

# 1 At Home Wherever You Are: A Guide for Guests



**M**argaret Johnson first visited London as a young traveler. Like most tourists, she spent most of her time in neighborhoods that were popular with visitors, such as SoHo, Westminster, and Kensington.

Given the prices of London accommodations, Johnson stayed in bland and mediocre hotels in a London neighborhood she didn't particularly care for, where prices were high and amenities few.

Ten years later, she returned to London for a week looking for a different experience. Unfortunately, hotel prices had only increased over time. As Johnson wanted to explore parts of the city where Londoners lived, she decided to try a local host rental—an apartment offered for a short-term stay by the owner—rather than book a room at a commercial hotel. She signed up for an account on Airbnb, spent a lot of time browsing options online, and settled on a well-priced apartment in Islington, an area she'd never visited.

While the flat wasn't extraordinary, Johnson was hooked on the experience of living where the locals lived. "The positives far outweighed the negatives for me. I fell in love with Islington. I felt like I'd been missing out! By the time I left, I was already thinking about where in the neighborhood I'd stay next."

Since then, Johnson, a Bangkok-based educator, has returned to London on five or six more occasions; each time, she would stay in a local host rental in or around Islington. She has also booked local host rentals in Tokyo, Shanghai, New York, Amsterdam, Perth, and other cities around the world while traveling for both business and leisure.

"I love the sense of adventure and getting away from crowded hotels," Johnson said. "I mean, it's kind of a cliché at this point, but if you take the time to look you really can stay in amazing places and see what it's like to live in these cities and in these neighborhoods. It's completely changed the way I travel."



## SETTING YOU UP FOR SUCCESS AS A GUEST

**O**ur goal in this chapter is to prepare you, the traveler, to make the most of your local host rental experience. We will stress throughout the book that being a guest in a local host rental is fundamentally different from staying in traditional hotel accommodations because you are staying in a stranger's home.

Although you are renting a place to stay, just as you would at a hotel, the process of using local host rentals feels different. With a hotel, the interaction is essentially a commercial one. When a traveler is booking, renting, and paying for a space from another individual, however, factors of trust and reputation matter a great deal. The relationship is less transactional and more personal, which can be the best part of the experience. On the other hand, the rental process isn't standardized, so at times it can be a little unclear what to expect. The relationship between you—the guest—and the host is one of the most important parts of this transaction. (Price will always be a decisive factor, and local host rentals can be significantly less expensive per stay than hotels. This chapter, however, will focus primarily on the less obvious aspects of local host rentals, with which guests will need to become familiar.)

With local host rentals, your search, your stay, and your

communications are person-to-person, not person-to-organization. How you present yourself online, interact with hosts, behave as a guest, and deliver feedback after you leave—these are all factors that will affect your future rental experiences, for better or worse.

This chapter walks you through the critical stages of the setup, search, selection, and booking process, and also provides tips on being (and being reviewed as) a good guest both during and after your stay.

We open by reminding you about the key benefits of booking a local host rental: the “hospitality difference,” the opportunity to feel “like a local” in a foreign place, and a more sustainable way to travel.

Then, as we take into consideration that many communities around the world are still figuring out ways to regulate the local host rental market, we offer some advice on how to anticipate and assess any legal questions that may arise. The heart of this chapter then follows: a practical, how-to guide to setting up your profile, evaluating service platforms searching for and booking properties, and protecting yourself against scams. Although, statistically, claims are few and far between, we guide you on what to do in case of emergencies and how to address claims if your local host rental experience falls short of expectations.

Throughout the chapter, we will impress upon you that communication with your host is paramount and critical to building trust.

Finally, we close the chapter with tips on how to write honest reviews: Reviews are the single most important factor that influences your host's reputation, and speaks to yours.

## THE LOCAL HOST RENTAL DIFFERENCE: HOSPITALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

**B**eyond price and location, the thing that really matters to us is hospitality. We find, more and more, that we're happy to stay in small places—a local host rental or a B&B—if we get the attention and help we need, particularly when we arrive and right at the beginning,” said traveler Ming Yeo. “A host who's welcoming, well-informed, well-organized, and friendly makes all the difference. Big hotels can't easily compete here, even when they're top-notch. In fact, even in five-star hotels you often end up waiting in line to check in—something that just can't happen in a local host rental.”

  
**Good hospitality in someone's home can be far more personalized and memorable.**



When you think of hotel hospitality, you may picture a doorman greeting you curbside, providing luggage assistance, and escorting you to the check-in desk, where a smiling receptionist extends a warm welcome. All these things and more can contribute to a great hotel experience.

A local host rental can also offer some of these amenities and services: the host may be available to welcome you, help with your bags, and provide tips on where to go and what to do. But good hospitality in someone's home can be far more personalized and memorable. It can include a handpicked basket of locally produced goodies, a home-cooked meal replete with regional ingredients, a fully stocked fridge based on your preferences, or an invitation to join the hosts and their friends for a night out on the town.

"I remember a host in Paris ended up buying us groceries. It was just a loaf of bread and just a few small things, but for me it was a meaningful experience," said traveler Sara Hutchins. "If you end up with a good host you'll get the things they recommend in the area and other local tips, so the experience can be more personal than staying in a hotel."

Many hosts provide a packet of menus from their preferred local restaurants, a list of the best bars, advice on getting around, and more. Because suggestions come from the host's unique perspective—and tips and recommendations about what's good and what's not will vary among people living in the same city, or even on the same street—you are essentially experiencing the host's hometown by following in his or her footsteps.

"My wife and I rented a flat on Airbnb for our first visit to Shanghai, and appreciated that our host took the time to show us around the neighborhood after getting us settled into her gorgeous flat," said traveler Robert Martinez. "She explained how the building was designed and how many families lived there, tipped us off to a few great local restaurants, and generally made us feel a little more comfortable in a city and neighborhood that were new to us."

At the same time, local host rentals appeal to guests who value sustainability—a trend that's of increasing importance, especially to millennials and consumers who want to purchase products and services that benefit communities and protect the environment.<sup>1</sup> In a 2016 survey of global users, Booking.com found that more than two-thirds of guests were more likely to stay in an accommodation if they knew it was "eco-friendly."<sup>2</sup>

If reducing your environmental footprint matters, then local host rentals are a great option for you because they tend to generate less waste and utilize fewer resources than traditional hotels. Many

**More than 2/3rds  
of guests say  
they are more  
likely to choose  
"eco-friendly"  
accommodations.**

— Booking.com



hosts are actively taking steps to make their properties more energy efficient, and as a guest living in someone's home, you have more control over the amount and type of resources you use—you can cook your own food, wash your own clothes and linens, and shop locally.

## A REMINDER ABOUT LEGAL MATTERS

As you read, it is important to keep in mind that the local host rental landscape is rapidly evolving and changes and new developments can be expected virtually every day—not all of which can be captured in this book. While all statements are accurate at time of writing, it is inevitable that changes will continue to occur after publication. Please make sure that relevant information is up to date before you book a stay, begin operating a local host rental, or take action on any local host rental community issues or regulatory policies.

As a sector overall, local host rentals have enjoyed exponential growth, but they have also encountered some growing pains. Markets for local host rentals have expanded so quickly that in some instances standard regulations, safety measures, and other legal matters have not yet been fully hammered out and resolved. Every country and city grapples with its own specific issues related to local host rentals, from zoning concerns to questions as to who should be allowed to host travelers—and for how long and in which types of properties. Some policies are very flexible; others are strict.



## Should I rent?

### 3 Steps to Mitigate Legal Risks



#### 1. Research.

Before you book, research online for news on general attitude and legal status of local host rentals at your destination. Some platforms may permit you to check with the host if you want to confirm.



#### 2. Rent wisely.

If you aren't comfortable with a host's actions, choose another property.



#### 3. Know your rights.

Review customer service and claims process, in case of problems.

The Singapore government, for example, passed a law in 2017 forbidding homeowners to rent out entire homes or apartments for less than six months without prior approval, and illegal hosts are subject to heavy fines.<sup>3</sup> The law was updated in June 2017 to lower the minimum rental period for private homes to three months, while keeping the minimum at six months for public housing units.<sup>4</sup> Airbnb now complies with rental regulations in cities like Amsterdam and London, which limit hosts to a maximum number of rental days per year by delisting properties once they hit that milestone (reduced from 60 days to 30 days starting in 2019 for Amsterdam, with an occupancy limit of four people;<sup>5</sup> 90 days for London).<sup>6</sup> In June 2017 the Japanese national legislature passed a law allowing homeowners to rent rooms or entire homes for up to 180 days a year, though local governments have the discretion to shorten the maximum operational period.<sup>7</sup> Given how fast the market changes, it is possible that between the time of writing and publication, some of these regulations will have been updated while new ones elsewhere will have emerged.

