

When the itinerary includes staying at strangers' houses

By Laura Bly, USA Today

It's billed as a "cozy and exceptional pool cabana" with a queen bed, "amazing 5-headed shower" and a "genuinely special location where connections deepen, hearts open and peace is found."

I've booked this yoga center retreat via Airbnb.com, a 4-year-old, rapidly expanding vacation-rental service that lets socially minded travelers stay in strangers' beds – or entire homes.

The professionally staged photos? Gorgeous. The four (first-name only) reviews? Glowing. And the rate of \$150 per night, not much more than what we would have paid for a room at the Motel 6 in this tony resort town? A certifiable bargain – at least until I factor in the additional \$75 cleaning charge, strict cancellation policy and 12% booking fee to Airbnb.

Within minutes of our arrival at the one-acre, Spanish-style compound in a residential neighborhood about a 15-minute drive from downtown Santa Barbara, my husband and I are quaffing complimentary poolside gin and tonics with owners Jenn Houser, 42, an international business consultant, and Martin Clarke, 50, a veteran commercial airline pilot.

Granted, our cabana bed lacks a box spring, the lightbulb on a bedside table has burned out, and there's no closet or hooks for our clothes. And yes, it gives me pause when Clarke confides that the absent Airbnb host with whom I'd exchanged e-mails is actually their long-term renter – and that he, Houser and their disarmingly energetic Tibetan terrier, Tenzing, had flown in from Montana to make sure we were on the up-and-up.

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