



POWERING TRAVEL | SEASON 3 | EPISODE 6

Beyond amenities: Delivering Premier Host-level experiences

What to listen for:

Long gone are the days when a flower-print duvet and leftover condiments in the fridge would indicate a cozy place to stay. Guest expectations have evolved to fit new standards — and yesterday's differentiators are today's norms.

In this episode, join Vacation Rental Collective's Mary Beth Miles and Expedia Group™'s Becca Glenn and Brandon Ehrhardt as they talk about the importance of tailored experiences for today's travelers. From redefining how you approach hospitality to being in tune with your guests' expectations, this episode will teach you how to craft an experience that makes your guests feel valued.

Press play now for insider tips on how to deliver Premier Host-level vacation rental experiences — and to get inspired by 2024's Vacation Rental of the Year. As an added bonus, you'll learn how to stay informed on local short-term rental regulations and gain strategies for communicating with lawmakers.

Introduction:

[[00:00:04] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Travel providers are the backbone of the travel experience. In this brand-new season of Powering Travel, we'll dive into industry trends, hot topics, and actionable advice to help business leaders continue evolving and enhancing travel experience one trip at a time. Welcome back to Powering Travel, brought to you by Expedia Group. I'm Brandon Ehrhardt, and we are talking about one of the most requested topics today: vacation rentals. In the past, we've talked broadly about the vacation rental industry. If you recall our episode from last season with Tim Rosolio, Vice President of Vacation Rental Partner Success at Expedia Group, and Merilee Karr from UnderTheDoormat, that was a great primer for vacation rental fodder. But today, we are talking more specifically about what it takes to be an exceptional host. What we like to call a Premiere Host, one that welcomes guests with open arms and encourages repeat bookings at their property. First though, I want you to get to know our guest host for the episode, Becca Glenn. Becca, I've known you for a long time. Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with our guest today.

[00:01:07] **Becca Glenn** Hey, Brandon. Thanks for letting me step into the host seat. This is a topic I'm so close to, and I love being able to talk to our partners about what they're doing to make their businesses stand out.

[00:01:17] **Brandon Ehrhardt** We've worked together, as I mentioned, for a long time, but why don't you share a little bit more about your role with the audience.

[00:01:22] **Becca Glenn** Sure. I am a bit of an Expedia veteran. Believe it or not, I've actually been with the company for almost 20 years. I started my journey on the hotel side of the business, taking on various roles in our account management teams, working directly with hotels really of all shapes and sizes across both our North America tertiary markets, as well as leading teams within several U.S. primary markets. In 2019, I made the transition from our hotel supply team to our vacation rental supply team, focused mainly on the Vrbo brand. This was a really exciting move for me because while of course I have a passion for all things travel and more specifically all types of lodging, I always felt like there was a tremendous potential for the vacation rental category, and it's just such a fun segment of the industry.

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I'm also a big believer in the VR product. It's really how my family travels. So I've been helping to lead our amazing group of vacation rental account managers since, and it's been so thrilling to see the growth and hear the inspiring stories of so many of our amazing partners.

[00:02:16] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Absolutely a great fit for our topic today. Mary Beth Miles is also a veteran in the travel industry. Becca, since she was your guest, I'm going to let you introduce her to the listeners.

[00:02:26] **Becca Glenn** Gladly. Yes. Mary Beth Miles serves as the Chief Executive Officer for Vacation Rental Collective, a full-service vacation rental management company. Mary Beth joined the company in October of 2017 as its inaugural employee and chief operating officer. She stepped into the CEO role in late 2020. Mary Beth's love for hospitality started at an early age, helping her mom run their family's bed and breakfast in Southern Colorado. This early connection to the warmth of hosting and creating unforgettable memories left an indelible mark on her. Before her tenure at VRC, Mary Beth spent nearly a decade of experience in local government management and municipal governance. This experience has fortified her understanding of the intricacies surrounding local government policies and regulations that influence the vacation rental industry, and we talked about that as well.

[00:03:13] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Well, let's jump right into it. No reason to make the audience wait. Here's your interview with Becca Glenn and Mary Beth Miles.