As these matters are of more relevance to hosts and local authorities, we will delve further into the legal issues and complexities facing the local host rental industry in later chapters. As a guest, however, you should understand that some gray areas still exist, and more so in certain destinations. Just as passengers on an airplane are taught how to act in the unlikely case of an emergency, we recommend that you educate yourself on local regulations that may affect your stay, just in case.

Traveler Franz Busch, for instance, described a recent experience in Bangkok: “The building clearly did not want to have owners renting their places out. When we arrived, the people at the reception desk were out-and-out hostile and didn’t want to give us the keys at all,” he said.

They told us to call the host, who was 9,000 miles away and didn’t answer the phone, so we were left sitting there in the lobby with all of our luggage, unsure what would happen next. We finally talked our way in, and eventually were able to speak to the host, who apologized profusely. But the experience left us feeling a little uneasy about staying in properties that are not fully legal and aboveboard.

The vast majority of guests have positive experiences in local host rentals, and only a fraction of them ever need to consider the legality of their stay; again, these issues should be handled by hosts. As with any new travel experience, however, part of having a successful trip is preparing for any possible, if not probable, complications. Above all, we recommend working with a local host rental service you trust, since it will be that service’s job to ensure that the rental is compliant with the law. You should also read any and all available reviews about the property you are interested in to see if this issue or other related matters have come up in the past. If they haven’t, then it’s likely you’re on safe ground—and your service will be your backup in the unlikely event that a problem arises. As we will discuss later in the chapter, some sites feature verified reviews, which ensure that the information you read is accurate.

### HOW TO GET STARTED: FIND YOUR SERVICE AND SIGN UP

**B**etween the many dedicated local host rental services like Airbnb, HomeAway, and VRBO, and large online booking services like Booking.com and Agoda that now also offer local host rentals, there is no shortage of places to start your search for the perfect property. Each service has its pros and cons, its own policies, and different inventories on offer, and the right service for you may simply be the one that satisfies your specific needs at a

specific time, for a specific destination.

“Travelers care about getting a good deal, a good price, and often use multiple sites to find and compare options,” said Monica Lees,<sup>8</sup> a senior user experience (UX) researcher at Agoda. “With that in mind, on Agoda we want to give travelers the option to find both hotel rooms and local host rentals so they don’t have to go back-and-forth among all these sites to find the place that’s right for them.”

There are a number of niche local host rental services specializing in certain types of properties (e.g., couch-surfing or luxury rentals), but it’s best to start with the biggest and most popular services for your search. For a summary of the industry’s key players, refer to Appendix 1.

### DIP YOUR TOES IN THE WATER

**B**efore venturing too far into any particular local host rental service, it’s a good idea to spend a little time looking around and getting a general feel for how things work.

Most people are familiar with booking hotel rooms online. It’s fairly straightforward—you might look at room types and costs, check the facilities and location, read the reviews, compare them with other potential options... and that’s it. There are more variables in the local host rental equation. Properties differ widely, from a basic apartment share to a luxury villa. Amenities, policies, and house rules can also vary substantially from one property to another. You’ll need to find out the answers to questions like “How will I check in or get my key?” “Are directions clear?” or “Where do I park?” since each listing is unique. Of course, with local host rentals you’ll be renting from a homeowner, so you’ll want to familiarize yourself with host profiles and how the service incorporates this information into the listing.

A fun way to begin is to look up a dream destination and see what types of listings are available there. Perhaps you’ve always wanted to spend a week exploring the ancient ruins of Rome, or seeing the cherry blossoms bloom in Tokyo, or experience island-hopping in Hawaii. Just punch in anywhere you’d love to visit, make up arrival and departure dates if you need to, and see what comes up. Better yet, you can look up somewhere you’re already planning to visit but haven’t yet booked a place to stay.

Once you have some results, click on anything that catches your eye. Check out the property description, photos, and amenities; look at the property and host reviews; and poke around the platform’s map functionality. We guarantee you’ll be amazed by the variety of places in which you can choose to stay.

Most local host rental services require nothing more than your first



### How to sign up for an account, and what you’ll need to do it

To book a local host rental, the first thing you’ll need to do is sign up for an account on the service’s website. This shouldn’t take more than a minute or two. However, before actually making a booking, you’ll want to set aside some time later to complete your personal profile, where applicable; we’ll have more on that later.

and last name, email address, and a password to get started; Airbnb does require users to be at least 18 years old, so you’ll also need to enter your birthday (don’t worry—it will be kept private) to get an account there. Some sites, like Booking.com and HomeAway, also allow you to join by simply logging in with your Facebook or Google account. (Always remember to protect your privacy when working with any social media service, and keep in mind that these platforms may use your account for targeted marketing.) Before signing up, review the service’s terms and conditions, privacy policy, and other legal information linked to the registration page. Once you’ve successfully created your account, you’ll receive an automated email requesting confirmation that you have signed up.

### ACCOUNT SECURITY

**A**s an extra security measure, and for the sake of transparency, Airbnb gives hosts the option to require potential guests to further confirm their identity using its internal Verified ID program. To complete this step, you need to enter a government-issued ID such as your passport or driver’s license and you can also provide a link to



## How to craft a personal profile that works for you

You might think that your profile doesn't matter—but it is, in fact, absolutely integral to local host rental transactions, which are based on person-to-person relationships. Put yourself in the shoes of a host: Would you feel comfortable renting your home to someone you didn't know anything about? Of course not. And that's why it's so important for you to take the time to complete a personal profile when local host rental sites offer them—which most of them do. Your profile will help assure your potential hosts that you're exactly the type of responsible, trustworthy traveler to whom they wish to rent.

### A SAMPLE GUEST PROFILE



Mr. Matt Guest

VERIFIED INFO Email Address Phone Number   
[Learn more...](#)

I am an American citizen residing in Singapore for the past 8 years. I work at a multinational consulting firm as an auditor.

I am a travel enthusiast who usually travels light and prefers venturing out solo. I love to travel as I get to challenge myself in getting to know new places, people, and local experiences.

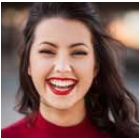
Besides traveling, I love to compose music. If you're intersted, you can check out some of my compositions in the YouTube link below, along with my other social media links.

I am fluent in English, German, French, Italian and now Chinese!

You can send me an email at [Matt.Guest@email.com](mailto:Matt.Guest@email.com).



REVIEWS (62) REFERENCES (62)



Susan, Costa Rica  
Matt is an amazing guest. Super clean, cheerful, and nice. He even brought us a souvenir from Singapore!

- ◀ Name
- ◀ Verification information
- ◀ Smiling and friendly photo
- ◀ Brief self-description, including where you live and work
- ◀ Travel interests
- ◀ Hobbies
- ◀ Languages spoken
- ◀ Contact information
- ◀ Social media
- ◀ Reviews and references

your social media accounts, if you have them, as further forms of identity confirmation. This is a secure and private process handled internally by Airbnb; hosts do not see your identification details, just that you've been verified. This process can be completed in the "Trust and Verification" section of your account, and is well worth doing since it gives hosts peace of mind that they are renting to real people. (Putting your host at ease also benefits you, the guest, because it fortifies the trust equation on which local host rentals, like much of the sharing economy, depend.) As the local host rental market matures and laws and attitudes regarding data protection evolve, we expect that ID verification will become a more standard practice across platforms.

### TIPS TO CREATE THE IDEAL PROFILE

Follow our suggestions and see sample profile on page 66 to create a profile that hosts will trust.

**Photo.** Upload a photograph that clearly shows your face. Pick one where you're smiling and look friendly—something that you would use for your LinkedIn or Facebook account. Airbnb also lets you upload a quick 30-second video of yourself, though this isn't necessary (and most users haven't yet bothered to do it). This is not the place to upload a picture of your favorite cartoon or movie character, your child, or pet; the purpose of this photo is to help establish trust.

**Description.** Most—not all—local host rental services provide a space where you can briefly describe yourself. This gives you an opportunity to tell hosts more about you—where you come from, what you do for a living, how often you travel, and what kind of travel experiences that you enjoy. It doesn't have to be lengthy; just be yourself, and remember that the profile is meant to convince hosts that you'll be an ideal guest.

**Social Media.** Currently, Airbnb is one example of a local host rental service that allows you to connect to your Facebook account and request personal references from friends, family, and coworkers. While this is optional, it can be good way to present a positive

picture of yourself. You may not wish to share your Facebook account if it is very personal, but do keep in mind that social media has become a big part of the local host rental validation process. With Facebook and other social media platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, or Twitter, it has never been easier to learn about strangers online. These social media platforms can help hosts get to know prospective guests, and determine whether the person making a request (or who has completed a booking) is reasonable and trustworthy. Remember that if a host sees offensive or otherwise questionable content on your profile, he or she may be disinclined to accept a request.

