace; how the beauty, quiet charm, sharing dinners together, and laid-back lifestyle kept them coming back. Upon retiring from the US Navy, the couple decided to move back to WV permanently and open their home as a year-round wellness retreat to serve military families. They now host around 20 families each year and continue to learn how to improve the retreat experience for both their guests and themselves.

"Absolute beauty out here. Once you step foot here, all your stress, all your worries, everything that's going on back home goes away. You feel at peace here. The folks I bring out here are constantly asking to come back. I've seen a true difference in the way they are before and after they come here, and that's how I know that this place is magical."
—Blake Hoyt - guest MCG

Costs to consider

- Labor
- Liability insurance
- Additions or upgrades to existing amenities
- Infrastructure
- Marketing

Mountain-Cajun Getaway is not for profit, all profits made from farm sales go back into their veteran retreat services, providing food and hosting future families, along with maintenance to keep the retreat running. Chris and Melissa invested money up front to hire an organization called The Mission Makers to help them secure the funding needed to get started. They paid \$250/month for the organization to write grants, one of which helped Mountain-Cajun Getaway receive a total of \$30,000 through the company Doterra. In addition, the Grimes' received some mentorship from other organizations, along with Future Generations University, who provided support with maple syrup operations, which plays an important role in their retreats.

Assessing yourself and your farm as a host:

While retreats can be rewarding, they do require a lot of thought and effort, and they are not for everyone. Before you decide to host a retreat there are some things you should think about:

- Do you enjoy talking and spending time with people you don't know?
- Do you enjoy sharing your experiences as a farmer and demonstrating various farm operations?
- Do you enjoy meeting people from different walks of life and opening your home to them?
- Can you see yourself as wearing many hats such as planner, host, teacher, tour guide, cook, and maid or do you have others available that are willing to be a part of your retreat operation?
- Do you have the time to devote to entertaining guests in addition to your current farming operations?
- What length of stay are you planning?
 - Overnight
 - Weekend
 - 3-4 days
- What types of activities do you plan on offering?
 - Immersive, on site that include hands-on farm activities or demonstrations
 - Off site activities that you may or may not participate in with guests
 - Discuss or offer a comprehensive list of activities

that guests may enjoy on their own

- Have you researched other farm retreats, either in person or online to compare amenities, pricing, and what they offer? Are there other farm retreats in your area, how will yours be distinct?
- Are you hosting people inside your main home or in a separate space?
 - If separate, do any new structures need to be built or improved before hosting?
 - A separate bathroom
 - An additional sleeping space to add capacity?
 - ADA Accessibility

Assessing your strengths and weaknesses:

SWOT Analysis

One powerful tool that can be used for self assessment of your agritourism enterprise is a SWOT analysis. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

What are internal strengths and weaknesses that exist for you and your property as a host site? Examples of strengths could be you have a six bedroom farmhouse that has easy access to bedrooms, a large kitchen that is perfect for preparing meals and hosting guests, and you have a unique farming operation that people would enjoy experiencing. Examples of weaknesses might be: you only have one bathroom, your guest lodging isn't easily accessible during certain times of the year, you spend the majority of time on farming operations and don't have extra time to entertain guests on the

days most people are available to visit. Weakness aren't necessarily deal breakers, but they are areas you would need to consider and strengthen before moving forward with your plan.

External opportunities and threats are factors that exist outside of your property. What opportunities are available for your business to thrive? Some examples of opportunities are collaborations with other local businesses to provide food and amenities to your guests, partnering with a neighboring farm to provide activities or learning experiences for guests, or recommending a local restaurant, who in turn advertises for you by carrying your brochure. Are there clear potential threats to your business? Examples of threats could be another farm retreat nearby that closely resembles your operation or your farm being close to a busy road or area with a lot of noise or traffic. Characteristics that you can look to strengthen. Also think about external factors that can be beneficial or threatening.

As you're conducting your SWOT analysis, think about your goals as a retreat operator. Do you want to solely focus on hosting overnight retreats? What are your aspirations for running this business? What sort of financial and time commitments are you willing to devote? Consider other areas of revenue and engagement within your agritourism operation such as hosting events, educational activities, outdoor recreational activities, etc.

