

THE LONG WEEKEND
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Travel

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COMING AND GOING » Don't get bitten by a Chinese quarantine . . . A lot of baggage will cost you . . . Page F3

Dave, left, and Mike Radparvar rent out Mike's bedroom in their East Village apartment through Airbnb.



When you rent her Brooklyn apartment bedroom for \$70 a night, Christine Be sleeps in the living room.



Paul Chiang makes his Chelsea apartment available through Hotel Toshi. The income helps him pay the rent.



\$125 a night gets you Mani Amaral's New Jersey studio apartment with a view of Manhattan.

Be Their Guest

You can crash in a condo or on a couch. These folks have room to spare — or share.

By ANDREA SACHS
Washington Post Staff Writer

Laura's place in New York's Little Italy has a dingy blue bathmat, and she wears a Santa hat. Dot's pad in Hell's Kitchen is all white, a cloud with four walls that could be perilous for those with muddy feet and a taste for red wine. Cristina's Nolita studio is flooded with natural light and includes laundry facilities, but the bed is a box spring on the floor. Ricky describes himself as "very talkative" and says, "I LOVE MY WIFE!" a red flag in a shared-apartment situation. Marissa invites guests to crash on her green pullout sofa in the East Village. It looks cushy, yet I worry that my sleep would be dogged by dreams of

swimming in a giant bowl of split pea soup. Now, Rad's House I could do: The private room in a two-bedroom apartment near Tompkins Square Park comes with fresh towels, kitchen privileges and a pair of brothers who play drums, eat bagels on Sunday and charge less than \$100 a night. I discovered these assorted sleeping arrangements — and voyeuristic snapshots of New York apartments — not on a "Roommate Wanted" corkboard at a local market but on Airbnb, a nearly year-old Web site

that opens doors previously closed to outsiders. The site works like Match.com for travelers, pairing those who need a bed with those who have one to spare.

"It's anything between couch surfing and a hotel," said Brian Chesky, 27, who co-founded the site with his two roommates, Joe Gebbia and Nathan Blecharczyk. "However, our name is becoming confusing, because we've been growing outside our core concept. Air beds aren't really involved anymore."

By the founders' definition, a crash pad can be a gym mat on a roof deck, a futon in a married couple's apartment, an aerie in a Ritz-Carlton residence, a treehouse in the woods or a berth on a boat. You won't find a standard hotel room here, but you will find everything else.

Since launching last August, Airbnb has become an expanding, pillow-studded universe, and at last count, it boasted accommodations in 1,108 cities in 77 countries, including more than 870 properties in New York area alone. "We're only in the beginning," said Chesky. "We hope to have more

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It Started With an Air Bed, Then Inflated

BEDS. From Page F1
rooms than the Hilton."
Anyone can post a lodging on the site, and any renter can take them up on the offer. The hosts are individuals and rental management companies, couples, singles, brothers, best friends, artists, musicians, nonprofit workers. The guests are usually diverse: European newbies, Australian journeymen, American families, a Washington weekendler. Some of the properties appear on multiple sites, such as Roomorama and ForNYC; others are exclusive to Airbnb. Prices start at youth-hosted levels and rise, though most are \$150 or less. (The site tacks on a transaction fee of about 10 percent.)

For the most part, the people and places are not vetted, inspected or interviewed by the Airbnb gals. The site is self-policed. The users create safeguards through reviews, detailed profiles and kaleidoscopic photos of the property. "We are reputation-based, like eBay," said Chesky, who holds meet-and-greets with hosts when he is on the road. The company has installed one layer of protection, holding the money for 24 to 48 hours, until it has confirmed that the guest has safely (and contentedly) checked in.

To book a room, start by perusing the properties, then send a query about availability to prospective hosts. Once the responses are in, pick your favorite, submit a booking request and await further instructions, such as the host's contact information and key pickup time and location.
After hours of so-called research (more snooping than taking notes), I settled on two apartments (one private, one shared) and waited for replies. Doubtful my itineraries, twined my hair. Checked my email compulsively, like a high schooler eager for her crush to return the interest.

The last hit 32 hours to respond. If you don't hear back, the booking is canceled, the \$1 charge for credit card authorization is returned, and you are free to start over. The Radparver brothers of Rad's House confirmed within a few hours. Emily, the Real practitioner/actress/writer with the Upper East Side studio, was not so prompt. After I'd followed up, minimal for more than 24 hours, the folks at Airbnb stepped in, providing me with a list of alternatives.

I dropped Emily for a studio in Chelsea managed by Hotel Toshi, a rental property firm based in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and named after the colorful Chinese American who owns it. I received a confirmation, followed by a cancellation, then a flurry of emails, all saying "refund issued \$1." Was Airbnb suffering a meltdown?