**Reviews.** Some services allow hosts to provide reviews of you following your stay, so while you may see a space for this on your profile, you won't have any reviews until after you've completed your first stay. These host reviews hold important information that, if positive, can considerably enhance trust and stand you in good stead for future bookings. It goes without saying that the more responsible and respectful you are during your stay, the better your reviews will be. (See sample reviews on page 69 and 71)

Keep in mind that while sites like Agoda and Booking.com offer instant bookings on most local host rentals at the time of writing, other services may require host approval for certain properties after you request a booking. (This is an area that's evolving as the market expands.) Your personal profile is one of the first things hosts will look at when deciding whether or not to accept your request, so make the effort to present yourself in the best light—honestly and with personality.

## HOW TO FIND THE PERFECT LOCAL HOST RENTAL

**E**ven after staying in local host rentals a few times now, it still takes me a little while to find the right place,” said traveler Bernice Loh. “Things like location, cleanliness, Wi-Fi, and at least a small kitchen are important to me, so I spend time sorting through quite a few places before I actually make a booking.”

At this point, you've gone to a particular service, entered your destination, your check-in and checkout dates, and have seen a listings page that may display available properties. When you see a listing of interest, you can click on it for more information and read reviews from previous guests—just like when you're searching for hotels online.

Once you've entered the basic search criteria, however, there are a few additional steps you should take to zero in more quickly on the local host rental that's right for you.

This may seem obvious, but to ensure accurate search results, it's

## Review from Hosts



**Christina**

July 2018

It was my second time to host Mr. Matt. He is very cheerful and respectful. Both times, he kept the room in good condition. It is my pleasure to host him. I would be more than glad to host him again and would definitely recommend him.

◀ **Personality and traveling style**

◀ **Feedback on cleanliness**

◀ **Recommendation for future**

## How a host views your profile

*I definitely do look at prospective renters' profiles. ... I don't need a life story, but it's helpful to know why the person travels, and if they typically travel with their spouse, friends, or family. It helps me to get an idea of who this person is and how they would treat the rental.*

*I do take into account if the profile is coherently written.... If the person has taken time to write a short, thoughtful profile using proper grammar, this tells me that he is probably a thoughtful person who will treat my rental space well.*

— **Maryam Siddiqi**,  
host of two properties  
in Canada and Croatia

**HOW TO SEARCH  
LIKE A PRO**

Make a list of  
important criteria

Choose service  
(Airbnb, Agoda,  
Booking.com,  
Homeaway, etc)

Enter destination

Enter booking  
requirements  
(dates, number of  
people)

Filter by key criteria  
(property type,  
amenities, number of  
rooms, price, currency)

Browse available  
properties

Read reviews

Impressed with  
what you see?

no

Go back to  
previous  
page and  
browse again

yes

Proceed with  
booking or  
contact host

important to enter the dates of your stay correctly (and double-check it to be sure), along with the number of adults and children who will be traveling. Prices and availability of local host rentals vary depending on dates and number of guests, and those properties that do not meet your basic criteria are filtered out. Furthermore, hosts maintain a calendar of open dates and may charge extra for reservations that include more than a certain number of guests. On the left is a flow chart to guide you through the process.

Note that most services allow you to adjust the displayed currency, and some let you change the language, as well. At the time of writing, Airbnb let users choose from more than 27 languages and 40 currencies; Booking.com had 43 language options and 50 different currencies to choose from, while Agoda had a choice of 38 languages and over 50 currencies.<sup>9</sup> One of the advantages of working through a large platform is that it can simplify your shopping process and help make sure that you get what you want in the most convenient way.

**WHERE DO YOU WANT TO STAY?**

Once you've entered your destination, dates, and the number of guests, some local host rental services then ask you to indicate the type of property you are interested in. Is it an entire property? A spare room within a property where the host (or other guests) may reside? Or a room to share with other travelers?

If you are looking for complete privacy and minimal host interactions, you may prefer to rent an entire property—though this will usually cost more than a private or shared room. On the other hand, if you value host interactions, don't mind sharing space, or are traveling on a budget, private and shared rooms may be better options for you. The key to picking the right property is knowing what your personal needs and preferences are.

**FINDING EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT**

The fact is that your basic search may yield hundreds of listings: this is where the service's search filters come in handy. These powerful tools help you weed out properties that don't fit your criteria, taking you one step closer to finding your perfect rental.

**Positive Review**

Australia  
8



Very nice and clean place, located right next to the train station. Not too far away from town and also in a nice and not-so-expensive neighborhood. The house is spacious and very pretty. Our host, Maria, was very friendly and kind. She greeted us with a welcome drink and prepared a nice breakfast. Her house is a kid-friendly place, with a mini playground that has a kids' swing set. Our kids had a very good time, and so did we! Would return back again.

Property and  
location feedback

Host behaviour  
and unique traits

Special amenities

Recommendation  
for future

**Negative Review**

Philippines  
3



My partner and I had a very poor experience at the villa. To begin with, the map in the description was not accurate. The villa was very difficult to find, located 20 minutes east from the area mentioned in the map. Also, the owner had left the keys with the neighbor, who was away shopping when we arrived so we waited for 40 minutes. This was very frustrating. Our rooms were ok, but not quite clean. Although, they had a picture of a nice kitchen in the website, the actual kitchen was rusty and dirty. But the highlight of our trip was when we returned back after going around the city, and realized that the door to our house had been unlocked (we remembered locking it very carefully)! We called the owner, who wasn't cooperative at all. Thankfully our belongings were untouched. We left the next morning and booked a hotel nearby. Never coming back again!

Inaccurate directions

Poor communication

Unclean and did not  
match listing photos

Safety concerns

No recommendation  
for future



The types of filters vary from service to service, but all of them allow you to set a price range (or minimum and maximum price per night) and have a map where you can zoom in and out of a given destination. On HomeAway and Airbnb, you can indicate the minimum number of bedrooms and bathrooms; choose to display only listings that offer instant booking (more on this later); and tick boxes next to amenities that you require, whether that's Wi-Fi, air conditioning, an indoor fireplace, washing machine, or cable television. Click on "More Filters" near the top of the search results page to access these filtering features.

Sites like Agoda and Booking.com offer other convenient filters. Booking.com, for instance, lets you sort by meals (breakfast included, kitchen available), cancellation policy, review score, and fun things to do within or near the property. Filter options continue to evolve: Airbnb has recently launched easy-to-navigate filters for families or business travelers.

### MAKE A LIST AND CHECK IT TWICE

Once you've used filters to limit the search results to only local host rentals that meet your specific criteria, you'll probably *still* see quite a few properties that'll entice you. The best way to keep track of potential rentals for future reference—and in case your top picks become unavailable—is by saving them to your favorites or wish list.

It's easy to do. On Airbnb, for instance, you'll see a small "heart" symbol in the upper right corner of each individual listing on the main search results page. When you click the heart, a window pops up that allows you to either create a new wish list (which you could name "Dream Homes" or "Paris" or "Summer Family Trip") or add to an existing wish list. You can do this within each individual listing by clicking the "Save to Wish List" button located in the right column.

Booking.com, Agoda, and HomeAway offer similar list functionality; just look for the heart symbol that's usually located near the top right corner on local host rental listings.

If at any time you want to review your favorite finds, just log in to your account and go to your personal profile to access your lists.

#### TIP

Save properties to a wish list for easy comparison.

### HOW TO ANALYZE HOST AND GUEST REVIEWS LIKE A PRO

One of the main differences between assessing a hotel room and a local host rental is, as you may have figured, the host. You may not necessarily interact with your host much—if at all—during your stay, but just as the host should look at your profile for assurances, you, too, should review the host's profile to ensure you are comfortable renting from him or her. Remember that when you rent a hotel room, you're interacting with a business; when you rent from a host, you're interacting with a person. And you need to make sure that this is someone you're comfortable doing business with, since you'll be living in his or her home.

"In some cases, the guest reviews and the information hosts share with you in their listing are a tip-off to the type of person from whom you will be renting," said traveler Desmond Chua. "For example, you might have very casual hosts who don't provide a lot of information in their overview, and this might tell you something about their hosting style. You may get others who are stricter, which may be reflective of the fact that they should have clear house rules and specific check-in times. It's important to pay attention to those types of things to ensure it's the right experience for you."

On HomeAway and Airbnb, hosts can upload their personal photo and provide brief descriptions of themselves and their rental (or rentals). You can see when they joined the site, the languages they speak, and how responsive they are to guest queries. Airbnb shows which identification criteria hosts have verified (email address, phone number, government ID), and lets them share additional information such as the university they attended, wish lists, and destination guidebooks they may have created that include tips and recommendations. References, if hosts have them, will be displayed, as well.

Guest reviews of local host rentals consider, or should at least consider, both the property and the host. When writing reviews, guests give their evaluations based on factors like timeliness and helpfulness of the hosts' communication; how accurately they depicted—through the description and photographs—their properties in the

**Make sure you are comfortable with your host; you will be living in her home.**



### 5 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN YOU READ REVIEWS:

#### Reality check:

Is the space really as nice as it looks online?

#### Interactions:

Is the host helpful? Rigid? Friendly?