[00:03:22] **Becca Glenn** Well, thank you for joining us today, Mary Beth. Can you tell us more about the Vacation Rental Collective and your role as CEO?

[00:03:29] **Mary Beth Miles** Yes, of course. And first and foremost, thank you so much for having me. I'm honored to be here today with you, Becca, and I'm thrilled to share our experience at Vacation Rental Collective cultivating a culture of hospitality. With that, I am the CEO of Vacation Rental Collective. We're a privately owned, locally operated vacation rental management company headquartered in Durango, Colorado. While our headquarters is in Durango, we also manage properties in 17 other markets and some of the best vacation destinations, places like Bend, Oregon; Moab, Utah; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Vail, Colorado; and our newest collection in Northwoods, Wisconsin. We provide full-service vacation rental management to over 750 homeowner partners, and we host thousands of guests annually.

The role of hospitality:

[00:04:21] **Becca Glenn** That's great. And I love that. The culture of hospitality as a motto, I love that. And one of the things that I think is really neat about your background, and I know from your bio, is that you actually got into hospitality at a very young age with your family's bed and breakfast. There are so many cool stories like that in this industry of people who got into this early in life, and it just sort of got in their blood. I know when we talk about hospitality, a lot of people think about that traditional hotel experience. But, of course, another facet of that is being hospitable as a host. So, how do you think about hospitality when it comes to managing a vacation rental? What does that mean to you, and how should vacation rental hosts be thinking about it?

[00:05:01] **Mary Beth Miles** You know, that is a great question, especially because hospitality is at the core of what we do every day. Our goal in hosting guests is to make them feel valued and feel at home. Really, that concept of home away from home. Hospitality underlies every interaction that we have, both with our guests and our homeowners, but it also extends to our service providers, folks like housekeepers and maintenance providers who are providing critical services to our guests, maintaining our homes throughout our platform. You know, at a base level, being hospitable, like you said, is about being friendly and warm and welcoming, especially to folks that you've never met. And in some ways, that just comes down to some basic human interactions: being genuine, being generous and sincere. What I really love about hospitality is that it's contextual, and it's also personalized. When you are working with an individual guest, providing surprise and delight with first-class service really relies on a base understanding of who the guest is, where

they're coming from, and what's important to them. So, understanding their needs, adapting our approach to each individual situation, really establishing that connection with the guest and then seizing the opportunity to go above and beyond and deliver on an expectation that the guest really doesn't even know they have at the time that you're assisting them.

[00:06:24] **Becca Glenn** You bring up such a great point about there's just so much that goes into it. You know, the service providers and we talk a lot about host that goes beyond that. And there's a lot of people that are involved in making that such a great experience and bringing that surprise and delight. So it's just such a great point.

[00:06:40] **Mary Beth Miles** You know, it's so true. For us, hospitality goes well beyond providing accommodations. It's about immersing our guests in the local experience and letting them experience what is authentic about our individual communities and helping them create memories that they're going to cherish over the course of a lifetime. So, in a lot of ways, our approach to hospitality is pretty simple. It's centered on personal service and meticulous attention to detail. In some ways, it's providing welcome gift baskets to our guests in our homes. And those baskets are filled with local products. You know, fudge from the fudge store on the corner, the best local coffee that's roasted in our community. They can go down to the coffee shop, grab some espresso while they're visiting. Also, it's local seltzers that are packaged and canned by the local brewery. One of my favorites and our newest market, Wisconsin. They have this regional beer. It's called Spotted Cow that you can only get in Wisconsin. So, when we host guests there, making sure that they're able to experience that hyper-local experience. And really what's truly authentic about the communities in which we work.

[00:07:49] **Becca Glenn** That is amazing. It's those kind of special touches when it comes to bringing in that local flair that really makes that vacation rental experience very special. And I can tell you, if I came in and I found a local fudge in my vacation rental, I would be happy right off the bat. So, we definitely won me over. I love the creative approaches and the local flair. Now, as we talk about guest expectations and you talked about surprise and delight, we've definitely, over the last few years, have seen a shift in traveler expectations when it comes to short-term rentals, especially as we have a lot of newer folks experiencing this segment for the first time. Can you speak to some of the changes that you've observed and how vacation rental hosts can tailor their offerings? A lot of that you've touched on and you've got some great examples, but what are some other suggestions that you have to tailor to the guest's unique needs?

