



A five-star hideaway

THIS week Blackpool won praise for having the best quality budget hotels in Britain, but down the road in Lytham, a new business is enjoying its own success by aiming at the opposite end of the market.

Jackie and Andy Baker have no previous experience of running a guesthouse and there is no B&B tradition in Lytham.

Despite that, they have sunk their savings and more – adding up to a cool £1.2m – into The Rooms on Church Road and are already attracting national acclaim.

Welcoming their first guests last July was the culmination of an ambition which took more than two years to come to fruition.

An overnight stay starts at £95 for a single person, but the quality of what is on offer reflects the cost.

And even in these difficult economic times, people are prepared to pay for something extra special.

Jackie and Andy both have business backgrounds, with sales and design part of their combined expertise. Having travelled the world, they also felt they had a pretty good idea about what made somewhere a good place to stay.

Now their dream is a reality and The Rooms is up and running, with an off-shoot – The Other Rooms, which is a two-bed self-catering unit – also now open.

But what makes this boutique B&B different is the level of specification which would put many a five-star city hotel to shame.

The floors (with under floor heating) are marble, the wet rooms (not merely bathrooms) have super-sized showerheads and are finished in the finest slate, the window blinds are built into the double glazing and the beds are from the same manufacturer that supplies Andy's favourite hotel in Hong Kong.

Forget baked beans, guests at The Rooms are more likely to tuck into Bucks Fizz at breakfast.

While Blackpool's B&B sector is shrinking, a £1.2m investment has seen Lytham get a new foothold in the market. **Shelagh Parkinson reports**



Jackie said: "Like many couples we had often talked about doing something different, maybe running a restaurant or a pub. It was always something that was on our minds.

"We were walking early on Lytham Green when we decided it really was time to do something else.

"I said to Andy, go and see what you can find in terms of a property and he literally rang me that afternoon to say he had found something in Lytham that he thought would make a brilliant bed and breakfast."



LUXURY: Andy and Jackie Baker at The Rooms, with interiors also pictured

What Andy, whose "day" job is as commercial manager at Fylde Rugby Club, had found was a seven-bedroomed family home whose owner was ready to downsize after her grown-up children had flown the nest.

The next step was to secure planning permission for change of use, before facing the challenging prospect of converting the terraced property so it could accommodate five ensuite bedrooms and be the Bakers' family home as well.

Clever architecture means one of the guest bedrooms has stairs down to its bathroom, while another room connects straight through to the family part of the house so that Andy's children can use it when they stay over.

Jackie's background as a designer with a gift and floral importer, is clearly visible in the interiors, including the dining room with its cocktail lounge inspired look.

But why did the couple choose the untried market of Lytham for their venture rather than Blackpool or even St Annes?

Jackie said: "There is plenty of stuff already in Blackpool and St Annes but the market we're aiming at is business people during the week, and people who are perhaps back in Lytham attending a family event such as a wedding at the weekend.

"We've had a lot of business people who are

fed up of staying in hotels and enjoy the more personal touch we offer, and just having a chat with us. We have stayed in a lot of hotels and wanted five star luxury but with a homely feel."

Andy added: "We really felt there was a gap in the market and lots of people have said that Lytham was crying out for something like this. We have put everything we have into it and more to get it how we needed it.

"I hope people, when they leave, walk out of the door thinking they really enjoyed their stay and that if they are coming back to the area, we will be the first people they will ring because we looked after them."

A so-called mystery shopper from The Times gave the B&B a fantastic eight of 10 for its rooms this month, which is a remarkable achievement for such a fledgling enterprise (Stanley House at Mellor only scored four out of 10 for its rooms by comparison).

The Rooms is proving, along with Claire Smith's properties in Blackpool, that the bed and breakfast industry is changing, even here on the Fylde coast.

● The mystery guest review is at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/where_to_stay/northern_england/article5530168.ece

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It's been another weird week, so join **JOE ROBINSON** for a round-up of the strange stories in the news from the past seven days...

IF there's two things I miss at the moment, it's cricket and cats.

During the winter, my Saturday afternoons feel empty without scoring my obligatory, Boycott-like 20 off a hundred and odd balls.

Working in Blackpool, an hour away from my folks' place, I never get to see the little horrors that someone decided to call Scratch and Whisper.

In case your wondering, they are our family's ridiculously playful and wolf-like black cats.

I came across a couple of stories on my favourite subjects which I hope will amuse and surprise.

First up are the leather on willow



mad Brits who are taking the gentleman's game to new heights.

Two crazy teams are to make a nine-day expedition in April to Gorak Shep, a plateau 5,165 metres above sea level near the Everest base camp, for the highest cricket match ever.

It's caught the imagination so much that England captain Andrew Strauss has agreed to be the honorary skipper of Team Tenzing, while his second in

command Alastair Cook is doing likewise for Team Hillary.

I doubt their contracts will allow them to take the mammoth trek.

Cricket nut Richard Kirtley, a man after my own heart, dreamed up the Everest Test idea during a trip to the world's highest mountain in 2006.

He saw Gorak Shep, thought it resembled The Oval cricket ground in London, and resolved to set up a match.

Kirtley told reporters that, unlike



MONDAY: A seasoned look at life with Roy Edmonds

most cricket matches where a few drops of rain sends the players running for cover, the game would go ahead no matter the conditions.

"We're not going all that way not to play," he said.

The teams, which include Australians and New Zealanders, hope to raise £250,000 for The Lord's Taverners and The Himalayan Trust UK.

In the slightly warmer clime of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a woman has been furiously defending herself after attempting to sell pierced, "gothic," kittens.

Holly Crawford's home was raided and she was charged with animal cruelty after a tip-off.

She maintains she has done nothing wrong, despite giving the cute little kittens ear, neck and tail piercings.

"When I did it, it wasn't with any

cruel intentions," she said. "They were definitely loved, well-fed, no fleas, clipped nails, and very happy."

Ms Crawford said she did not see any difference between piercing a cat and piercing a human being.

She says she used sterile needles to pierce the animals and made sure they healed properly.

Police also charged a man who helped her take calls about the kittens, which were being sold online for hundreds of dollars.

Ms Crawford says her dog grooming business is now in serious trouble and she has received dozens of abusive phone calls.

"My name's ruined, my reputation's ruined and my business is ruined," she said.

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