

The allure and pitfalls of Airbnbs

Staying at Airbnbs must be a thing of the millennials. Their location, price, ease of booking, and several other things suit the hyperconnected younger travelers. For an older couple like us, Airbnbs are a mixed bag. Nevertheless, while arranging a place to stay, Tim has often opted for an Airbnb because one or two features seemed ideal for us. There are two Airbnbs we have stayed at in the last two visits to Vancouver, and after considering the differences, we think one of them is less tacky than the other. Let me describe each one in more detail, so you can decide for yourself.

The first one is the one where we stayed last year in Vancouver. It was a room on the ground floor of a fairly big two-storey house. There were several rooms on the ground floor, but we were the only guests. We entered the premises by punching the code on the keypad at the entrance, as we had been instructed. Once we entered, I felt that I was entering someone else's house. There was a living room, a kitchen, one bathroom, and, as I mentioned, several rooms whose doors were closed. We entered our room, unpacked, and tried to make ourselves comfortable. We were on our way back from Haida Gwaii, so we needed to wash some clothes. Fortunately, in the basement of the building, there was a washing machine and a dryer. We were told by the owner (via email) that we were allowed to use the laundry facilities, so I was able to wash and dry a load. As the clothes were getting washed, I sat in the living room and noticed that the room had huge piles of groceries; a huge stack of bags of rice, and other stuff. Not the kind of quantities you would buy for one family, even if the bags and other commodities were on sale. There was a distinct smell of cooking that must have filled the living room at some point, but, as the windows were closed, the smell was held hostage and had penetrated the walls, the upholstery of the furniture, and so on. There was no one, so no cooking was going on in the kitchen on the ground floor. In fact, except for some signs that the washing machine and dryer had been used recently, we seemed to be the only guests on the ground floor. However, I was able to hear noises upstairs, so I reckoned maybe the owners lived there and cooked downstairs.

We were able to shower, go out, meet JS, eat out, get some milk for the next day, reenter the house, and go to bed. In the morning, we decided to make coffee as we had brought the coffee-making stuff with us. This is when I became aware that there was someone else using the kitchen, for there was a huge hunk of frozen meat left out to thaw in the sink. I wondered, how am I supposed to use the sink? Should I wash our breakfast dishes without moving the frozen meat? That seemed wrong, so I moved the meat to the counter. We had coffee and breakfast (we had breakfast cereals with us) and washed up. That is when, a woman came into the kitchen and greeted us. Our guess was that she was the owner. She seemed to be the one who had put the meat to thaw, as she took in the fact that the meat had been moved to the counter. Anyway, no worries. We got ready and left to meet up with JS.

When we came back in the evening, there was evidence of fresh cooking smell, trapped in the closed house. It was late September, so heat had been turned on at least for a part of the day,

and windows were closed. Closing windows to keep the heat in is the norm here unless you happen to be an insane person like me who opens windows even in the dead of the winter to blow air in (by means of window fans) at one end of the house and suck air out by another set of fans at the other end of the house. Our house is small, so I have been able to do this (it is insanity, of course) throughout the winter to “enjoy” fresh air.

Anyway, by the second or third day, we were able to take in more details of this household. The kitchen shelves were stacked to the gills with provisions, the fridge was so full that we had to jam in the milk carton we had bought for our coffee and cereal. Yet, there was no one except the woman who appeared a couple of times every morning, first time to get a huge hunk of meat out of the freezer and plop in the sink, then to just check in before she left the house. During the day, while we were out, someone seemed to have been cooking huge amounts. The stove was filthy, the vents of the exhaust system above the stove, the controls of the stove, and other surfaces were covered in thick oily deposits, as though this was a restaurant kitchen. Still, no one seemed to have eaten on the dining tables (one in the kitchen and one in the living room) on the ground floor. The cooking dishes were done by the time we got back in the evenings, but other than that, the cooking smells and the frozen meat left in the sink to thaw were the only indications that there was some food preparation going on.

One day, JS accompanied us to the Airbnb, with his Scrabble set in his bag, so that we (he and I) could play a couple of games. We sat at the dining table in the living room, spread the set out, and played. JS noticed that a lazy Susan had been set in the middle of the dining table, a feature that lent itself to moving the Scrabble board towards each player without upsetting the tiles. We had a gala time, and talked about how many hot plate parties we could have in this place and play Scrabble after. Yet, no one seems to have used the clever dining table with an embedded lazy Susan in the middle recently. Was it an antique? Was there a vibrant family living here at one point? Had the children of the family left? We fantasized answers to all these questions while contemplating the email contact of the Airbnb, who went by the name of Caesar, who had told us, in polite English, about the facilities. Did Caesar live on the premises or was he conducting this business from abroad? He seemed to answer our questions almost immediately. Was Caesar a human or a robot? Had AI been conscripted into the bizarre Airbnb business? With JS, as with all the Dickinsons, it is easy to go overboard with fantasizing, but it was fun.

We stayed for three or four nights, and the same scenario repeated itself each day. It's how Airbnbs work, I guess. You provide a bedroom and some facilities; bathroom, kitchen, living room, etc. The facilities would most likely be shared either with others using the Airbnb or the owners, or both! It is futile to try to understand the events that go on in the building. Nevertheless, the cooking smells, the evidence of activities, the noises, etc., would likely make you wonder who else is around. How do Airbnb guests deal with this? Let me know.

Now we are visiting JS again this year, for a slightly longer period- five nights. Tim found another Airbnb, which is in the same neighborhood as the one last year. Both Airbnbs are close to JS's apartment.

On the first night here, we had a strange experience. It is October, so the nights are very cold, and heat is turned off at nights, as is the case in smaller buildings. We had a massive quilt, yet we were cold. Each one tried to pull the quilt onto ourselves, having experienced quilt/blanket hogging by the other all these years. Yet, neither was able to get warm, so we snuggled, and got some sleep. As I tried to make the bed in the morning, I understood what the problem was. The quilt's stuffing had all migrated to the bottom. In fact, the quilt was like a bag with the stuffing. We had been sleeping under two thin layers of the quilt as the insulating material, drawn by gravity, had migrated to the foot of the bed. This was a strange problem. Also, I was not happy with their pillow, so I decided that we should buy a quilt and a pillow instead of contacting the owner about replacing these two items. Tim was not convinced. However, JS said that if we buy a quilt, he will take it off our hands when we leave because his quilt needs to be replaced. And yes, he could also use a spare pillow.

On Friday, after riding the bus to JS's recycling place, we wandered around, took pictures, and found a Value Village outlet on the premises. Value Village is a chain that sells used things. We went in, bought a quilt and other things we needed. A lovely store clerk found a huge Ikea bag for us to carry our purchases on Vancouver Transit.

This Airbnb, is very different. It is a one-storey building with a basement. The owners live upstairs. The basement has been converted into an Airbnb, for just one guest or a couple. We have the bathroom and kitchen for our use exclusively. Though we had the quilt and pillow problems, the towels stank, the bed was not made properly, etc., we have this generous space for ourselves. We only hear the owners but not seen them. It would seem that we are in contact with the owners only by texting or by emailing via Airbnb. We have been able to make coffee, some soup, etc. and eat breakfasts and lunches here, and hang out, write anecdotes, and wait for JS. Each of us has gone into the city on Vancouver buses, and walked around the neighborhood.

To cope with the shortcomings of this place, I think it was a good idea to have bought things. Now we have a quilt, a pillow, pillow cover, a couple of towels, etc., from Value Village. We will give these things to JS and head home tomorrow.

Here is a picture of the quilt for laughs.

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