Evolution of the guest experience:

[00:08:36] **Mary Beth Miles** I think there are two key elements here, Becca. Certainly, we've seen an evolution in guest expectations post-pandemic. And the other piece here is really about us as property managers, homeowners, and individual hosts adapting to those expectations. And in most instances, that adaptation is happening in real time. So, as you mentioned, during the pandemic we saw a ton of travelers transition over to vacation rentals from traditional lodging-setting hotels and with that influx, bringing a certain set of expectations. So, they're looking for things like white linens, in-home amenities including high-speed and, in our instance, reliable Wi-Fi, cable TV, luxury bath products. Truly important.

[00:09:20] **Becca Glenn** So important.

[00:09:21] **Mary Beth Miles** Those types of things pre-pandemic really weren't the norm in the vacation rental space. Guests also want more accommodations that are pet friendly for all of those pandemic puppies that they're traveling with these days, and for property managers and hosts, it's really about adapting to those expectations. It means working with our homeowners to upgrade their linen packages, to add amenities to their homes. And while those things are important, both in the way of meeting expectations of guests, it's also important to remaining competitive in an environment with increased supply. We've seen 30 percent more supply in our space year over year and softening demand as travelers resume international travel, and some of them transition back to hotels. So, I often think back to when Tim Rosolio talks about cancellation policies. He often says yesterday's differentiators, today's norm, and this

perspective certainly applies to guest expectations as well. Gone are the days of flower print sheets and duvets. Leftover condiments in the fridge and half-used shampoo and conditioner. I think we both can relate. So, what that feels like in a vacation rental space.

[00:10:30] **Becca Glenn** So true.

[00:10:31] **Mary Beth Miles** And you know, with that, the guest expectation is that they've rented a home that's been professionally cleaned and intentionally prepared for their stay. They want those crisp white linens, and they want to know with confidence a bathmat has been washed between every guest state. It sounds simple, but I think we all would be surprised about the variability that we see across our platform. So, delivering the same quality and consistency that guests expect from a major hotel brand and delivering it with precision and execution on our part, on the part of hosts, is really where we're headed as an industry and a better reflection of what guests expect moving forward.

[00:11:11] **Becca Glenn** There's so much truth to that. And again, the changing expectations and dynamics, and you touched on this scope and the scope of experiences and the need for professionalism.

[00:11:21] **Mary Beth Miles** Can I make one other point? And I'm sorry I neglected to do it, but the interplay between guest expectations and hospitality. We talk a lot about guest expectations, and we know that guest expectations are high, and rightfully so. For many of our guests, this is the only vacation that they can take over the course of the year. It's their only time to spend quality time in a home with their family and friends. They've invested a lot in making travel plans. A recent path to purchase report by Expedia Group indicates that vacation rental guests spend approximately 8 1/2 hours coordinating their travel plans, looking at travel content, finding the perfect accommodation for their family. So, when it comes time to have that vacation, they're also investing a lot of money. And when you come on a ski vacation and visit us in Colorado, you have to outfit your three kids with skis. You've secured a luxury ski-in, ski-out home with us. Maybe you've purchased your tickets to ride the Polar Express and a moonlight Christmas Eve sleigh ride for the whole family. But those things add up and it's costly. You know, our guests want to know that their only vacation is going to go off without a hitch. So, it's easy to understand where those expectations are coming from. And as hosts, in order to meet those expectations, we have to deliver quality personalized service. And that really goes back to the hospitality elements we've talked about today.

How our tools help:

[00:12:45] **Becca Glenn** And you talked about delivering that personalized service and all the different facets of the vacation rental experience. Obviously, every vacation rental business looks different in terms of scale and number of properties and employees. So, what are some of the tools that have helped you in managing your vacation rental to ease that day-to-day experience?