#### Hidden Secrets:

Is anything broken, not working, missing, dirty or unclear?

#### If only:

What could be improved?

#### Match:

(Everyone has different needs at different times.) Is this property the right match for me, on this particular trip?

listing; the cleanliness of the property; and whether it was good value for the price.

In fact, it's probably not a stretch to say that guest reviews may be the best indicators of whether that dreamy local host rental you've fallen in love with is as amazing as it appears. Remember—be prudent and do not take everything at face value.

With host and guest reviews—as with restaurant, movie, and book reviews—their power lies in quantity. If after more than a hundred reviews, a local host rental has an overwhelmingly positive (or negative) consensus, you can probably trust the score. It doesn't mean that just because a property has very few or zero reviews that it's a scam or a place to avoid (more on common scams later), but you should definitely tread more carefully if a property looks too good to be true and also doesn't have a single review. Of course, new hosts are offering their homes for rent every day, so you may just have spotted a gem and could have the honor of being the first traveler to enjoy it.

When you do come across a negative review, pay attention to the guest's particular concerns. Though he or she may have legitimate gripes, it's also possible that this traveler simply had unrealistic expectations or had an unfair bone to pick with the host. On some services, hosts are actually able to respond to guest reviews, and these responses can often tell you a lot about the host and help you know what to expect.

To sum up, review the host profile carefully. The best and most trustworthy hosts upload a clear personal photo, provide detailed property information, are highly responsive, and have strong overall reviews.

### TOOLS FOR HOST VERIFICATION

Reviews are one way to screen local host rentals, but another tool that's worth mentioning is ID verification, which will become more significant as the local host market matures and technologies improve. You should expect that in the future, services may require additional steps to verify all users—guests and hosts.

What if guests want extra assurances that hosts are actually who they say they are? In today's digital world, concerns about hacking and identity theft are certainly valid, and guests are justified to do more research before



booking a room from a stranger. Currently, guests can take steps to verify a host's identity by researching easily accessible data, either within or outside the service.

Within a service, verified ID symbols on host profiles and reviews are two major building blocks for establishing trust between guests and hosts; reviews serve as “reputation mechanisms,” which will be further explained in Chapter 4. If you are booking without a service, a quick survey of a host's social media activity can help you learn more. LinkedIn has public profiles that can provide basic information on their professional activities. You may see whether a host can be followed on Instagram, Pinterest, or Twitter. If so, you can probably follow the host without attracting attention, since these are public platforms. Hosts who are serious about their rental business may well help you learn about themselves, their properties, and their approach to marketing. Given that most Facebook accounts are private, however, guests need to think about whether or not they want to become friends with a host solely for verification purposes—especially since access to information goes both ways. Nevertheless, social media platforms are quick tools to use when doubts about host identity arise.

Note that there are three specific situations in which we would thoroughly recommend extra vetting of your potential host's identity:

**When the service is unfamiliar.** If you are using a service for the first time or one that is new.

**When it's a high-value booking.** More and more, local host rentals are tapping into the luxury market with niche product offerings and higher price tags. Let's say you are booking a special event (such as a wedding at a secluded beachfront property) or want to indulge in an exclusive getaway at an upmarket property promising the services of a five-star hotel; err on the side of caution and find out more about your host. Stay One Degree, for example, is a niche service where guests book luxury accommodations only from hosts that they are connected to through social networks. Properties are listed as "One Degree"—which means they're hosted by people you personally know—and "Second Degree," which are properties hosted by connections in your network. As of publication, guests can view Second Degree properties, but in order to make a booking they would need to add the service to their personal social network.

**When you're a solo female traveler.** According to a survey conducted by Wanderful—a community for women travelers that has recently launched a woman-to-woman local host rental service—54 percent of women prefer to stay in a hotel over Airbnb while traveling alone, because of trust and personal safety concerns.<sup>10</sup> Wanderful markets itself as an "identity verified" platform, where all members have to be verified via a five-minute video call before they can sign up as a host or rent a property as a guest. If safety is a concern for you—especially as a female traveler—it is wise to take precautions!<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, no local host rental service can provide a 100 percent guarantee against fraudulent activities or host identities, however rare they may be. However, keeping pace with advancements in ID verification and doing your research using social media can help mitigate most of your fears and concerns, and hopefully, allow you to book your stay with confidence.

## HOW TO HANDLE SPECIAL NEEDS AND OTHER REQUESTS

In addition to the filters that help narrow your search for things like amenities, price, and type of property, most services also allow you to indicate any special needs, requirements, and other extra requests for your stay.

On the Booking.com and Agoda search results pages, for instance, you can sort listings by those that offer facilities for disabled guests. HomeAway can filter properties that are wheelchair accessible and/or are suitable for the elderly or infirm, while on Airbnb you can check "Wheelchair accessible" under "Facilities," and choose "Lift" if a member of your traveling party requires an elevator. As you can see, these filter options can be invaluable for those who need them.

If you have any special requests or have questions about the facilities listed in a local host rental, it's best to contact the host before making a booking; we'll discuss how to do so shortly.

## BRING THE KIDS ALONG!

According to Tripping.com, 90 percent of U.S. local host rental guests travel with family members; 36 percent travel with kids.<sup>12</sup> (See Figure 13 on page 79.) Service providers like Airbnb and HomeAway identify families as a key segment to drive growth in the local host rental market; the same is true for Agoda. Cost may have something to do with it: BJ Yasuda, senior product owner at Agoda, explained that the data show it is significantly cheaper (more than 50 percent) for families to go with a local host rental than to book two hotel rooms.<sup>13</sup>

The fact remains that local host rentals are also often a much better option for traveling families because they contain the perks that most hotels cannot provide. Think a full-sized refrigerator for storing groceries or milk for babies, spacious facilities for diaper duty, separate bedrooms, and a fully equipped kitchen. The vast majority of Agoda's homes have kitchens—the top preference for traveling families—while approximately 90 percent have more than one bed.

"While considering a few properties on my short list for places to stay in London, I ended up booking the one in which the host stated in the description that a baby cot was available," said traveler Martinez. "It was a huge relief knowing that we wouldn't have to pack that for the trip."

To cater to this segment, booking sites have filters for child-friendly accommodations to help families find their perfect place. Agoda can filter local host rental listings by "family/child friendly," while Airbnb's amenity filters



**For families, renting a local host rental is typically more than 50% cheaper than booking two hotel rooms.**

— BJ Yasuda, Senior Product Owner, Agoda



include “family/kid friendly” and “kitchen,” the latter of great importance if you prefer home-cooked meals (and the significant cost savings from not eating out three times a day). Parents can choose “children welcome” on HomeAway and “family room” on Booking.com.

If you want to stay near a park or other family-friendly attractions, you can also use the map on the main search results page to zoom in on places that you want to be near, then survey the listings populated in the surrounding area to see if they fit the bill.

### HELP YOUR HOST HELP YOU

**Y**ou may not need to contact a host before initiating your booking; it’s certainly not required. Some travelers can decide immediately on a property, and sites like Agoda and Booking.com offer instant bookings on the majority of local host rentals. However, if you want more information before you make a decision, these sites and others allow guests to communicate directly with a host prior to booking, which can help answer any burning questions you may have about a property (and its host). In these cases, direct communication can help you decide whether or not to book.

“Responsiveness by email matters, both because it helps us plan and because we take it as an indicator for how helpful and attentive the host will be during our stay,” said traveler Yeo about one of his main considerations when booking properties. “Someone who can’t be bothered to write back to a question sent in advance isn’t likely to be very accessible or responsive when we really need help on the spot.”

To find and communicate with a potential host, look for a “Contact Owner” or “Contact Host” link on listings on Airbnb, HomeAway, and other services. Here are a few reasons why you may want or need to contact a host:

**Confirm availability.** Since property availability is fluid, you might simply wish to ensure that a host’s calendar is up to date. It can be a serious letdown to set your heart on a property and request a booking, only to learn that someone else has already booked it because the host

### TIP

**Some sites let you communicate directly with host before booking.**



FIGURE 13

**90% of local host rental guests travel with family members, 36% with children.**

**700,000 trips** were taken by U.S. families on Airbnb in 2015.

Families make up **42%** of HomeAway’s guests.

**71%** of guests with children chose local host rentals so they could cook their own meals.

**Family reunions** are the most popular special occasion (41%) for local host rentals.

SOURCES: Data from Airbnb; HomeAway; Tripping.com.

forgot to update his or her calendar (which can happen, especially if the property is listed on multiple sites). Sites that offer instant booking, of course, avoid this problem altogether.

**Inquire about needs.** If you’re a light sleeper you could ask about street noise; those with physical limitations could inquire about elevators. If you’re traveling in the depth of winter you could make sure there are no issues with heating, or you might simply want to confirm there isn’t any major construction going on near the property.

**Clarify listing details.** Consider your critical personal needs and requirements. If you have any questions or if anything is unclear in the listing, don’t hesitate to send a brief, polite note requesting clarification before you confirm a booking.



