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10 Things Your B&B Won't Tell You

1. Technically we're not a B&B . In fact, we're really not a B&B at all.

Traditionally, bed and breakfasts were required to have general business licenses, says Jay Karen, CEO of the Professional Association of Inn Keepers. But with the rise of the Internet, the term has been co-opted by all kinds of establishments seeking to rent out rooms. Airbnb.com, for example, lists rooms to let. But it doesn't guarantee that the hosts are licensed. Users indicate that they want to book a room based on a description, then enter their credit card or Paypal information. It is up to the host to accept or decline the guest.

Renting from unlicensed strangers presents a host of problems, the foremost being quality control and safety. "One the one hand, it's cool, but on the other hand it's a liability and safety issues are wide open for abuse." To some degree, "it's buyer beware," Karen adds.

"While we don't approve every listing on our site, we are very transparent about what we do and do not know about each host," says Brian Chesky, co-founder and CEO of airbnb.com.

2. Impressed by the rave reviews you read about us online? Our friends and family might have written them.

Many travelers hunt for a **B&B** by using online travel directories, such as BedandBreakfast.com or TripAdvisor.com. These sites also create the opportunity to **read** and write reviews, giving vacationers a view beyond what a **B&B** might say about itself. But most of the reviews are anonymous. They could be done by legitimate guests, the owners' family and friends, or competitors. There is no way to know the motive behind the review. Reviews can also be unhelpful, because they're completely contradictory.

One anonymous review of The Gracie Inn, a **B&B** in New York City, posted on June 15, 2009, on TripAdvisor.com starts with "The location is great …" and the very next review, which was posted on Nov. 9, 2009, begins by saying, "First of all the location is inconvenient …" Most reviews are very polarizing, basically "an exercise in extremes", says Lynn Mohrfeld, president and CEO of the California Association of Bed & Breakfasts. "They either had a great stay or a terrible stay," but **you**'ll rarely hear from someone who just had a normal stay where all of the service was as it should be.

3. We'll drop our prices at the last minute -- if we need your business.

Seasoned **B&B** visitors know that many of the most popular inns can get booked up quickly. But with the travel industry as a whole still stuck in the doldrums, this summer it's likely you can catch a room and a deal at the last minute – just maybe not the room you want.

Liz Hall, the general manager at the Inn at Playa Del Rey, in Los Angeles, says she starts to offer deals when she has rooms open and time is running out. For instance, the inn had rooms left open for Memorial Day weekend, so in mid-May it circulated two deals – one for $40 off one night, and another for 50% off a second night. The Laurel Inn in San Francisco also offers last-minute deals or will throw in a free bottle of wine to snag a new guest. "The problem is that everybody is booking at the last minute, and they might not get the rooms they want," says John Spear, the Laurel Inn's general manager.

4. The recession didn't hurt us -- that much.

The B&B occupancy rate held steady in 2008 at 43.7%, the same as 2007 (and that was an industry record), while the median average daily rate rose 3.4%, to $150 a night. (The 2009 data will be released later this year.) The hotel industry, meanwhile, saw its occupancy rate fall 4.2% from the end of 2007 to the end of 2008 as its average daily room rates rose 2.4% over the same period, according to data from Smith Travel Research. B&Bs tended to do better than hotels during the downturn because more travelers opted for drive-in vacations and shorter stays, says Karen. That shift meant people didn't "bail on us," he adds.

Still, some B&Bs say that the recession affected how their customers think. People are "wheeling and dealing more," says Lowell Daniels, owner of the Victorian Inn, in Ferndale, Calif. But Daniels himself doesn't bargain "because we feel our prices are very, very honest and reasonable already, and to undercut them means we must have been inflated," he says. Instead of cutting prices, he tries to give extra value in areas like room upgrades.

5. Three stars, four stars -- who's counting?

In the no-brand name world of B&Bs, ratings cited in guidebooks or brochures can be useful, but don't tell the whole story. The most prestigious ratings are those handed out by Mobil (stars), AAA (diamonds), and an innkeepers' association called Select Registry (a stamp of approval). All three groups inspect properties and share the results. The fact that AAA will arrive unannounced for inspection "keeps people on their toes," says Lowell Daniels, the owner of the Victorian Inn in Ferndale, Calif.

If an inn is a member of one of these programs, it can show a level of care, says the Professional Association of Inn Keepers' Karen, and can reflect members who are "tapped into trends and best practices." However, Karen says he wouldn't limit searches to rated B&Bs, since the organizations only rate dues-paying members. "There may be an inn that doesn't want to throw a few thousand bucks at one of these programs," he says. "It doesn't mean they aren't top quality.