[00:13:03] **Mary Beth Miles** So, one of the key tools that we use in managing our day-to-day business is our property management software. We use Escapia as our property management software, which is also an Expedia Group product. But for us, using Escapia means that all of our calendars are syndicated across every platform, including Vrbo. So, we never have to worry about are we going to get a double booking because the calendar isn't synced, that one guest booked with us on a platform and another on Vrbo. We just don't even have to think about it. Escapia also allows us to interface with our housekeeper and maintenance folks, and automates those daily tasks in the system, making it really easy for them to see and coordinate their schedules. It allows us to communicate with our guests in one single central platform, regardless of what platform they may have booked on. And it also helps us dynamically manage our nightly rates through its Rate Manager functionality. As most folks know in this business, offering a rate at the right time in the right season is critical to optimizing our homeowners' revenue. So, without a tool that helps you do that, it can be really complicated to try to manage those rates on a daily basis. I think the other critical thing, and we're certainly seeing more of it these days, is that Escapia, in addition to some other products, helps us implement travel tech across our platform.

That includes things like smart locks and general smart home technology. So, thermostats and lighting and hot-tub sensors. For us, those types of features help us reduce friction with our guests at the time of check-in, and it also helps our owners save on energy costs in their homes.

Elements of a vacation rental:

[00:14:44] **Becca Glenn** That's great. So, now we just announced the 2024 Vacation Home of the Year Award. And obviously, with all that you have shared and with Vacation Rental Collective, you have clearly mastered creating that amazing guest experience. I'm interested to hear from you. What does make a stellar vacation rental? If you were giving this award out today, what would be some of the elements that you would be looking for?

[00:15:07] **Mary Beth Miles** Gosh, Becc, I'm all of a sudden feeling the pressure of giving such a prestigious award, but for me, it's all about amenities. You know, I'd be looking for things like private pools and hot tubs, game amenities, things like basketball courts and arcade games. I know those sound a little over the top, but it certainly is something that makes a home ultra-special. Personally, if a home has a basketball court and a Skee-Ball, like, that's probably the top winner for me. But other things like unique architecture and interior design are also critical in guests helping to make their selection, among the many great options that are out there and exist. Location is a key feature. Needs to be walkable to downtown or the city center, or in some instances you're looking for a secluded vacation that's away from everything else. So, the location element again, is highly personalized but really important to the selection process. Accessibility is also important to ensure that all travelers can enjoy the home equally and sustainability. Key features like access to recycling, eco-friendly products in the home. And then again, that energy-saving smart home technology. I think the final piece for me is it has to be pet friendly. You know, I want to bring my dog on vacation, as do many people.

[00:16:23] **Becca Glenn** Those pandemic puppies.

[00:16:25] **Mary Beth Miles** Exactly.

Regulations and advocacy:

[00:16:26] **Becca Glenn** They're part of the family. They have to join on their vacation. So many great points and I love that you included accessibility and sustainability. We've made a lot of progress with that, but it really is so important that we're able to offer experiences that are so inclusive. Switching gears a little bit, but obviously a very important topic. And one, and I know that you have an interesting background with. We know the best hosts are ones that are invested in the traveler experience and engaged in their local communities. One of those components is understanding the local regulations that impact the vacation rental industry. So, how can VR owners stay in the loop on relevant regulations, and how can they get involved with advocacy at the local government level?

[00:17:10] **Mary Beth Miles** That's such a timely question, Becca, and I joined the VR industry in 2017 after about a decade-long career in local government, and so I was on the other side of the aisle really helping policymakers understand those key policy elements, what was important as part of the consideration process. And through that experience, I gained a lot of insight that helps us in the work that we do today. For folks who aren't familiar with local governments, it can be hard to know how to navigate that policy-making process. So, when to engage in the process, how to engage local elected officials, and conversations that are important to the future of your business. I guess with that, having had the experience early on in my career, and also, we've been engaged with policymakers over the course of the last six years just helping craft and shape vacation rental policies in the communities in which we work. So, key insights and what we've learned from that process, it's important to establish a relationship with policymakers and also municipal staff. So, understanding the form of government. In most instances, governments have a professional city

