

RIGHT AT HOME

Hosting an Airbnb Right Now Is Harder Than You Think

The pandemic has increased demand and also ramped up the expectations of vacationers.



By Ronda Kaysen

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Last August, Ben and Elana Vorspan bought a cabin in Big Bear City, Calif., a two-hour drive from their home near Los Angeles, thinking it would make for a nice family getaway and a place they could also rent out.

As it turned out, the cabin was in such high demand, with so many people looking for a socially distant getaway during the pandemic, they could barely keep up.

Reservations flooded in as soon as they listed the three-bedroom property, with weekend guests paying \$500 a night — double the typical peak-season rate. On holidays, some paid as much as \$1,000 a night, “which is insane that anybody would pay that much to go away,” said Mr. Vorspan, the creative director for a synagogue. “That was very much Covid pricing.”

Sure, the money was nice, but the fevered market posed problems the couple hadn’t anticipated, like getting the cabin properly cleaned and turned over for each new guest’s arrival.

As the country opens up after almost a year and a half of pandemic lockdowns and restrictions, many travelers are choosing to stay in rented homes instead of hotels as a way to maintain a safer bubble, turning the summer of 2021 into a bonanza for homeowners in resort areas. Rentals were snatched up early. In Cape Cod and on the Jersey Shore, 90 percent of VRBO listings were already gone by the end of March. Holiday weekends are especially tight, with Airbnb searches for the Fourth of July weekend up 57 percent from 2019, according to the company.

All this demand comes at a time when there are fewer rentals to be had. As of May 2021, around 52,000 new units had been added to Airbnb and VRBO, about 10 percent fewer than a typical year during the same period, according to AirDNA, a data analysis company. In April, Brian Chesky, the chief executive of Airbnb, told CNBC that the company needed millions of new hosts to keep up with demand.

But the local housing market in Big Bear City, where the Vorspans were, was exploding, with new homeowners and, consequently, new vacation rentals flooding the area. Many of those new hosts needed property managers and housekeepers, just like the Vorspans, who discovered that those service providers were struggling to keep ahead of the surge.

The first management company they hired couldn’t handle a same-day guest turnover, and once left wet linens in the washing machine. Another company left a vape pen on the mantel and trash in the garbage. That company, which took a 30 percent cut of the list price, provided linens, “and the quality was not even what you’d get at Motel 6,” Mr. Vorspan said. “It was the lowest, cheapest quality.”

By spring, the Vorspans saw reasons for worry. The town was considering changes to its short-term rental regulations, and with so many new rentals saturating the market, prices could plunge in a post-pandemic ski season. “There is just so much potential risk,” Mr. Vorspan said.

In June, they signed a one-year contract with a company that specializes in short-term rentals. Like a typical tenant, the company pays the Vorspans a set monthly rent, and is responsible for maintaining the property, handling the snow removal in the winter and the landscaping in the summer. The company then rents the cabin to short-term guests at whatever rate it sets, pocketing the profit. The Vorspans no longer benefit from surges in the market, but they also don’t have to worry about whether the place has been rented or if the sheets have been washed. They get to use the cabin four weeks a year — two in peak season, and two off season. “We just didn’t want to deal with any of that,” Mr. Vorspan said, referring to the instability and uncertainty.

Even more experienced hosts have been racing to keep up with the frenzy.

In Kauai, Jed Stevens, the general manager of Koloa Kai, which manages 15 properties on the Hawaiian island, said demand for rentals blasted back to prepandemic levels in three weeks once the state relaxed its quarantine restrictions in April. “Now, instead of managing zero properties, we’re trying to drink from a fire hose,” he said, speaking from Southern California, where he works remotely.

Cue the hosts. Airbnb recently streamlined its hosting platform, adding features to make it easier for hosts to upload listings, manage bookings and handle messages. New hosts can also take webinars from seasoned ones.

But it's not easy learning the ropes, especially in a season like this one. Many guests, who haven't been out of the house in over a year, are paying premium prices and expecting a dream vacation.

"You are signing up for an entire job of managing somebody else's vacation," said Mr. Stevens, who supervises a team of workers that was able to pivot when the tourists returned and turn over rentals efficiently. "People think, 'I'm going to throw it on Airbnb or on VRBO and I'm going to make a lot of money and it's going to be fine.'"

Sometimes it isn't.

Facebook groups for vacation rental owners are full of questions from owners trying to decipher cryptic messages from guests, or respond to wild parties or sudden cancellations.

On TikTok, Christina Zima, who manages 13 vacation rentals in Silicon Valley, vents about unruly guests. There was the one whose emotional-support rabbit demolished the baseboards. Another one tried to hide a plush blanket that was covered in foxtail seeds, ruined by an impromptu picnic.

Before the pandemic, Ms. Zima mostly catered to business travelers. But with business travel down, anything goes. At a seven-bedroom shared house she manages, one guest, a middle-aged man, decided to parade around in a Speedo, then tried to get back into the hostel after his stay had ended. "Seriously, almost anything can happen," she said.

Ms. Zima added that many guests expect white-glove service. If someone finds stray hair in a bathroom, brace yourself. "People can't handle finding a hair," she said. "You would think that hair is super poisonous, or contagious. Hair is a problem that nobody really thinks about."

Guests also arrive looking for an experience. Think tree houses, yurts, houseboats. New hosts have to be ready to level up. "You have Instagram. You have HGTV shows. People want that dream," said Evelyn Badia, who has been an Airbnb host since 2010, and now also runs The Hosting Journey, a website, YouTube channel and podcast to educate hosts. "They don't have it in their houses, right? But they want to get to a home and be wowed."

Of course, some newcomers have a natural knack for the hospitality business. In June 2020, Jeff Dickerson and his wife, Tracie Howard Dickerson, listed the two-bedroom treehouse that Mr. Dickerson built himself outside Atlanta, Ga. The treehouse, which is behind their home and adjacent to a 2,500-acre nature preserve, has been booked almost constantly ever since.

"We initially thought maybe on the weekends we'd have people wanting to come out and hike and explore," said Ms. Dickerson, a novelist. "This month and next month every available date is booked."

The couple hired a property manager to handle the listings, but Ms. Dickerson is all about the flourishes, leaving bottles of wine and personal notes for guests. Last winter, she wanted to make the space feel cozier, so she bought some fuzzy socks, rolled them up and displayed them in a basket in the living room.

"I thought it was crazy," said Mr. Dickerson, a communications consultant. "A basket of fuzzy socks? Really? We have to get a basket of fuzzy socks now? And then the reviews came in."

The socks were a hit. After that, he knew better than to doubt his wife's instincts.

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