Eventually, I called Hotel Toshi to learn whether I had a bed, or two, or none. The company had mistakenly denied a request when it actually had an opening. A gracious assistant said he could book the Chelsea apartment for \$125 but, as an apology, offered me a duplex in St. Mark's Place for a reduced price (\$125 vs. \$200). I'll take it, I told him. Or not. Turns out it was booked for the night. And back to you, Chelsea.

I walked past the building — and the keeper of the apartment key — twice before realizing that I was in the 1900s brick structure with the doorman was my home for the night. I followed Hotel Toshi intern Paul Chang, as friendly as the key next door, through the black-and-white tiled lobby and into the studio in Chelsea, "the big place to live," he said. "It used to be the West Village."
Chang held open the door as I stepped inside, yes, a real New York apartment, small but not suffocating, with wood molding on the white walls, hardwood floors that creaked slightly and a cubbyhole kitchen with a countertop window into the main room, ideal for a drink-through dinner party.

I could nest here, I thought, as I scooped out the sofa with free WiFi, the black flat-screen TV, the divet-dropped bed dappled in sunlight. "This is the best apartment, local-ness," Chang said, running through the nearby subway lines. Before leaving, he wrote down his phone number. "Definitely call me if you need anything," he said. "Anything" meaning additional towels, a replacement light bulb, subway directions, restaurant suggestions: basically whatever a guest would ask of a hotel concierge.

Checked the next day was at 11 a.m., but I had lost track of time while cutting breakfast on the roof deck. When I contacted Chang for a later checkout, he invited me to evening cocktails at Hotel Toshi's headquarters. "Toshi" knew drinking with clients," he explained about his boss. He also enjoys interrogating his guests, at least the ones from across the river.

"What went wrong?" he exclaimed after meeting me, the pilot grudge splashing slightly in his glass. "The only reason someone comes in from Manhattan is to yell at me. Did something happen?"

Everything was great, I assured him. Loved the place, the location, Chang, the doorman, the neighbor who recommended a good sushi restaurant and the invitation for cocktails. Now, how about asking some liquid to my glass?
We sat on white leather couches



Patrick Whiskas lets guests use a private bedroom in his loft in the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn. A detail of his living room decor, below right.



Above left, Emily May offers an air bed in the living room of her apartment. Her Airbnb listing notes that two cats live there, too. May's building in Park Slope, Brooklyn, above.

and talked about Toshi, a.k.a. Robert Chan, a very interesting topic indeed. "I throw parties, that's what I do, that's what I am good at and enjoy," said the 35-year-old San Francisco native, adding that he'd been kicked out of Columbia University for his late-night wags. "Everything else I fell into." In addition to real estate, he also stumbled into acting, appearing in several films and TV commercials here and abroad. "I was in Spain throwing a party when I got a call. Maria Scorsese wants to meet you," he said. He flew to Los Angeles and was eventually hired for a part in "The Departed."

For the past year, Toshi has taken a hiatus from party planning to focus on real estate management. His portfolio includes dozens of places around New York. The Chelsea apartment I stayed in, for example, was recently inhabited by Chang, however, after he graduated from New York University, his parents stopped covering his rent. Toshi is helping him sublet the place through August, turning his vacation rental into a social cause.

The property profiles follow a user-friendly format that includes, among other details, bed type. If you know the site's history, this is an important fact. "You see, the company was built on an air bed. In October 2007, the three founders were sharing an apartment in San Francisco and looking for a little extra cash flow. When a design conference came to town, causing a shortage of hotel rooms, the pals bought three blow-up mattresses and opened up a temporary (air)bed-and-breakfast (and yes, a morning snack was included). They tried out the concept on a larger scale at Austin's South by Southwest music festival in March 2008. Five months later, they decided to expand the business beyond special activities and embrace everyday rentals: the new Web site was unveiled during the Democratic National Convention in Denver. It was very much an evolutionary process," said Chesky, who still lists his place (\$50 a night for the couch). "It went from our apartment

of the offerings are of the insta-roommate variety.

"It requires a certain open-mindedness," said Dave Radparver, one half of Rad's House. "This is not for the person who wants to stay at a hotel in Midtown."

Or for the traveler who is skittish around strangers wearing only a towel.

The Radparver brothers were out shopping for apartments when I called to arrange a key pickup. "We just want to see what else is out there," said older brother Mike, 26, explaining that the lease on their East Village shoe is almost up.

While the boys were checking out a new pad, I headed over to their old one. After picking up the key at the corner bodega, I stood outside the graffiti-splinked black door, wonder-

ing how much the landlord was charging for such a gritty building.

