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Redefining Hostels: Not Just for Young Travelers

Tips for Booking Hostels Online (They're Not Just for Young Travelers Anymore)

By ANNE WALLACE ALLEN For The Associated Press
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This photo taken Feb. 2, 2010 shows guests using the living room of Lisbon's Travellers' House hostel. The hostel has been awarded World's Best Hostel 2009 for the second consecutive year by the readers of Hostelworld.com
 (Francisco Seco/AP Photo)

Dictionaries typically define hostels as inexpensive lodging, usually for young travelers. But Hostelworld.com, a Web site where travelers can book a hostel stay, is trying to change that definition.

As a spokeswoman for Hostelworld.com, Aisling White has written to dictionaries in the United States and Europe asking them to redefine hostels as inexpensive lodging for people of all ages.

These days, said White, hostels are moving away from their Spartan roots. They still have communal kitchens and bathrooms. But while dormitory-style sleeping arrangements are typical, many hostels offer private rooms as well, and some even have private bathrooms with fluffy towels and hair dryers.

"They're almost akin to a boutique hotel," said White, speaking from Hostelworld's headquarters in Dublin.

One of the main reasons travelers choose hostels is the price. They typically charge a fraction of what other types of lodging cost. As Jim Williams writes in his "Hostelling Handbook," "The reality is this: suppose you have \$5,000 and a lot of time — you have taken a year off school and worked for a while and are taking some time to travel. You could spend this amount in a few weeks at expensive hotels and restaurants OR you could stretch this money and travel for perhaps two years. This is where modern hostelling fits in." But, he adds, "You are not paying for a five-star hotel and it won't be one."

Hostelling is a venerable tradition in Europe, Asia, and Australia. But while Americans, especially young ones, often turn to hostels while traveling overseas, they are less accustomed to staying in them in the U.S. Here, budget travelers, long accustomed to moving around by car, think first of motels.

The more than 450 U.S. and Canadian hostels in Williams' handbook are usually occupied by Europeans and other foreigners, not by North Americans, said Williams, who ran a hostel in New York City for 20 years.

Hostels are Changing to Suit All Ages

Gradually, though, perceptions are changing. White said inquiries on Hostelworld from U.S. travelers rose 20 percent last year, which she attributes to changing amenities.

Hostels cost less than most hotels and motels. The venerable Earl's Court Youth Hostel close to central London charges about \$26 per night; a bed in a two-person dorm room with ensuite bathroom at the Columbus Circle Hostel in New York City is \$38.

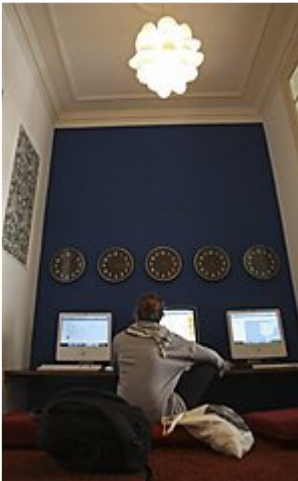
Hostels also tend to be sociable places. The young Australians, New Zealanders and others who travel for several months or even years at a time use hostels as a place to find jobs, make friends and learn about the area. "I don't think you'll ever be lonely in a hostel," said White.

White is trying to spread the word that hostels are fine places for families and older travelers. In a survey completed in January, Hostelworld.com found that 36 percent of hostel customers were 18-24 years old; 42 percent were ages 25-34, and 9 percent were 35-44. Thirteen percent were over 45.

"Hostels are adapting," said White. "While there is the party hostel for younger people, a lot of hostels are changing to private rooms to make sure they are accessible to every person who is trying to save money while traveling."

Online hostel booking sites abound. Hostelworld.com is one of the largest, with 1.6 million visitors a month, according to the research firm comScore. Other top hostel-booking sites, according to comScore, include HostelBookers.com, which advertises no booking fees; HostelsClub.com, which requires a \$2.50 fee for each booking and a nonrefundable 10 percent deposit in advance; and Hostels.com, which has a \$2 booking fee and 10 percent nonrefundable deposit. Hostelworld charges a \$2 fee, but after you make three bookings, you don't have to pay fees again.

The Hostelworld.com site includes suggested itineraries, mini-tour guides to 60 places around the world, and an iPhone application to make it easier to find and book a hostel room while you're on the go.



This photo taken Feb. 2, 2010 shows guests using the living room of Lisbon's Travellers' House hostel. The hostel has been awarded World's Best Hostel 2009 for the second consecutive year by the readers of Hostelworld.com (AP Photo/Francisco Seco) (AP)

Hostelworld.com Users Open the Globe

Hostelworld.com Users Span the Globe

Hostelworld.com carries thousands of user ratings, and uses guest ratings to honor the best hostels worldwide each year. This year, five of the top 10 were located in Lisbon, out of 23,000 hostels worldwide.

"A lot of the hostels there (in Lisbon) have a nice modern feel," said White. "One or two have dorms and rooms designed by local designers."

Hostelworld.com's top U.S. hostel was USA Hostels San Diego, which charges \$57 for a private room with twin beds.

Williams recommends using hostel booking sites to find a place, and then doing the booking itself directly with the hostel management. That way, a family looking for a four-person hostel room can ask the staff if theirs is a party place with a nightly pub crawl, or something more peaceful.

"Hostels are incredibly different," he said. "Go to the original source to get the information." If you speak to staff in person about room charges, "nine times out of 10 you'll get a better rate," Williams added.

And while you're doing your research, check the user ratings, available on most of the hostel booking sites. They provide some genuine-sounding details and can shed light on the general experience of budget travel.

"Apart from this place being slightly out of the way the only issue was there was a rat living in the roof right above my bunk gnawing through the wall all night long," wrote a reviewer named Sean on Jan. 18 of the St. Christopher's Inn in Paris. "I think this is more of a Paris problem rather than the hostel though," Sean wrote. "It is by far the best value in an expensive place."

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<http://abcnews.go.com/Travel/wirestory?id=9746990&page=1>