SWOT ANALYSIS

Internal to you and your enterprise	Strengths
	Weaknesses
External to you and your enterprise	Opportunities
	Threats

Business Structure

If your farm is already registered as a business, does your farm stay enterprise work within your current business structure? If you are not already established as a business, you will need to choose a business structure before you register. The table below shows some primary differences and similarities between business types. This is an area where it is often helpful to seek legal or professional tax advice to determine what business structure would best suit your operation.

The Grimes’ invested in the help of a lawyer to help them navigate business structure and planning. They wanted to offer their retreat to any military family going through transition, and wanted them to be able to focus on spending time together rather than worrying about how to pay for a vacation. Mountain-Cajun Getaway is a 501c3 nonprofit organization. Guests pay only for their travel and Chris and Melissa cover all other costs by way of private donations, grants, and sales from their maple syrup and other products that they make on the farm, which operates under the umbrella of their nonprofit.

Not everyone will operate a nonprofit organization. There are several routes of business registration to consider.

Pricing Your Accommodations

When pricing your services, it is critical to think of your costs, customers and competition.

- How much does it cost to host a retreat for a family of four?
 - In addition to food and supplies, consider costs of things like utilities and additional labor

- Is my price set at a rate that my target customers are willing and able to pay?
- Are my prices comparable to similar operations in the surrounding area?
 - Research other farm retreats in your area to compare
- Can I make money with the price I have set?

To sustain your operations, your prices will eventually need to be able to cover your costs.

Your pricing strategy should include costs of marketing and advertising. Consider offering different options for pricing such as weekday and weekend rates, seasonal rates, package deals, etc. Enterprise budgets are a helpful tool to record and assess the profits and losses of a given enterprise.

Planning your farm stay

There are two main perspectives to examine: the perspective of the guests and the perspective of the hosts. Consider what makes your retreat space unique, what will stick out and be memorable to your guests? Also, consider your capacity and workload as a host, be realistic about what you can sustainably manage.

Reservations

There are different ways to take reservations for your retreat and you will need to explore these and determine which way, or a combination of ways best fits your enterprise.

Business Type	One Owner?	Two or More Owners?	Limited Liability Protection?	Business Name Protection?
Sole Proprietorship	✓			
General Proprietorship		✓		
Corporation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Limited Liability Company (LLC)	✓	✓	✓	✓

- Use a platform like AirBnB, Hipcamp, or Harvest Host
- Manage reservations on your own farm website
- Accept reservations through email and phone

Guest Experience

It's important to let guests know what to expect and also to find out what they expect to experience in order to make their stay an exceptional one. Having a website or social media presence with plenty of pictures of guest rooms, your property, and other highlights of your property will give them a glimpse of life on your farm. Once they register, it is helpful to have some communication with your guests to learn more about them and what they are hoping to experience, or to share your itinerary and walk them through a typical stay.

The average stay at the Grimes' retreat is three to four days. Once a guest inquires about a stay at Mountain-Cajun Getaway, Chris and Melissa have a few informal conversations over the phone or video chat with a family to talk about what the family would like to experience while on their stay. Some families want time to relax with no planned activities, while others want to go on hikes and outdoor adventures with the Grimes as their guides, or fully immerse themselves in farm life - drying herbs or canning tomatoes in the summer, or in the sugar shack, boiling sap for maple syrup while the snow comes down in winter.

Guest Policies

It's good practice to have some rules that you share with guests who will be staying. Think about both the guests' experience and yours as a farmer, as well as your property.

Depending upon how you are operating your retreat, you may want to consider rules around:

- Payments
- Cancellation policy
- Check in and check out times
- Non-smoking policy or designated smoking area
- Pet policy
- Noise
- Off limit areas

Food and Dining

Food and dining is an important consideration for your retreat. Some important questions to consider are: how much time and labor do you have to spend on food services? Will you provide all meals during a stay or are



guests expected to provide some of their own? If you plan to have meals on site, it is important to have some flexibility in planning. In addition to your planned menu, it is beneficial to have some quick to prepare backup meal plans. If you and your guests are planning a mid hike picnic but have a sudden downpour, or if your day trip goes a bit off the beaten path and you are tired and hungry when you get back home, you may not feel like taking the time to prepare a big meal.