Trust between  
hosts and  
guests is  
reciprocal.

**Validate the relationship.** Most hosts will be responsive, and some really welcome interaction with guests. Besides, it’s important for hosts to know when you will be arriving. (Remember: They don’t have a front desk with a 24-hour-a-day desk clerk.) If the host is unresponsive or doesn’t answer your queries clearly, you may want to consider another listing which, ideally, you have saved in a wish list or marked as a favorite, as we’ve previously suggested. Get more insights into how the guest–host relationship works in the chapter on hosts: you’ll learn some things that can make you a better guest, as well as help you get more out of the whole rental experience!

Trust is reciprocal in the host–guest relationship. When you communicate well with your host, you not only obtain the information you need; you also present yourself to the host as a trusted traveler. (Just don’t overdo it. Remember that hosts are busy people, too.) Before getting to the questions, introduce yourself briefly. Perhaps tell the host what attracted you to his or her property and explain the purpose of your trip—just a few sentences will do. Be friendly, and be your best self; after all, you know what they say about first impressions. Your goal is to present yourself in the best light.

**UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU’LL PAY, AND WHEN**

Payment, understandably, is the point where some travelers feel most leery about local host rentals, particularly those who have never booked one. There’s a comfort and ease to booking hotels that are a known brand and entity, whereas private local host rentals have an element of the unknown. There are certainly horror stories about payment scams involving local host rentals. In 2016 one London woman was taken for nearly GBP 800 (~US\$1,100) when she transferred a payment to a scammer managing a fake Amsterdam Airbnb listing.<sup>14</sup> Another woman wired US\$3,800 to somebody purporting to own two New York City apartments, only to soon learn that this “host” had created elaborate, fake Airbnb listings and even managed to create a fake Airbnb live–chat service (when, in fact, Airbnb offers no such service).<sup>15</sup> Some guests who make






high-value bookings are particularly careful about using social media to validate hosts. Bear in mind, however, that only an infinitesimal proportion of travelers ever experience such issues with local host rentals. And remember that Agoda, Booking.com, Airbnb, and other local host services offer secure internal payment systems and have measures in place to protect both guests and hosts; after all, their businesses depend on it. One other thing: Aside from paying the host for accommodation, there are also other services that you may want to consider purchasing. Whether it’s having a meal with a local family, a cleaning service, a bike tour of the neighborhood, wine tasting, or just ordering groceries, there are many ancillary services that can make your experience both more local and more enjoyable. Services like these are becoming increasingly available and, really, the only catch is payment. At some point, probably in the next couple of years, payment services will communicate and cooperate with one another but for now, if you’re a U.S. traveler who uses American Express and Apple Pay, and your host or local service provider in Guangzhou uses Alipay and WeChat Pay, it may be difficult for you to find a shared medium of exchange. Watch this space, though—things change fast.

**HOW CAN YOU AVOID A SCAM?**

The number one rule to avoiding a scam is to familiarize yourself with the service’s payment system and act accordingly. The service you use will clearly describe in its booking form whether you should pay via the website’s payment service or directly to the host. For services like Airbnb and Agoda, for example, guests usually pay through the service’s payment system, unless otherwise noted. On some sites, guests often need to pay hosts directly. Other payment options can include PayPal, bank transfer, or a third-party credit card processor. Use the method recommended by your booking site. In general, you should communicate with the host via the service’s internal messaging system, if that option is available. Again, different platforms will offer different options; the best thing you can do is get to know your



**AVOID SCAMS**

-  **Familiarize** yourself with the service’s payment system, and pay either via the website’s secured payment service or directly to host.
-  Communicate with the hosts via **internal messaging system** only.
-  Understand **all costs** before you book.
-  If the service provides a **payment system**, don’t send money through outside channels.
-  **Don’t click** on payment links in emails—even if they look official!

.....

platform well and follow its instructions. Understand that these services have their customers' best interests in mind, so if you feel that something isn't right, ask the service for help. Be prudent, as you would with any online transaction.

### AVOID GETTING FLOORED BY HIDDEN FEES

**B**efore you confirm a booking, it's important to check for any additional fees.

Local host rental costs vary from service to service and from property to property. Sites like Booking.com and Agoda, for example, do not have an additional booking fee for guests: you simply pay the listed rate, which may include the service's markup and local taxes, when applicable. Many sites also collect a cleaning fee if the host indicates one.

Airbnb currently charges guests a fee of up to 20 percent of the booking price; taxes and currency conversion charges may apply, as well.<sup>16</sup> Airbnb hosts may also require a security deposit, which is held by Airbnb and collected only if the host makes a claim within 14 days of the checkout date. Note that while Airbnb charges you once your booking is confirmed, they do not transfer payment to hosts until 24 hours after you check in. This is an added security measure.

Overall, the key to booking happiness is to understand exactly how your service works and know what your total cost will be—make sure you know what's what in terms of the costs, fees, and potential deposit requirements before you click. When it comes to money, nobody likes surprises!

### BOOK IT

**O**kay, you've found the perfect place, you feel comfortable with the host, and the price is right—it's time to book!

Depending on the service, there are two ways to complete a local host rental booking—instant booking and a two-step process of requesting and confirmation. Listings that are marked as "Instant Booking" require nothing more than your payment details to secure the reservation; it's just like booking a hotel room. Remember that on some sites, like Agoda and Booking.com, most listings can be booked instantly; the rest are "Book on Request." On other sites, services are working with property managers to

migrate more listings to this option. According to the travel industry site Tnooz, the total number of properties that can be instantly booked doubled in 2017; instant booking will increasingly become standard, though not universal.<sup>17</sup> For example, as of June 2018, 99 percent of all local host rental reservations on Agoda are instantly booked.<sup>18</sup> This is an area that will continue to evolve as the lines between local host rental and hotel services blur.

On Airbnb, HomeAway, and some other local host rental services, you may need to make a booking request first and receive host approval before the reservation is completed. In this case, you'll see a button that says, "Request to Book" instead of simply "Book."

Once you click the request button, you'll see the property's house rules, when applicable, and then be asked to tell the host about yourself, any other travelers, and your visit; again, this helps establish trust. If you've already contacted the host with pre-booking questions, he or she may have already extended preapproval, which essentially means that your booking will be instantly processed should you choose to proceed. The same rule applies to your booking request note as it does to your personal profile and pre-booking queries: be friendly and honest, and be yourself.

Once you've requested a booking, you'll need to enter your payment details, but you will *not* be charged until the host accepts the request. If, for some reason, the host rejects your request—and it can happen, unfortunately, because of changing availability or any number of other reasons unrelated to you—the service's rejection email will include automated alternative suggestions you might consider. Such instances are exactly why it's a good idea to create a wish list of favorite properties—if your first choice isn't available, move on to the next-best options you've found, reviewed, and saved ahead of time.

It's worth noting that on extremely rare occasions hosts have canceled guests' bookings for discriminatory reasons. One former Airbnb host, for instance, explicitly and infamously canceled a guest's booking for racial reasons (a case we'll look at in Chapter 4, which is about regulation).<sup>19</sup> Contact the local host rental service immediately if you experience any discrimination at any time before, during, or after your stay.





**In 2016, professional companies managed 1/3 of all local host rentals in Europe.**

—Smarthosts blog

## PROFESSIONALISM OF (SOME) LOCAL HOST RENTALS

Though personalization has been synonymous with local host rentals since the industry's inception, in recent years professionalism has entered the picture, as well. It makes sense: As a more diverse set of travelers seek out local host rentals—business people, senior citizens, multi-generational families—the experiential expectations evolve and create a need, somewhat ironically, for hotel-like services. For example, according to a 2016 article in the Smarthosts blog for short-term rental hosts, one-third of all local host rentals in Europe were managed by professional companies.<sup>20</sup> For guests, the increasing professionalization has both advantages and disadvantages.

The downside, of course, could be a more impersonal experience. The list of properties available on many services, particularly those located in major cities, often include local host rentals managed by real estate firms, not independent hosts. In Toronto, for example, *The Star* reported in August 2017 that the top host is a management company that manages 128 listings across the city.<sup>21</sup> If one of the main reasons why you're staying in a local host rental is to meet and interact with a host, make sure to review a listing carefully, particularly the owner profile and guest reviews, to ensure you rent from an individual rather than from a service.

On the plus side, a more professional approach to rental management from hosts can give you an easier booking process, better and more standard amenities, and streamlined check-in and checkout. For instance, the ability to make instant bookings, which we previously discussed, can help take the guesswork out of the reservation process. Airbnb released “hosting standards” for its hosts to review and to help them better understand and react to their guests’ needs.<sup>22</sup> And advanced features like smart locks, which allow hosts to remotely send timed property access codes to guests, can eliminate the sometimes tedious task of arranging a time to meeting to pass off and return keys.

