BuildUp
BOOKINGS

09

BONUS 09 OF 11 · MASTERING VACATION RENTAL MARKETING

Building a Guest Guidebook That Earns Its Keep

A companion resource to the 2nd edition

WHAT YOU'LL HAVE WHEN YOU FINISH

A section-by-section guidebook checklist and a complete guidebook covering every section a guest needs, plus the three things a guidebook can do for your marketing with the guests who booked with you directly.

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buildupbookings.com/book-bonuses

PART 1

Do this now

Start here. Each one works on its own.

1 **Count the questions you answered last month.**

Go through your messages and tally the repeats. Wifi password, checkout time, where to park, how the hot tub works. Every recurring question is a gap in your guidebook and a tax on your team's time.

2 **Go digital, and keep a printed copy in the property.**

Digital because you can fix an error in thirty seconds instead of reprinting forty binders. Printed because cell service fails, and a guest who cannot find the wifi password has no way to load the guide that contains it.

3 **Send it before arrival, not at arrival.**

A guidebook delivered at check-in is a reference document. Delivered three days early, it is a planning tool — and it starts influencing what they do, where they eat, and how they feel before they arrive.

4 **Put the arrival essentials on the first screen.**

Address, door code, parking, wifi. A guest reading your guidebook at 11pm on a dark road does not want your welcome message first.

5 **Write recommendations only for places you have been.**

Name the dish. Name the person. Say what to avoid. This is the section guests actually value and it is impossible to fake.

6 **Give direct-booking guests a reason to stay in touch.**

For guests who booked with you directly, add an optional email sign-up offering something real — next season's calendar early, a returning-guest rate — and a link to book their next stay. Keep both out of the version OTA guests see: for Airbnb reservations booked on or after November 20, 2026, hosts may not solicit guests' contact details, and Airbnb and Vrbo both bar incentives to book off their platforms.

7 **Put a review date on it.**

Restaurants close. Trails wash out. A guidebook recommending a business that shut two years ago actively damages your credibility.

PART 2

The depth

The full method.

What a guidebook is actually for

Most operators treat the guidebook as an operational document — the thing that stops guests from calling. That is real value and it is the smaller half.

A guidebook does four jobs:

1. **Reduces inbound questions.** The obvious one, and the one that pays for building it.
2. **Prevents bad reviews.** A guest who cannot work the thermostat and cannot find out how writes a different review than one who solved it in ten seconds.
3. **Improves the stay itself.** Better recommendations mean a better trip, and a better trip means a better review and a returning guest.
4. **Earns the next booking.** This is the one nobody builds for, and it is covered below.

The sections, in the order a guest needs them

Order by **when the guest needs the information**, not by how logically it groups. The structural mistake I see most is opening with a welcome message when the guest opened the guidebook because they are standing outside in the dark.

1. Arrival essentials — first screen, always

- Full address, with a map link that works
- Door code or key location, with a photo of the lockbox
- Parking: where exactly, how many spaces, any permit
- Wifi network name and password, written to be copied
- Your phone number

Nothing else. Everything a guest needs in the first ten minutes, and nothing they do not.

2. Welcome and orientation

Now the warm introduction. Who you are, why you love this property, what makes it particular. This is where your brand voice belongs — and if you have written a **Brand & Style Guide**, this section should sound like it.

Then a brief orientation to the property: layout, which bedroom is which, anything counterintuitive.

3. How things work

The section that prevents the most calls. One entry per item, with a photo:

- Thermostat and HVAC — including which mode for which season
- Hot tub: how to open it, temperature, chemicals, what not to do
- Fireplace: gas or wood, how to light it, what is provided
- Kitchen appliances, particularly anything unusual
- TV and streaming: how to sign in, and what to do about a guest's own accounts
- Laundry
- Any smart home devices, locks, or automation
- Water: well or municipal, pressure quirks, what not to flush
- What to do if the power goes out

Write these as though the guest has never seen the appliance. They have not seen *yours*.

4. House rules and policies

Clear, brief, and explained rather than barked. Quiet hours, smoking, pets, occupancy limits, events, and anything specific to the property or the neighborhood. Where consequences apply — a fee, a fine, a deposit — say so plainly. A rule with a reason attached gets followed far more often than a rule alone.

5. Local recommendations — where the value lives

This section is the difference between a manual and a guidebook.