manager. Some larger communities, that certainly isn't the case. Strong mayor form of government. But municipal staff plays an important role in shaping that policy. So, engaging with those folks, asking them to have coffee, establishing a personal relationship can go a long way, especially when it comes to regulations coming down the pipeline. You already have that conduit for communication to be able to engage with them and talk about the issues that are important to you. And I think getting involved is a key piece about being an effective community leader and business owner. The two co-founders of our business both served on city councils, so I interacted with them in my time as a city staff member, and ultimately, they were kind enough to extend an offer for me to join their organization. But again, that comes from building relationships, understanding the people that you're working with at the really, really basic level, monitoring agendas. Things pop up quickly, and policymakers are moving pretty fast. So, it's possible that you might see an agenda come out on a Thursday for Tuesday meetings. We have to pay really close attention to what they're going to be talking about during those sessions. You know, I think a key piece, too, is seeking to find common ground. And really being respectful goes a long way to have respectful conversations with policymakers. And most good policy comes out of compromise. So, know where you're willing and able to compromise and concede when you can. There's usually some alignment and really work with the policymakers to work towards a common goal where you do have that agreement. Beyond that, of course, as we've learned in most people who've been through this process, no, they don't always listen to us. And it's not as easy as I might be making it sound. But to that ends, you know, submit your comments in writing and make sure you're publicly participating in opportunities to log testimony and get your comments on the public record. As part of that, telling your personal story about how your business benefits the community, the number of people you employ. Talk about your housekeeping and maintenance providers and what your business means to them and their families. How much money your business brings to the community, both in the way of sales and lodgers, tax revenue that funds critical services, and also in the money that our guests spend in communities shopping in local shops, eating in local restaurants, booking local experiences. So, it really is a multi-pronged approach in order to be effective. I think the other big item here is knowing that there's strength in numbers, in gauging your peers, other property managers, individual hosts. The real estate community can be really effective in this space as well, and including service providers such that it's a diverse set of opinions that is lodging their testimony during that public participation period.

[00:21:11] **Becca Glenn** So smart and so insightful. And I agree on so many points. And I think it just starts with getting involved. I think that's what a lot of people get really overwhelmed, where to start. And there's so many small opportunities to just do something to get involved and then let it grow from there.

[00:21:23] **Mary Beth Miles** Becca, on that point, for folks who are not sure where to start the journey of engaging local policymakers, our friends at Rent Responsibly — David, Alexa, and Dana — are really, really great resources. They're a wealth of knowledge and experience that can help guide you through the process. Rent Responsibly provides host and property managers with a framework and blueprint to make this process that might otherwise be scary really, really simple. We have worked with Dana in a variety of ways. She leads Mile High Hosts, which is a local advocacy group that we're a part of, and she's also helping us start an advocacy group in our Bend, Oregon, market to engage the other providers in that space and really formulate that local coalition of your peers that we talked about earlier.

[00:22:11] **Becca Glenn** That's great. Love to give Rent Responsibly a plug. And that personal story is so important. We've got to be able to show that there are real people behind this, and a lot of times is involving the local community, which a lot of times is overseeing in these discussions. And it's so important to bring that into the conversation.

[00:22:31] **Mary Beth Miles** You know, I think as an industry, we tend to get a bad rap. And when we're participating in these conversations, lots of people categorize vacation rental owners as a boogeyman or the outside investor who doesn't care about the local communities. To the extent that we can combat that narrative and really share our local stories, it's super important and critical to the future of our business.

Final thoughts and key takeaways:

[00:22:53] **Becca Glenn** Absolutely. And that's when it comes down to that common ground. There's always going to be common ground that we can find. So, last question for you, Mary Beth. And this is a fun question, and it's actually our favorite question here at Expedia Group. What is your next trip, and any fun plans coming up?

[00:23:09] **Mary Beth Miles** Oh, my goodness. This is also my favorite question. And it's the easiest one by far. So, thank you for the softball. You know, my mom celebrated her 70th birthday. She'll probably kill me for sharing her age, but we are taking her to Italy next year in 2024. It's a girls' trip: my mom, my aunts, and my sister. And we are looking forward to all things Italy. Rome, Florence, but mostly wine tasting and the Tuscan landscape.