The Inn at Playa Del Rey, for example, has a three diamond rating. But to get a five diamond, the inn would have to have to have a concierge and a swimming pool. Not everyone wants that in a B&B experience, says the general manager, Hall. Even with two personal butlers per room, an inn could never have more than a 3.5 rating without a restaurant," says the Laurel Inn's Spear.

6. Beauty is in the eye of the photographer.

A lot of inns will hire a photographer and err on the flattering side of photos, says Karen. But his association encourages member innkeepers not to “overdo it” or take pictures “from a funky angle to make a room look bigger,” he says. They’re like wedding photos -- they don’t depict how a person will look every day, “but you will at least get an idea of how attractive they might be,” he says.

The idea that innkeepers are misrepresenting properties is unfair, says Mohrfeld of the California Association of Bed & Breakfasts. “Almost all” photos are accurate, he says, adding that “you can’t fake someone out with a photo, especially in 2010, and if you do, they are going to get on TripAdvisor.com and say that it’s not real.” Further, they're going to post their own photos for comparison, he says. “Most marketing is pretty darn honest these days,” he says. “Is it taken in the best light? Sure, they are trying to sell it, but most are representative.”

What about guest photos that end up online? “It’s often a bad thing, because of the quality of the photos and because if someone goes to the trouble to take a photo, it’s usually of something bad, says Spear. “As an operator, you’re much better off being realistic – but that’s something not everybody has learned.”

7. Try us, we might be more flexible than you think.

Innkeepers would much rather you ask for something, no matter how bizarre, than have you leave unhappy, says Mohrfeld. If a bed is uncomfortable, they may have another room available. “Employees realize that if guests come back, they’ll get another shift, so service is paramount,” Mohrfeld adds, referring to the fact that the busier an inn is, the more work there is for employees.

In Los Angeles, the Inn at Playa Del Rey offers early check-in and late check-out if possible. At the Laurel Inn, Spear has fielded requests for things like a five-foot-tall teddy bear, bottles of Champagne and artisanal chocolates to be added to a room, while the Victorian Inn, in Ferndale, Calif., recently removed all the pillows and pictures from a room in response to a guest request.

8. There’s no escaping corporate America.

To bolster revenues, many bed-and-breakfasts are now marketing to niche groups, offering discounts, meeting rooms or breakfasts-to-go to corporate visitors. Yet many guests choose to stay at bed-and-breakfasts precisely to avoid such meetings.

Inns like business travelers because they make natural repeat customers, says Karen.

If you’re concerned about this issue, call ahead and find out whether other guests are business travelers, what the policies are for cell phone usage in common areas, for instance, and if you can have a room away from those guests.

9. When it comes to cancellations, we mean business — most of the time.

Because they are small, B&Bs feel the lost revenue more than a large hotel if a room goes empty, but owners also try to be understanding. The Inn at Playa Del Rey and the Laurel Inn both have 48-hour cancellation policies. “We realize that plans change and things come up, and we didn’t want to penalize someone for an emergency or change of plans – we want to make a friend,” says the Playa Del Re’s Hall. Spear’s policy is also 48 hours – if a guest cancels after that they owe one night’s fare and tax; but he “absolutely makes exceptions.” The Victorian Inn has a seven-day cancellation policy; owner Daniels also makes exceptions, and if he does charge a guest a cancellation fee, he’ll offer them a gift certificate in the same amount for later stay. All three innkeepers say if they can rebook the room, they won’t charge a cancellation fee.

10. If you are unhappy, speak up sooner rather than later.

“If someone is asking for their money back and it’s the first we’ve heard about it, they didn’t give us a chance to make it better,” says Hall, adding that she could at least put someone in a different room or try to address whatever the issue might be. Things go wrong, which is why she says she does offer refunds on an individual basis. Additionally, if someone shows up and it’s not what they’re looking for, Hall says she’ll usually let them leave without charging the normal cancellation fee. “The B&B world isn’t for everyone,” she says.

Spear agrees that it’s a case-by-case matter. “If the person does have a compelling story, you have to fess up and own the fact that you screwed up,” he says. Of course, “sometimes you just get people angling for a deal – it’s a difficult situation.”

Abuse is a problem. There are guests “who will leverage the threat of a negative review to get the things they want,” including refunds, Karen says. “That’s extortion, and it’s an unfortunate reality.”