Organize by need rather than category, because that is how guests actually search: *breakfast · a good dinner · dinner with kids · rainy day · morning walk · groceries · coffee · a drink after dinner · the one thing you should not miss.*

For each recommendation:

- What it is, and who it is right for
- **What to order.** Naming the dish is what makes a recommendation feel like a person wrote it.
- Practical facts: hours, whether they take reservations, whether they take cards, how far
- **When to avoid it.** Trust is built by the honest note more than the endorsement.
- **Any referral fee or ownership stake, disclosed in the entry.** Airbnb requires it, and guests deserve it either way.

Write only about places you have been. Guests can tell the difference between a list and a recommendation, and a bad recommendation costs you more than no recommendation.

Do not generate this section with an AI tool. It will produce plausible restaurant names and confident opening hours, some of which will be wrong, and a guest driving forty minutes to a closed restaurant on your recommendation is a review you cannot recover from. Use these tools to tighten writing you have done; never to invent local knowledge you do not have.

6. Getting around

Drive times to the places guests actually go — airport, grocery, town, the trailhead, the beach access. Drive times, never "steps from." Note where cell service drops, which roads close seasonally, whether the map apps route people badly, and where parking is genuinely hard.

7. Emergencies and safety

- "Call 911 in an emergency," with the property's full street address right beside it
- Poison Control: 1-800-222-1222 (free, 24/7)
- Nearest hospital and urgent care, with addresses and drive times
- Local non-emergency police number
- Your after-hours number, and what counts as after-hours
- Fire extinguisher, first aid kit, and shutoff valve locations, with photos
- Smoke and carbon monoxide alarm locations, and what to do if one sounds
- What to do in the weather event your area actually gets

8. Checkout

Checkout time, what you want guests to do (trash, dishes, thermostat setting, keys), and what they should not bother with. Being explicit that they do not need to strip beds or vacuum is a kindness that costs you nothing and reads as generous.

9. Before you go — the section that earns the next booking (direct-guest version only)

Covered in full below. Most guidebooks end at checkout instructions. For guests who booked with you directly, this is the money.

The three marketing elements almost nobody includes

1. The review ask, for direct guests. A line near the end, and in the checkout section, pointing at your Google review link. Not a hard sell — a sentence and a link. Coordinate this with your review system so the guidebook mention and the post-stay message reinforce rather than duplicate each other. Ask every direct guest the same way, regardless of how you think the stay went (see the **Collecting Google Reviews** bonus). Leave it out of the OTA version: Airbnb bars asking guests to review a stay on another website unless the listing is a hotel.

2. Email capture, for direct guests. Your guidebook is being read by someone who has already paid you and is currently enjoying themselves. If they booked with you directly, that is the warmest audience you will ever have, and most guidebooks ask them for nothing.

Offer something real in exchange: a returning-guest rate, first access to next season's calendar, or a genuinely useful local guide. One field, email only. Then those addresses feed the sequences in the **Off-Season Email Funnel** bonus. Never show this field to Airbnb guests: Airbnb bars hosts from soliciting personal data at any point during the booking or the stay.

3. The direct booking path, for direct guests. A direct guest who had a good stay is the cheapest booking you will ever get, and the guidebook is the one place you are guaranteed to have their attention. Make the next booking easy.

> **Coming back?**
> Book with us directly next time — same cabins, and you can call a real person.
> [ridgelinecabins.com] · Returning guests get [specific benefit].

This block goes only in the direct-guest version. Airbnb requires future and repeat bookings to stay on Airbnb and bars discounts to book off it (Help Center articles 2799 and 4169). Vrbo bars links, QR codes or contact details meant to redirect guests away from Vrbo, and incentives to book off-platform. A guidebook is not an exception. So run two versions: the full guide for direct guests, and an OTA version with sections 1–8 and nothing that collects data, asks for an outside review, or points at your booking site. The case for booking direct has to win the guest before they book on an OTA, on your own website, not during their Airbnb stay.

Digital, print, or both

Both. They fail in opposite ways.

	DIGITAL	PRINT
Update speed	Instant	Reprint
Works with no signal	No	Yes
Can hold video	Yes	No
Available before arrival	Yes	No
Guaranteed to be found	No	Yes, on the counter
Captures email (direct guests only)	Yes	No

The pragmatic setup: a digital guidebook as the real one, and a single printed card in the property with the arrival essentials, your number, and the link or QR code to the digital version. The card solves the no-signal failure without committing you to reprinting a binder every time a restaurant closes.

