



## Chocolate Gannets

**Sue O'James Proprietor**

**[chocolategannets.com.au/](http://chocolategannets.com.au/)**

Chocolate Gannets is a complex of four 5 star, fully self contained villas overlooking the Southern Ocean and Great Ocean Road, just east of Apollo Bay.

It is the only 5 star accommodation facility on the Great Ocean Road and one of only two AAA 5 star green rated accommodation properties in Victoria. Sue O'James prides herself on her property's emphasis on Australian and Victorian products; everything from light fittings and doonas, to guest chocolates and tea.

In 2004, Chocolate Gannets was named Best New Tourism Development in the Victorian Tourism Awards, edging out Federation Square for the title. In 2005 it narrowly missed taking the title of Victoria's Best Luxury Accommodation, having been beaten by Crown by just a few points.

Sue O'James previously operated the Tortoise Head Guest Head on French Island, in Victoria's Westernport Bay. It was a 3 star facility and she built-up the business through fine hospitality and her very popular Murder Mystery weekends.

During Sue's time at the guest house she was constantly asked by prospective guests whether the property had spas and open fires.

Consequently, when she sold the business and took time-off to assess what she wanted to do next in the tourism industry, she realised that there was a market need for high quality, eco and child-friendly, self-contained accommodation.



Her search for the right location was relatively easy – a superb 100 acre property overlooking the crashing surf and pristine beaches of Bass Strait.

She realised that the harder task would be to achieve the right 'product-market' match. She embarked on an extensive personalised research process in a quest to establish the finest accommodation on the Great Ocean Road.

Despite the growing body of information that was becoming available during the late 1990s, Sue realised that the most reliable and detailed research would come from her own investigation.

The 5 star accommodation sector is fiercely competitive. She realised that her competition would probably not be other self contained accommodation, but some of Victoria's finest hotels. She therefore benchmarked her standards against some of the highest quality and most established accommodation properties in Australia and Great Britain, many of which she personally experienced. She then determined how she could achieve even higher standards.

She soon realised that the biggest market gap was in five star accommodation that catered for groups bigger than couples, especially the family market. She had also observed that ladies travelling in groups of two or three often sought high quality accommodation. Sue realised that the core market segment that she sought lived in Melbourne's inner urban areas. Her advertising is now directed primarily at this market.

## UNDERSTANDING VISITOR NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS



TOURISM  
EXCELLENCE



The research didn't stop when she opened the doors of Chocolate Gannets. She devised a product specific customer feedback form, which, among other questions, invites her guests to rate the property against others they have stayed in. Guests are provided with a reply-paid envelope, which not only ensures anonymity, but also enables them to carefully reflect upon their experience. Forty per cent of guests complete the survey form. The responses are analysed as they are received and daily feedback is provided to staff. Any monthly and seasonal trends arising from the feedback is noted and Sue compiles an annual review of the customer service standards. Sue is qualified in eco-tourism and recreation. Both courses examined changing social trends and she is therefore now an active observer of the marketplace, especially her target segments.

As a result of Sue's research to create a product that caters for a particular market segment, Chocolate Gannets opened its doors at the end of 2002 to an average of 70% occupancy. This has now grown to 93%.

Sue O'James says that nothing in the planning of their facility was left to chance. They invested heavily in the facilities and fittings that the market segment required or aspired to. She insisted that everything within the villas should be as natural as possible. The eight per cent of international visitors (mostly U.K, U.S.A. and Singapore) often comment on the 'Australian-ness' of the fittings and consumables.

Eighty per cent of patronage comes from inner Melbourne, which vindicates her original research as to where her market was located. She is attracting a healthy percentage of families with young children and, contrary to popular belief, they do not wreak havoc upon the furniture and walls, according to Sue.

Forty five per cent of guests rate Chocolate Gannets as the best accommodation they have ever stayed in and another 50 percent state that it is among the best 5 establishments they have ever stayed in.

### Key findings:

- *A major investment in tourism is not such a gamble if the proper research is undertaken beforehand*
- *You need the negative feedback as much as compliments*
- *Always put yourself in the shoes of your customers*
- *See the product from a 'visitor experience' perspective, rather than simply as a business*
- *Continue to observe the needs and trends of the marketplace, especially your market segment.*