Farm fresh food is a big part of the draw in any agritourism based retreat and also presents an opportunity to highlight other local businesses in your area. This can lead to partnerships, shared promotions and more sales for your farm business. When possible, use foods from your farm and the local area to connect visitors to a sense of place. Tying food and place together for the guest can lend to creating a unique and memorable experience.





Mountain-Cajun Getaway uses meals as intentional family time spent together, Chris and Melissa consider it one of the most important components of their retreats and one that helps their guests really feel at home and connected. The Grimes' invite their guests to bring foods to share and to help with meals, preparing foods from local farmers, as well as herbs and vegetables picked right from their backyard garden, and eggs gathered from their chickens. Enjoying meals together at the big farm table is a huge part of what makes their retreats so rewarding for both the hosts and the guests, the dining room is where many big ideas happen, where heartfelt moments are shared, and where many board games are played.

Hospitality

It isn't just the scenery and outdoor recreation that call guests back to Mountain-Cajun Getaway; it's also the hospitality. Chris and Mel put a lot of thought and effort into every aspect of their retreat home, from the comfortable and inviting decor of their 120 year old farmhouse, to several outdoor entertainment areas throughout the property, an ice bath and sauna area, a well-stocked game room provide entertainment during bad weather, and lots of well thought out kids activities like interactive games and nature scavenger hunts.

Activities

Activities are an important part of developing a farm stay. If you are opening up a space on your farm to simply offer a unique lodging experience, where guests can relax and enjoy taking in the scenery while planning their

own meals and activities, you may consider creating a list of fun activities in your area and be prepared to recommend activities that fit the season. If you plan to offer hands-on opportunities for guests to participate in farm operations or demonstrations, you will need to plan these with some flexibility to accommodate different seasons or when the weather doesn't cooperate. This can look different for different operations. - Some may want to host farm stays during a time when they are doing farm operations that are easily shared with guests – for example, summer gardening where guests help harvest and process food. Others, such as maple syrup operations, may choose to host in winter so guests can learn how to collect and boil sap. The important part is that you put some thought into activities from a guest's perspective and have a plan.

Chris and Melissa are living the life that they promote, which is a slowed down simple style of life where they are trying to sustain off the land and support the people around them. Here are some of the activities Mountain-Cajun Getaway enjoy with their guests to promote health, wellness, relaxation and recreation:

- *Making tinctures with herbs grown on the farm*
- *Growing, harvesting and canning food from the garden*
- *Promoting intentional family time - picnics, games, family dinners*
- *Outdoor adventures - hiking, caving, exploring nearby waterfalls and other local sites*
- *Collecting and boiling sap to make maple syrup*
- *Intentional time to slow down and relax - gathering around the farm table for a board game, chatting and telling stories at the outdoor fireplace*



"We utilize nature here as one of our tools. West Virginia has so much to offer when it comes to outdoor recreational therapy. There are so many studies that show when families work together, hike together, fish together, grow gardens together, the outcome is so positive." —Chris Grimes

Administration & operations considerations

- Budget
 - Accommodation costs
 - Meals
 - Activities
 - Staffing
 - Operational costs
 - Seasonal fluctuations
- Marketing and Customer Service
 - Marketing your retreat in a positive light will directly lend to your operation's success. It is important to diversify your marketing strategy. Use platforms such as a website and social media to advertise and build customer relationships. If you're a veteran, use your network to help build word of mouth marketing momentum. If you're not a veteran, connect with other veteran support agencies. Mountain-Cajun Getaway can attest to word of mouth marketing being a powerful tool when hosting veteran retreats. Once customers get to participate in your retreat, they can become a return customer, or be an advocate of your business and recommend others.
- Record keeping
 - You will need to keep good records and should consult a legal professional on what is required for tax and liability purposes.
- Risk Management
 - While business planning, it is important to think about insurance coverage. When you invite visitors to your property, there are inherent risks that the property owner and visitor alike should be aware of. It is recommended that you seek advice from your insurance provider or a qualified professional to discuss coverage options that are specific to your operation.