Overall, the key takeaway for guests is that it's never been easier to find a local host rental that suits your personal needs—whether that's a highly personal experience, one that's more impersonal and professional, or something in between.



## Be a 5-star guest: Practical advice from a 5-star host

**Dana McMahan is a freelance writer and a longtime Airbnb Superhost.<sup>a</sup> with two properties in Louisville, Kentucky. Guests have given both units five stars. Below, McMahan shares five tips to help guests make a good impression and have a great stay:**



### 1 | READ THE LISTING!

The best hosts provide detailed property information in their listing—and the best guests carefully review all of it before booking or asking busy hosts questions they have already covered. “Chances are other guests have had the same questions you might have, so over time your host has updated the listing with all the details you might need,” McMahan says. “Ask a question that’s already answered (“Do you have Wi-Fi?”) and you risk not having your booking accepted—because hosts will reason that if you can’t be bothered to read the listing, you probably won’t read the house rules, either.”



### 2 | TELL US WHY YOU’RE TRAVELING AND A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF

Don’t forget the personal connection and trust that go into the host-guest relationship. “For some folks it’s just a transaction, but lots of us got into this because we like meeting fellow travelers,” says McMahan. “Plus, we’re in a position to give you some great insider tips as you plan your trip—but only if we know more about you than just your name and dates of travel.”



### 3 | NO RADIO SILENCE, PLEASE

As we’ve mentioned in this chapter, there’s plenty of reasons to keep the conversation going with your host after you’ve booked your local host rental. “Guests are great about communicating on the fly during the booking process, but almost without fail go silent after

booking,” says McMahan. “Your host will often have a question or two geared at helping you have a better stay—such as asking about dietary requests if they provide breakfast—and it’s frustrating to be ghosted up until the day before the trip when you suddenly launch a flurry of questions.”



### 4 | IF YOU ONLY DO ONE THING, TELL US WHEN YOU’RE COMING

McMahan says there is one essential piece of information you absolutely must relay before you arrive. “Whether we’re hanging around at the rental to let you in, or just trying to plan cleaning around checkout and check-in times, we really need to have a general idea of when you’ll be here,” she says. “Just a rough estimate is fine, and if you decide to stop for a leisurely lunch en route, no worries—but do the thoughtful thing and send a heads-up.”



### 5 | WRITE A REVIEW

Your experience isn’t over when you check out. Tell others (and your host) about your stay. “Hosts live and die by their reviews and work hard to make sure everything is great for you. They sweat over the details, including writing a review of your stay that will help you get accepted by future hosts,” McMahan says. “Return the courtesy and jot a few lines. No need to be flowery—just tell potential guests what to expect. Keep in mind, too, that potential hosts look at reviews you’ve left for other hosts, and if you seem super picky, well, you might not have first pick of the best spots.”

<sup>a</sup> Airbnb uses the Superhost designation for hosts who have received five-star reviews for at least 80 percent of their bookings.



### BEFORE YOU ARRIVE

Once your local host rental booking is completed, the service will email a receipt and confirmation letter that delineates all essential booking details, like arrival and departure dates, payment method, check-in time (and instructions), and perhaps house rules, driving directions, and parking information. If anything is wrong, you can edit or manage your booking in your personal profile.

### KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING WITH YOUR HOST

Consider at least sending a short note to your host prior to your arrival (and be sure to answer any queries the host may send you, too), if the service makes it possible. Again, because this is a personal relationship and not just a business transaction, it helps to maintain communication.

You may wish to confirm your expected arrival time, requests, or other special needs, clarify the check-in process, or simply say how much you're looking forward to your visit. This is also the place to ask any questions about logistics; for example, whether you can preorder groceries or supplies to be delivered before arrival, or to

arrange a backup plan in case your arrival is delayed. If and when you receive a response from your host, the local host rental service will automatically send you an email alert. You can access the message on the provider's internal messaging system after logging into your account.

### WHAT YOU SHOULD BRING— AND NOT BRING—WITH YOU

For the most part, packing for your stay at a local host rental is no different than packing for a hotel visit, but there are a few notable exceptions.

Most hotels, of course, provide such essentials as towels and linens, bath products, and basic bathroom amenities. The same is true of many local host rentals, but not all of them! So it's important to review the listing carefully to see what will and will not be provided for your stay. In that regard, the best and most thorough listings should fully prepare you.

For example, one property may come with fresh linens, towels, toilet tissue, and soap on arrival, which will not be refreshed during your stay. The host of another property may offer all the aforementioned items, plus shampoo, conditioner, a carton of milk, and fresh fruit; in some properties the host may even have a "help yourself" policy, allowing you to use whatever you see in the pantry or bathroom.

Contact the host prior to your arrival if you have any questions after reviewing the listing. For instance, if you'd rather not pack your hair dryer, or anticipate needing an iron and ironing board but are uncertain whether these items will be available, that's a perfect opportunity to get in touch with your host and plan ahead. If you've rented the entire property, you could even ask if your host will leave garbage bags.

Remember, it's your responsibility to review all listings thoroughly before you proceed with a booking; this goes back to our advice to contact hosts with questions before you book. If only after completing the booking do you realize that an important amenity is not provided, and you no longer wish to stay in that property, you will be subjected to the listing's and service's cancellation policies.

## WHAT TO DO ABOUT CANCELLATIONS AND AMENDMENTS

Just as different hotel room categories and rates have varying cancellation and amendment policies, rules also differ greatly among the various local host rentals and services; in other words, the cancellation policy for one property on Airbnb may be completely different than another.

Both Airbnb and HomeAway have several different cancellation options and it's up to the host to indicate how strict or relaxed they wish to be. For example, HomeAway's five cancellation policies range from "relaxed" (100 percent refund if canceled at least 14 days prior to the arrival date, 50 percent if canceled at least seven days ahead of time) to the much stricter "no refund."<sup>23</sup>

On Airbnb, any cleaning fees that would have been incurred during the stay are always refunded, regardless of the property's cancellation policy. Users may also receive refunds on Airbnb's booking fee on up to three cancellations per year, based on eligibility. Many local host rentals on sites like Booking.com and Agoda have free cancellations up to a specific date.

To avoid any frustrations stemming from a change of mind (or plans), it's best to familiarize yourself with your service's and property's policies before making any bookings. (You can refer to Appendix 2 for a summary of the different cancellation policies across service providers.)

It's good to remember that the top priority for any local host rental service is to effectively and efficiently meet their customers' needs. Most of the larger players invest heavily in customer service departments—these are often their largest internal teams.<sup>24</sup> This means that customer service is available 24/7; there's no need to wait for a hotel reservation desk to open for someone to get back to you. At the time of writing, Agoda has customer service staff based in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, China, Japan, Hungary, South Korea, and the United States, all accessible by phone and email, around the clock;<sup>25</sup> Booking.com currently has customer service offices in 13 countries.<sup>26</sup>

Before you book, take a moment to browse the customer service information listed on a service's website. It is in your interest to book with a service that can assist you should you require a refund or have an emergency.



## BACKUP AND EMERGENCY PLANS

Accidents, emergencies, sicknesses, and other unforeseen circumstances can occur when you travel. Therefore, a key step in planning for your local host rental stay is to put together a backup and emergency plan that is specifically tailored to your destination and travel needs. Backup plans should answer some basic "what if?" scenarios. Let's say you and your kids are scheduled to arrive at night, but your flight got significantly delayed. Will your host be able to let you into the rental in the small hours of the morning? Have you scheduled your travel during a peak holiday period like the eve of Chinese New Year, when transport costs rise and demand is high? If you or someone you are traveling with falls ill, do you have a first aid kit and prescriptions on hand? Do you have travel insurance? Do you know the phone number for emergency services in your destination country?

Establish a communication plan with friends, family, or colleagues at home. It is good practice to make sure that at least one person has all your travel details so that you can be reached, if necessary. Finally, be sure to keep soft copies of your ID and passport (if traveling internationally), in case you lose your passport or wallet. (A paper copy of your main passport page is also a very useful thing to have.) You should also know how to contact your bank or credit card company



## BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME—A CHECKLIST

- ☐ Local host rental confirmation letter (printed or saved on your phone)
- ☐ Accurate driving directions to the local host rental (if you have a car), or taxi and public transportation details (as needed)
- ☐ Your host's contact information (email address, phone number, messaging app)
- ☐ Your local host rental provider's contact information (email, call center, social media)
- ☐ Check-in procedure (printed or saved on your phone)
- ☐ Enough local currency (particularly if you've booked a cash-on-arrival property)
- ☐ Backup and emergency plans.

**Have everything? It's time to check in!**

and have a backup plan to get money if your wallet is stolen or lost. Most of these reminders apply whether you are staying in a hotel or a local host rental, and will ensure sure that you have the best possible experience, wherever you decide to stay.

## WELCOME TO YOUR LOCAL HOST RENTAL

**A**s we've mentioned, local host rentals depend on a healthy two-way relationship. The best hosts go out of their way to ensure that guests are happy and comfortable and receive everything they expect, while ideal guests are mindful and respectful of their surroundings.