Never put the door code or wifi password behind a login, email gate or app download. Airbnb bars requiring a third-party app or registration to get into a listing or use a critical amenity, and a guest locked out at 11pm will not care whose policy it was.

Timing: when to send it

WHEN	WHAT	WHY
At booking	Confirmation with the link	Sets expectations, and they will read it once
3–5 days before arrival	"Getting ready" message with the link again	The planning window — this is when it shapes the trip
Day of arrival	Arrival essentials only, as a message	They need four facts, not a document
Mid-stay *(optional)*	One recommendation, well chosen	Feels like hospitality, not marketing
Checkout day	Checkout steps, plus the review link for direct guests	

The pre-arrival send is the one that does the most work and the one most often skipped.

For Airbnb guests, send the OTA version through the Airbnb message thread or put the essentials in Airbnb's own check-in instructions. Airbnb's payments policy bars links in messages that take people off Airbnb. We have not found Airbnb guidance on whether a purely informational guidebook link counts, so confirm with Airbnb before relying on one.

Keeping it true

A guidebook decays. Restaurants close, hours change, trails wash out, access roads get rerouted, the lockbox gets replaced.

Review it **twice a year**, with a named owner. And build the feedback loop: when a guest tells you something in the guide was wrong, fix it that day. Your guests are a better auditing system than any schedule, and they will only tell you if you ask.

One more use worth knowing about: the evergreen sections of your guidebook — the local recommendations especially — are the raw material for the destination content in the **12-Month Content System** bonus. You are writing it once for guests; publish it and it works for search too.

PART 3

Worked example

One example, all the way through.

Ridgeline Cabin Co. — fictional company, 40 mountain cabins, the running example across these bonuses.

What they found in their messages

One month of guest messages, tallied:

QUESTION	TIMES ASKED
Hot tub — how to open the cover	23
Wifi password	19
Where to eat tonight	17
Checkout time	12
Thermostat	11
Which road to take — maps sends people the wrong way	9
Does the fireplace work	7

Ninety-eight messages, essentially all of them answerable in advance. The hot tub cover alone justified building the guidebook — a thirty-second video solved twenty-three messages a month permanently.

Their structure

First screen: address · door code with a photo of the lockbox · parking · wifi · the on-call manager's mobile. Five items, nothing else.

Then welcome, then How Things Work — with a phone-shot video for the hot tub cover, the thermostat, and lighting the fireplace. Then rules, recommendations, getting around, emergencies, checkout, and the "coming back" section.

One recommendation, as written

A good dinner — The Mill House
Twelve minutes down the valley road. The best food within half an hour of the cabin, and the only place we send people for an anniversary.

Order: the trout, and the brown butter cake if it's on.
Book ahead — Friday and Saturday fill up a week out in season, and they don't take walk-ins.
Cards only, no cash discount.
Skip it Mondays — the kitchen runs a reduced menu and it isn't the same place.

Every line is something only a local would know. The "skip it Mondays" note is what makes a guest trust the other nine recommendations.

The two things that changed their marketing

Email capture: one optional field in the direct-guest version, offering next season's calendar a week before public release.

Direct booking path: the "coming back" section, in the direct-guest version only. OTA guests get the same sections 1–8 with no email field, no review link and no booking link. The printed card's QR code opens that OTA version, so it is safe in every cabin whoever booked it.

The road note that saved them

Getting here — read this part
Both map apps will route you over the south switchbacks. Do not take them between November and April; the county doesn't clear that road and we have pulled more than one guest out of it. Take the ridge road instead — it's four minutes longer and it's open all winter. Cell service drops for the last two miles. Screenshot these directions before you leave town.

This single section eliminated their most frequent and most expensive winter problem. It is also, not coincidentally, one of the five items in their off-season email and a section of a published blog post. One piece of local knowledge, working in three places.

PART 4

Your turn

Your worksheet. Print it and fill it in.

The question audit

Go through last month's guest messages.