[00:23:42] **Becca Glenn** Oh, my goodness, that sounds amazing. What a great experience for you all to travel together like that. Italy is definitely one of my favorite places. So very jealous, but sounds amazing and I hope you have a wonderful time. So, this has been such an insightful discussion. Great to get your takes on these very important topics, and really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today. Mary Beth, thank you.

[00:24:05] **Mary Beth Miles** Thank you so much, Becca. I really appreciate it. It's been so fun chatting with you and look forward to seeing you soon.

[00:24:15] **Brandon Ehrhardt** My goodness, Becca. That was an electric factory of energy. Mary Beth really brought some great insight to the discussion. I bet that was a fun one to record.

[00:24:24] **Becca Glenn** You know, it really was. We had such a good time chatting, and it was great getting to know her better as part of the preparation for this episode.

[00:24:31] **Brandon Ehrhardt** You know, as we just announced our 2024 Vacation Homes of the Year, it's a perfect time for us to be talking about how our partners can strive for Premier Host status, which is a criteria for properties selected. What stood out for you from this conversation, and how can our partners take that and apply it to their business?

[00:24:49] **Becca Glenn** You know, it's so true, Brandon. Now really is the time for our partners to be thinking about how they can really redefine what hospitality means for them and how that impacts the traveler experience. Mary Beth mentioned a few times that being in tune with traveler expectations is an important area to dial into, so that you're constantly optimizing to make for a better stay. I think also the tool she's using, like a Escapia and calendar sync are making her job easier. So, finding those tools and utilizing them for efficiency sake is really just a smart move.

[00:25:19] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Yeah, absolutely. Like there are so many ways that we can make the acceptance of bookings and the first interactions with a partner a good one if the partner leverages those tools. So, I was excited to hear that she's using Escapia and calendar sync, and you can pretty clearly draw the line to an elevated traveler experience there. I also love that you both touched on the regulatory aspect of things. I know that can get a bit boring for some, but the way she spoke about it just further informed us that the closer hosts are tuned into local laws and policy, the better their experience will be.

[00:25:50] **Becca Glenn** That's right. I'm so glad she came in with that expertise, because we know that having the most up-to-date information on the local regulations pertaining to your rental can be a make-or-break scenario in some cases.

[00:26:01] **Brandon Ehrhardt** All right. We've got the map out in the podcast room. We heard from Mary Beth where she's going on her next trip. I've got to ask you, Becca, where are you and the family going to next?

[00:26:11] **Becca Glenn** My next big trip is in just a couple of months to Naples and Positano. I absolutely love Italy but have never been to either destination and I'm so excited. I cannot wait to take in those iconic Positano views.

[00:26:24] **Brandon Ehrhardt** So, the million-dollar question: Are you staying in a vacation rental or a hotel?

[00:26:30] **Becca Glenn** A vacation rental. Absolutely.

[00:26:32] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Of course you are. That sounds like an amazing trip. If you need someone to come carry your bags, I'm available.

[00:26:37] **Becca Glenn** Good to know.

[00:26:38] **Brandon Ehrhardt** Sounds so fun. And thank you so much for stepping in. What a fabulous episode that builds out even more knowledge for our vacation rental audiences and others in the travel industry just looking to learn a little bit more. Was an excellent interview and appreciate it so much. Becca.

[00:26:53] **Becca Glenn** Of course, Brandon. Thank you.

[00:26:57] **Brandon Ehrhardt** As always, let us know what you think of the podcast by emailing us at PoweringTravel@Expediagroup.com — that's poweringtravel, all one word, at Expedia.com. We also have a new form on the website, the hot new website that you can fill out easily. You can find that at Partners.ExpediaGroup.com. As I mentioned, we've just refreshed that website and it is beautiful and lends to so much good insight and opportunity for our business partners. If you have a few seconds, be sure to rate and review on the podcast platform of your choice that helps people like you find our show. Thanks so much for listening. We'll see you next time on the Powering Travel Podcast, brought to you by Expedia Group.