"You'll be living in someone's home," said traveler Tyler Fisher. "I think for hosts to continue renting out their properties, which is a unique opportunity for them and for the guest, once you check in it's

all about respecting the host's property and their things. It's about treating their home like how you'd want your own home treated."

Stories of poor guest behavior have cast a dark cloud over the reputation of local host rentals. The fact is that guests who are disrespectful of their host, property, and surrounding neighborhoods are in the minority; unfortunately, those few that do cause problems can threaten to ruin a good thing for everyone. A quick search online would yield numerous articles detailing the fallout from unruly guest behavior for hosts and communities. There's even a site, AirbnbHell.com, with "uncensored stories" from hosts about nightmarish guests (and vice versa).

In many ways, local host rentals are a great opportunity for hosts to welcome travelers from around the world while earning some extra income, and for guests to experience a refreshing new way of travel while choosing the accommodations that most closely fit their needs (location, amenities, opportunities to interact with hosts, etc.). The model works best when both guest and host do their part; as the saying goes, "it takes two to tango."

On your part, follow the house rules, if there are any. Handle furnishings, appliances, and all items with care. If you're sharing a home with the host and/or with other guests, try to accommodate others' needs as much as possible; you'll see that when you do so, others will be quick to reciprocate. That may mean cleaning up after yourself in the kitchen, or remembering to take your shoes off before going indoors, or keeping personal media to an appropriate volume in your room. Similarly, try to keep noise to a minimum if you come back late at night or rise early in the morning. Treat your host's home as you would like yours treated. Basic manners and a little politeness can go a long way towards ensuring a positive experience for you and your host. Also remember that while you may be on vacation, neighbors are at home. Living like a local isn't just about the home in which you're staying—it's also about being a responsible neighbor.



**Remember:**  
Living like  
a local also  
means being  
a responsible  
neighbor.



### WHAT IT'S LIKE CHECKING IN

Most people could check into a hotel with their eyes closed. Getting into your local host rental is usually just as easy, but sometimes there can be a little... adventure involved.

"After I booked a local host rental in Los Angeles, the host sent me a URL to some check-in instructions, and I told him over and over again that the link just gave me an error message and that I needed the correct URL, which I never received," said Agoda's BJ Yasuda.<sup>27</sup> "What happened is that I showed up at the place and I told the lobby attendant that I was going to this room. He let the elevator open for me, and it was not a problem; he just kind of took my word for it. It might have been a problem if that guy hadn't been so nice, but since it all worked out I didn't care. Things aren't necessarily always smooth, but it's okay."

Of course, such incidents during check-in are not the norm. Yasuda, in fact, makes his family home in Seattle available as a local host rental and, like some hosts, helps ensure a smooth check-in for his guests by simply emailing them a code for the front door's electronic lock. He has a property manager on hand, as well, to welcome guests, provide a goodies basket, and make sure they get in.

Check-in instructions are either provided automatically or by the host upon booking. The host may greet you at arrival with the keys or leave them with a neighbor or nearby merchant.

Remember that, unless you've booked a cash-on-arrival rental, all payments are handled online via your service's internal system, so one thing you won't need to worry about is cash or deposits.



**TIP****MORE GUEST  
TIPS:  
HOW TO  
MAKE YOURSELF  
AT HOME**

**Stay in touch.**  
Don't show up  
unannounced.

**Respect the  
house rules.**  
Read the house guide  
and follow rules to  
the letter.

**Clean up.**  
“Leave it better  
than you found it.”  
Empty trash/manage  
resources.

**Mind the neighbors.**  
You may be on  
holiday, but  
neighbors are not.  
Keep noise levels low  
and act appropriately  
for local culture.

**WHAT TO EXPECT DURING YOUR STAY**

**B**ecause you are a guest in a stranger's home, there may be some things that are expected of you. House rules should be made clear before you arrive, so you will know in advance if you're required to assist with daily upkeep. But it's always polite to help maintain the place, no matter the rules.

For instance, if you've booked an entire property, you may be asked to take out the trash, sort the recycling, and do the dishes—basically, stuff you do to keep your own home clean and tidy. Of course, you may not have to do anything at all, particularly if you've splurged on a property that has, say, live-in help preparing meals, cleaning, and doing the laundry. (Such local host rentals do exist; many villas in destinations like Bali and Phuket, for example, include house cleaners, chefs, and even drivers).

Though you should always expect the best from your local host rental—that listing pictures are accurate, that all amenities are provided, that it's clean—it doesn't hurt to be a little flexible and go with the flow. As with any kind of accommodations, there will be times when the property not only matches, but exceeds your expectations, and times when individual hosts may be able to customize the experience for you in ways that larger, commercial properties cannot. There will, of course, also be instances where it's not quite as clean, or as quiet, or as spacious as you'd anticipated. Accept that there is potential for variability in the local host rental experience.

“You have to be clear about what you want and what you're getting,” said traveler Shulamit Levi. “If you're looking for a business hotel, you won't find it in someone's apartment, but if you're open to something different or more local, and you can check in advance that you're signing up for what you want—you really can find places that will make for a memorable stay and that are different from any hotel experience.”

Responsive hosts will do their best to address minor problems as quickly as possible. However, on rare occasions, there may be times when an issue warrants further escalation.

**HOW AND WHEN TO RESOLVE ANY ISSUES**

**I**n many hotels, the maintenance staff can try to repair a leaking air-conditioning unit, fix clogged plumbing, or replace faulty light fixtures—even at two o'clock in the morning on a holiday weekend. Things may not always be so straightforward with local host rentals, such as when traveler Alex Lim experienced an issue at a property in Italy.

“My husband and I both smelled gas in the room, and when I went to the host he said that it was the heater for our shower, which vented outside. He advised me to keep the windows on that side of the room closed,” said Lim. “This did remove the gas smell, but it wasn't a fix, and I know that there have been some bad problems with gas heaters in different countries. This was a case where the informality of the arrangement was a negative, as a hotel would have fixed the problem, rather than just providing a temporary and not very confidence-inspiring workaround.”

If there are any problems, first do as Lim did and try to get it addressed by contacting the host directly. Most circumstances can be resolved without too much fuss—if not always to your total satisfaction. If there is a larger issue, or if you wish to file a formal complaint with the local host rental service, do so immediately. Airbnb, for example, requires that both hosts and guests provide notice of any complaint within 24 hours of the guest's check-in. All major local host rental providers have staff available 24/7 to assist guests in the rare event of an emergency.

Such support can extend not only to call and email centers, but also to social media. In 2016, for instance, a couple arrived late at night at their remote Airbnb in Puerto Rico, found it uninhabitable, and tweeted their problem to the company's Twitter support account, @AirbnbHelp.<sup>28</sup> In less than an hour, the support team saved the couple from an unfortunate situation by booking them into another accommodation, paying for it, and refunding their original booking.

This is an extreme example, of course, but it's good to know that when there are problems, help is at hand.

**WHAT TO DO WHEN IT'S TIME TO GO**

**T**he checkout process should be easy and quick. Just as check-in procedures are made clear prior to your arrival, hosts will also inform you of checkout procedures beforehand. Your host may be on-site to collect your keys and bid you farewell, or make other arrangements (e.g., have you slide the keys under the front door, drop them in a mail slot, or leave them with a neighbor). Make sure, however, that you don't forget any personal items because there (probably) won't be a receptionist on your way out to ask whether you remembered everything.

Whether you've booked an entire property or a shared space, it's polite to tidy up before you leave, even if your booking includes a cleaning fee (often



standard practice). Take out the trash, put dishes away, and toss used towels in the washer or hamper. Leaving a positive last impression can help secure a glowing review from your host, which, in turn, builds your reputation as a reliable guest. And that will make you a more attractive candidate for your next local host rental; it's a kind of accommodation karma.

### YOU'VE CHECKED OUT OF YOUR LOCAL HOST RENTAL—NOW WHAT?

Once you've checked out of your local host rental, and assuming you've given the host no reason to make a claim, any right to charge you the deposit (if it was required) expires. At the time of writing, Airbnb hosts either have to make a claim within 14 days of checkout or before another guest checks in, whichever comes first. At this point, Airbnb will step in, investigate the situation, and act as an intermediary between you and the host. Since you are charged a deposit only if a claim is made, you'll probably forget that you even had to cover it.

Every service has its own policies for deposit claims and returns, so be sure to review the terms before booking. Also, company policies can change, so it's wise to check again with each new booking.

### WHY HONEST LOCAL HOST RENTAL REVIEWS MATTER

As we've discussed, local host rentals operate on trust. Reviews for both hosts and guests are the key safeguards in the local host rental system to establish and maintain trust. Hosts will feel more comfortable renting out to guests with positive reviews, and guests will feel an added sense of security renting from well-reviewed hosts. That is why most sites make it as easy as possible for you and the host to provide feedback on your stay.