QUESTION ASKED	TIMES	WHICH GUIDEBOOK SECTION FIXES IT

Section checklist

1. Arrival essentials — first screen

☐ Address + working map link ☐ Door code + lockbox photo ☐ Parking ☐ Wifi ☐ Your number

2. Welcome and orientation ☐ written in your brand voice

3. How things work — one entry with a photo or video per item

☐ Thermostat ☐ Hot tub ☐ Fireplace ☐ Kitchen ☐ TV / streaming ☐ Laundry

☐ Smart devices ☐ Water quirks ☐ Power outage

4. House rules ☐ with reasons attached, not just rules

5. Recommendations — organized by need

☐ Breakfast ☐ Good dinner ☐ Dinner with kids ☐ Rainy day ☐ Morning walk

☐ Groceries ☐ Coffee ☐ A drink ☐ The unmissable thing

For each: ☐ what to order ☐ hours and reservations ☐ when to avoid it
☐ any referral fee disclosed

6. Getting around ☐ drive times ☐ seasonal road closures ☐ where maps misroute ☐ where signal drops

7. Emergencies ☐ 911 with the street address ☐ Poison Control 1-800-222-1222 ☐ hospital ☐ urgent care ☐ non-emergency police ☐ your after-hours number ☐ extinguisher, first aid and shutoff photos ☐ smoke and CO alarm locations ☐ local weather event

8. Checkout ☐ time ☐ what to do ☐ what not to bother with

9. Before you go (direct-guest version only) ☐ review link ☐ email capture ☐ direct booking path

Your recommendations

Only places you have actually been.

NEED	PLACE	WHAT TO ORDER	WHEN TO AVOID IT
Breakfast			
Good dinner			
With kids			
Rainy day			
The unmissable thing			

Format and delivery

Digital guidebook tool / platform: _____

Printed card in property: ☐ arrival essentials ☐ your number ☐ QR to digital

SEND	WHEN	CHANNEL	AUTOMATED?
At booking			
3–5 days pre-arrival			
Arrival day essentials			
Checkout			

Marketing elements

Email capture offer: _____

Returning-guest benefit: _____

- ☐ OTA version built with no email field, no off-platform review link, no booking link
- ☐ Door code and wifi reachable without a login
- ☐ Every recommendation with a referral fee or ownership stake says so

Maintenance

Owner: _____ **Review dates:** _____

- ☐ Guest-reported errors get fixed same day

PART 5

How you'll know it worked

What to check, and when.

Within a month — the question count. Re-run the audit above and compare. This is the cleanest before-and-after measurement in any of these bonuses, because you are counting the same thing you counted before. If the hot tub question is still arriving weekly, either the guidebook is not being read or that section is not clear enough, and those need different fixes.

Within a quarter — review content. Watch for guests mentioning recommendations by name, and for the disappearance of reviews complaining about things the guidebook now covers. A review that says "we never would have found The Mill House" is the guidebook working.

Within six months — the marketing outputs. How many email addresses the capture field produced, and how many past direct guests booked their next stay direct. That second number is the one that compounds, and it is the whole argument for section nine.

Check guidebook views before arrival. If guests are not opening the guidebook before arrival, the document is only doing its operational job and none of its planning job. Fix the send — subject line, timing, channel — before rewriting content.

The failure mode: a guidebook built once, beautifully, and never touched. Within eighteen months it recommends two closed restaurants and lists a lockbox code that changed, and it is now costing you credibility with every guest who follows it. A guidebook with a named owner and a review date beats a better guidebook with neither.

PART 6

Where this lives in the book

Where to read more in the book.

Chapter: *Streamlining the Guest Experience Through Guidebooks* (Featherweight) — why this is foundational work rather than a nice-to-have, and how it fits the wider guest experience.

Read alongside *Reign supreme in email marketing* and *Offline & Online Email Collection Tools* (Featherweight) for the capture element — for direct-booking guests, the guidebook is one of the offline-to-online collection points the book describes, and it is the warmest one you have.

Three other bonuses connect directly. **Collecting Google Reviews** covers where the review ask sits and the compliance rules around it. The **Off-Season Email Funnel** is what the addresses you capture here feed into. And the **12-Month Content System** will turn your recommendation section into published content that works for search as well as for guests.

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Want help putting this to work?

We've worked with more than 300 vacation rental companies on direct bookings, homeowner acquisition, SEO, paid media and AI search. If you'd rather not do this alone, book a free call at **buildupbookings.com**.

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