

Vacation Rentals a natural transition

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Ken and Leslie Cook own La Quinta Vacation Homes -KATHY STRONG/SPECIAL TO LA QUINTA SUN

La Quinta Vacation Homes

Where: 78-010 Main St., Suite 208, in Old Town La Quinta

Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday

Information: (760) 771-0175 or www.lqvacations.com

Ken and Leslie Cook owned a large real estate brokerage business in Northern California with hundreds of agents working for them, but they had been investing in single-family homes in the desert for a while.

"When we decided to move here and take on this small, existing vacation rental business in La Quinta, it was very refreshing," said Ken, who is enjoying the personal service he and Leslie are able to give their homeowners and clients.

"In researching rental properties to buy, we searched all the communities in the desert," Leslie said. "We found La Quinta to be the best community for us."

The couple bought Diana's Vacation Rentals in 2008 and began rebranding the business, including giving it a new name: La Quinta Vacation Homes.

They also upgraded, adding a computer system with databases and decided to scale down to just homes in La Quinta "rather than trying to be everything to everybody," Leslie said.

"We are also selective in the homes we take," said Ken. "They need to be immaculate and have nice décor."

Leslie, who is a certified interior designer, is often asked to make suggestions for furniture and décor upgrades in homes in their rental program.

"I try to keep budget in mind and will go ... take photos of furnishings I think would work."

The couple has also added a second component to the business with about 250 long-term rentals that are non furnished homes.

"With our background in real estate, this was a natural," said Ken, "giving us year-round cash flow."

However, the Cooks like the hands-on experience of the vacation rentals best.

"I like the reservations and the people who come here for the first time and are amazed by the beauty of La Quinta," Leslie said.

"We are basically on call for the entire stay of a vacation rental guest," Ken said. "I personally escort guests to the home when they arrive and make sure they know how to work the systems in the house — from the pool and spa to the Internet. ... With my technical background, I can fix or show them how to use most things. I carry routers in my car!"

It is difficult for the couple to take breaks in their business, but they have one steadfast rule that gets them through the rush.

"At the end of the season, which we target for Cinco de Mayo, we go to Las Vegas, call room service and hibernate," Leslie said.