If you book your property on Booking.com, HomeAway, or Airbnb, you'll receive an automated email inviting you to review your guest experience; the host will also have the opportunity to review *you*. When you leave a review, there's space to send private feedback to the host (and service) as well, and to leave stars and comments that will appear on his or her public profile. To help maintain review integrity, the host and guest can see their own reviews only once *both* reviews have been submitted.



**Remember:**  
Feedback  
is a two-way  
street.

## In my experience: 5 frequent guests share advice



### 1 | ASK QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU BOOK

When searching local host rentals, Margaret Johnson carefully reviews the details in every listing and reads previous guest reviews, too. However, she still prefers to contact hosts before booking, even if everything looks perfect. "I can put up with a lot of things, but I absolutely cannot stay somewhere that's noisy," she says. "I've found that most people don't discuss street noise in their reviews, so I always contact hosts to ask them how loud it can get."



### 2 | ADJUST YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Amenities are important to traveler Ching Jet Heng, but his local host rental experiences have, in some respects, changed the way he evaluates them. "We stayed in a very small B&B in Italy—basically an apartment whose owners, an older couple, rent out three bedrooms—and were really happy there because the room was nicely decorated and had spectacular views," Heng says. "It had basic amenities like Wi-Fi, a nice shower, and a comfortable bed; there definitely wasn't a pool, or room service, doorman, any of that. But it was still an amazingly pretty place to spend the night, and no hotel would have offered that experience. And for what it's worth, our picture of that room got more likes on Facebook than anywhere we stayed!"



### 3 | BE FLEXIBLE

In most cases, staying in a local host rental is nothing like staying in a hotel, says Singapore-based freelance writer Robert Martinez. At a local host rental, things may not always go the way you expect. "I once rented a place in which the owner clearly stated in her listing that her two dogs roamed the backyard freely, but were extremely friendly.

Prior guest reviews confirmed that," Martinez says. "But on our first morning one of the rather fearsome-looking dogs decided he didn't like me and barked and growled like crazy. I called my host and she left work immediately to calm things down. In the end the dog just needed to be reassured and sniff me a little, and he was fine for the rest of my stay."



### 4 | TO INTERACT OR NOT TO INTERACT: THAT IS THE QUESTION

At some local host rentals, you'll have the opportunity to speak with your hosts and share their living spaces as they go about their day; at others, you may not even meet them. Keep your desired interaction level in mind when you review listings and before making a booking. "I know people who have booked on Airbnb and the only reason they did it was because they wanted to interact with the host," says Ian Lee, a marketing agent based in Vietnam. "Then there are people like me, and others I talk to around my office, who just have no interest in that at all, so you can go from 100 percent to zero percent."



### 5 | FIND JOY IN THE LITTLE THINGS

During a local host rental stay in Paris, traveler Jaime Burroughs found that one of the things she enjoyed most was simply seeing how much her host's everyday home experience differed from her own. "One of the things to which I was exposed at my first local host rental in Paris was that it had heated pipes in the bathroom to warm your towels, as well as a combined washer and dryer that was really small," she says. "What I loved was this mind-blowing experience of living in someone's house and seeing the technology and experiences they have day to day."



FIGURE 14

## Experience more, locally

Local host rental industry's entry into "experience" travel taps into worldwide trend.



The travel experience market is **10%** of total global travel revenues.



Globally, **Europe and Asia** have the highest demand for experience travel—especially with food.



**78%** of millennials prefer to splurge on experiences than on things.

SOURCES: Data from Forbes; Phocuswright; Skift.

Was the property accurately described and pictured? Were all expected amenities provided? Was the host responsive and helpful? If there were issues, were they serious or small, and did the host do his best to address them in a timely manner? Be fair, thoughtful, and honest when crafting your review; while you want to prepare potential future guests for what to expect, there are other things to consider.

"I'm still trying to decide whether to mention the gas heater issue I had because it's important for other guests," said Lim. "At the same time, I realize that a negative review could really turn business away from a place—and people—we liked a lot."

When writing your review, consider the experience as a whole and be sensitive to the impact your ratings and remarks can have on a host and property.

### HOW "EXPERIENCE" TRAVEL GOES BEYOND LOCAL HOST RENTALS

**B**efore closing this chapter, let's discuss an emerging trend that hints at the underlying appeal of local host rentals: the desire to experience travel "like a local." There is rising demand among travelers—particularly those aged 40 and under—for a more personalized, authentic experience during their adventures, and sites like Vayable (a niche site that provides "unique experiences offered by locals") and Airbnb have piggybacked on the local host rentals concept by offering tours, classes, food and drink tastings, and other experiences you can take with local guides, who have expertise in a particular activity or topic. Launched in November 2016 in 12 cities, Airbnb Experiences has taken off; as of January 2018, Airbnb offers 4,000 experiences across 50 cities around the world.<sup>30</sup> In October 2017, Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky told *Fortune* that the company boasts a "wait list of tens of thousands" to host experiences and that 90 percent of their experiences receive five-star ratings.<sup>31</sup> Booking.com has also launched Experiences, and is offering them in more than 60 international cities as of September 2018. "Deciding what to do while you're traveling can be an extremely time-consuming and stressful task that takes away from your overall experience in a destination.... Booking

**"The stuff that matters in life is no longer stuff. It's other people. It's relationships. It's experience."**

—Brian Chesky,  
CEO Airbnb<sup>29</sup>

Experiences seamlessly helps our customers to enjoy whatever they want to do, whenever they want to do it,” said Ram Papatla, vice president of Experiences at Booking.com.<sup>32</sup>

In Barcelona, one host offers an in-home experience that includes Spanish wine tastings, Catalan-style home cooking, and a guitar performance. In Bangkok, guests can join a host for a five-hour biking outing that includes ferry rides, equipment, refreshments, and street-food snacking. Olive-oil tastings with an expert in Sabina, Italy; sake master classes in Tokyo; and three-on-three street basketball followed by beers in Cuba are just a few of the many unique activities travelers can book on Airbnb Experiences.

According to Phocuswright’s 2017 report *Tours & Activities Come of Age: Global Travel Activities Marketplace 2014–2020*, travel activities/experiences account for 10 percent of total revenues in the global travel market; it is the third-largest industry segment.<sup>33</sup> As with other trends you will read about in Chapter 5, we expect experiences with local hosts to become widespread. So if you’re looking to make your travels memorable and different, try an experience!

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There’s definitely a bit of a learning curve in the process of becoming a guest at a local host rental. After all, you’re more likely to be dealing with individual owners and all their quirks, and you’ll need to learn to navigate things like building your profile, making arrangements for check-in, understanding refund policies, and even the mundane stuff like how to take out the trash. On some occasions—like a rapid-fire business trip—this may just be too much of a hassle. But for many other kinds of travel (if you’re on a protracted stay and a kitchen would come in handy; or you’re traveling with kids and doing daily laundry is a necessity; or you’re embracing living like a local in a country you’ve always dreamed about), local host rentals offer opportunities and experiences that hotels just can’t match. If you invest a little time and effort into mastering the basics, it can make all the difference between a frustrating experience and one that really meets—or exceeds—your needs. Whether you’re staying in a centrally located studio apartment in Tokyo or renting a beachfront villa on a Thai island, you can have amazing experiences that you’ll look back on for years to come. So follow our tips, find a service you’re comfortable with, and go for it!

## Chapter Summary: Key Lessons for Guests



**Trust is a two-way street.** Remember that local host rentals are person-to-person businesses. Be honest, practical, and smart about how you present yourself when interacting with hosts—from setting up a profile, searching for rentals, and communication, to following the house rules during your stay.



**Educate yourself on policies and legal context.** Check the legal status of local host rentals at your destination before you book. Know the legal issues and attitude towards local host rentals before you arrive.



**Your profile is your calling card.** Your profile assures potential hosts that you’re a responsible traveler and someone they want to rent their space to. Include a good photograph and share appropriate details about yourself, your trip, and needs.



**Explore and investigate.** To find your ideal rental, search on multiple services, using filters to narrow down your search options. Pay attention to details—amenities, cancellation policy, and the like. Look out for red flags by reading reviews carefully.



**Safety first.** Make sure that your host’s profile is verified and use social media to validate.



**Avoid scams** by following instructions regarding payment, and only use the service’s internal messaging system.



**Communication is key.** Ask questions to clarify any doubts before you make a booking. Always let your host know when you’re arriving. Don’t show up unannounced.



**Plan for the unexpected.** Prepare backup and emergency plans for travel delays and medical problems. Consider purchasing travel insurance.



**Make yourself at home, respectfully.** Treat your rental as if it is your own home. Make an effort to conserve resources, clean up after yourself, and be considerate towards neighbors.



**Pay it forward with honest reviews.** Help the host, future guests, and yourself by writing an honest review after you leave. The sharing economy works best when there’s transparency. And remember that your review says as much about your host and property as it does about you as a guest.



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