Planning Checklist

To operate a successful business, it is important to think ahead. Planning can sometimes feel overwhelming but it is helpful to break down tasks into simple steps. Be

specific and realistic with your timelines. Here are some actions to help lead to successful business development.

- Visit other farms or locations that offer similar services (Mountain-Cajun Getaway would be a great starting place!).
- Develop or add to an existing business & marketing plan
- Create an enterprise budget for your agritourism venture.
- Contact your insurance provider and purchase appropriate coverage.
- Consult a financial professional.
- Consult regulatory and legal advice.
- Develop reservation, registration, etc. policies.
- Have an online presence through websites, social media, etc.

Regulations

One primary component to helping get Mountain Cajun Getaway started was hiring a lawyer to assist with the necessary administrative and legal duties.

When hosting overnight guests and providing food services, beware of local, state and federal laws. Make sure you are in compliance with the appropriate regulations. It is suggested to check in with your local health department and insurance provider to seek advice. If you have a lawyer in your network, this could be an opportunity to seek pro bono legal services. West Virginia's laws can be found by searching "agritourism" at code.wvlegislature.gov.





The Ripple Effect of Farm Stays (change)

It is anticipated that hosting retreats will be folded into a potential or existing farm, business or organization. Whether hosting retreats is the sole focus of a business, or one of several enterprises, this can lead to a ripple effect of economic development for you and your community.

Hosting retreats can bring more customers to your existing farm business. It can also generate more local commerce through your community, through more food and services purchased by your business and customers. Through hosting retreats you can highlight local products where applicable, and form relationships with other local businesses in your community.

Mountain-Cajun Getaway partners with a local elementary school and Future Generations University to provide education around maple syrup. They have fed the local high school volleyball team before matches and hosted veteran coffee socials at their sugar shack. Consider what ways you can provide value to the community; this type of engagement can lead to more connections and shine a positive light on your business.

Q and A with Mountain-Cajun Getaway

Q: What are your biggest successes?

A: The biggest success of their organization is to see how what they are doing is positively impacting the military families that come to stay with them. Oftentimes the families that stay at Mountain-Cajun Getaway stay in touch with Chris and Melissa after their trip and this sustained communication and these connections are a huge success.

Their maple endeavors have been a blessing in disguise for several reasons:

- Therapeutic for Chris and Melissa to be active and spend time outside.
- Provides supplemental income serving as a social enterprise business within their nonprofit organization.
- Provides engagement and participation opportunities for their guests.

Q: Do you have any additional tips or advice?

A: Chris refers to some of his partnerships and projects in comparison to qualifications in the military. The partners and projects that he is involved with help him to continue to keep the appropriate skills and knowledge needed to keep progressing his organization. Be active in the local community, get engaged, have a presence and get involved with local civic clubs and organizations. Maple in the classroom, community clubs, supporting local businesses, feeding the local volleyball team, Ruritan Club, American Legion Club are all examples of how we try to stay involved in the community. Do something to make your organization or business stand out and be unique. Chris and Melissa's background of growing up in West Virginia and Louisiana has made their approach unique by blending cultures of Appalachia and The Bayou.

Helpful Links and Resources

- Home - Future Generations University (future.edu)
- Veterans & Heroes to Agriculture: West Virginia Department of Agriculture
- Mountain-Cajun Getaway - Combat Veterans, Nonprofit, 501c3 (mountaincajungetaway.org)
- *Building a Sustainable Business A Guide to Developing a Business Plan for Farms and Rural Businesses* (published by SARE)
- Agritourism | Extension | West Virginia University
- Agritourism: West Virginia Department of Agriculture

Resources Used to Help Create this Toolkit

- 2019AgriTourismGuide.indb
- 2020HowTo-DevelopFarmStay.pdf