"I looked at that place," an Iggy Pop-ish passerby said to his friend. "It was going for twenty-two five."

Thank you, man.

In the apartment, I set down my bag in what I assumed was my room — the one with NYC guidebooks on the shelf and Liz Claiborne towels on the bed — and padded around, a cat brawler with no intention of stending. I stepped into the bathroom, noting the array of Tom's Toothpaste tubes, an empty jar for guests' toothbrushes and a wall of Post-it potty poetry.

In the main living space of the third-floor walk-up flat, I took a seat beside a giant stuffed elephant and read some of the enthusiastic notes on display from past guests. My eyes chaotically skipped past the brothers' bedroom (they share a bed when the second room is rented out) and land-

ed in the kitchen. Impressive collection of Asian condiments.

I didn't meet a Radparver brother until that evening, having spent most of the day outside, roaming the neighborhood. Dave was in his bedroom with the door shut, and I stood around awkwardly, unsure whether I should knock, create a loud disturbance or make myself at home. (Miles, I later learned, was dog-sitting all night.)

The 23-year-old eventually emerged, and after initial pleasantries, he invited me to join him for a cup of locally made mint chocolate chip ice cream.

"I'd done a lot of couch-surfing, traveling around France, Luxembourg and Belgium," he said when I asked how he'd been to have unfamiliar faces in his home. "So I was very comfortable with the idea of housing people."

The money the brothers reap from Airbnb is central to their survival; they recently quit their jobs to focus full time on their eco-clothing line, Holstea. Dave trotted out some T-shirt samples, including one from his laundry basket, and explained how the company lends a portion of its revenue to impoverished entrepreneurs in developing countries. Airbnb "is helping us fund our own business and helps us cover our rent," he said. "It's not a get-rich scheme."

My visit with the Radparver brothers was for one brief night, but from what I could glean from their stories of boozing jams and Persian dinner parties, the longer you stay, the more the distance between host and guest dissolves. "We develop a close bond and are sad to see them go," Miles told me the next day. "It's been a lifestyle thing. No matter where we live, we'll still do Airbnb."

In the morning, still in my pajamas, I lounged around the apartment as Dave got ready for work, emerging from the bathroom dressed only in a brown towel. After he departed, I packed up, then left the key and a thank-you note on the kitchen table. I closed the door, but perhaps not for the last time. As long as the Radparver brothers were on Airbnb, I knew that I'd have an open invitation.

Tips on Booking an Airbnb Bed

Booking accommodations on Airbnb (www.airbnb.com) takes a bit more skill than, say, reserving a room at a hotel. Here are tips to help you sleep wisely.

- The site has thousands of properties around the world, none of which are vetted. To lower your risk, choose a place that features an abundance of information, such as a full profile of the host, a thorough description of the property and, most important, a sizable number of guest reviews. (Guests cannot post a review until after their stay, preventing phantom reviewers from writing deceptive accounts.) To avoid surprises, read the property data sheet thoroughly so that you know the bed type, breakfast arrangements, security deposit requirement, etc.
- The hosts are not required to accept a reservation, they, too, want safe and respectful visitors in their homes. To increase your odds and stay their fears, include a photo and short bio in your profile. (It just as in a person-

al, don't reveal TMI.)

- Send out queries before booking to be sure the host has availability. The online calendar is helpful but not always up to date. The host has up to 32 hours to respond, though more than half reply within four hours, according to Airbnb. If you submit several reservations, the site charges only for the first one that's accepted. You can also book a reservation, then message other hosts and retract your previous requests.
- Cancellation policies vary by host, so before you book, check whether the policy is "flexible," "moderate" or "strict."
- After receiving confirmation, contact the host to introduce yourself and arrange a time and place to pick up the key. Make sure to pack the host's phone number, e-mail address and street address, plus directions.
- To protect the guest, the company does not release payment until 24 to 48 hours after check-in if you are dis-

- mayed with your rental — if it is dirty, or was misrepresented, or does not appear safe — contact Airbnb immediately, and the staff will help find you lodging elsewhere. The Airbnbers are on call around the clock.
- If you are renting a private or communal room in a shared apartment, be discreet and tidy. Don't pounce on your hosts. Even though they are opening their homes to strangers, they might not be looking for a new best friend. Gauge their availability, then proceed slowly. Suggest meeting up for a beer, for example. Conversely, do not feel required to accept their social invitations. This is no different from a roommate scenario: You might become best pals, or you might just be strangers.
- After you stay, help out the community and fill out the review. Be honest with your assessment, for better or for worse.

—A.S.