

## Lodging

# Vacation Home Rentals Billed as Safer Alternatives to Hotels

Stringent cleaning standards among precautions owners embrace to attract nervous travelers

by Jen Murphy, **AARP**, May 4, 2020 |  Comments: 1

As a traveler, Theresa Blanding has always considered herself a hotel person. But in the age of coronavirus, a bustling hotel lobby and crowded elevators give her pause. “I’m confident that hotels will be careful about cleaning, but I’m not sure how it’s possible to avoid contact with other guests, not to mention staff,” says the 71-year-old Boulder, Colorado, resident. So while Blanding has been reluctant to book Airbnbs and similar options in the past, she says she will be more open to them when we can all travel again. “They don’t always deliver what they promise, but they feel like the safer choice right now,” she notes.

As [coronavirus lockdowns](#) slowly begin to ease, people are slowly starting to contemplate future vacation plans. Many, like Blanding, are rethinking old travel habits. They’re also armed with a lot more questions. “I’m normally a very trusting person, but whether I stay at a hotel or a rental property, I want to know exactly how they’re cleaning between guests and whether I’m going to have to travel with Clorox wipes,” she says.

Donna Racette, a 70-year-old retiree in Niwot, Colorado, was traveling in California in early March when the coronavirus-related travel alarms started. “I noticed the hotel staff weren’t cleaning the doorknobs,” she says. “I became fastidious about having my own wipes and would go into a hotel before my husband to wipe down the doorknobs and elevator buttons.” When she starts to travel again, Racette says she’ll definitely book through [Airbnb](#) or [Vrbo](#). “I like knowing I am in control of cleaning all the rooms and surfaces in a home during my stay,” she says. “I can’t have that control in a hotel.”



**Save 25% when you join AARP and enroll in Automatic Renewal for first year.** Get instant access to discounts, programs, services, and the information you need to benefit every area of your life.

---

A recent survey conducted by market research company OmniTrak examined travel-related perceptions of risk related to the coronavirus pandemic and found that hotels (46 percent) were seen as a greater risk than an Airbnb or vacation rental (39 percent). The survey of 2,500 people did not ask participants to go into detail about their travel confidence, but Chris Kam, OmniTrak's president, surmises that respondents perceived home shares as less risky because the volume of travelers to a vacation rental is likely smaller than at a hotel. "A vacation rental is also less likely to have common areas frequented by guests," he adds.

## Increased safety precautions

Despite lower foot traffic perhaps translating to fewer germs, guests need to realize that companies such as Airbnb, HomeAway and Vrbo do not oversee the cleaning standards of individual properties. Homeowners have always been responsible for maintenance and cleaning. But with the pandemic, all three companies have taken extra measures to provide hosts with cleaning guidance based on recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, including [washing hands](#) thoroughly before and after each cleaning, emptying vacuum cleaners after every use, and disposing of or washing cleaning supplies. They have also updated their sites with helpful information for hosts, including listing EPA-approved products for use against the COVID-19 virus and recommending ways to make guests feel safe, such as stocking extra hand sanitizer and antibacterial hand washes. "We encourage partners to update their listings with their cleaning procedures," says Alison Kwong, a Vrbo spokesperson. The company also encourages travelers to read reviews and ask owners about their cleaning protocols before booking, she says.

Amy Varain, an Airbnb and Vrbo host with homes in Lake Tahoe, California, and Maui, Hawaii, has updated her listings to include her cleaning regimen and precautions. "I already have high cleaning standards, but I've decided to get rid of decorative throw pillows," she says. "Blankets that I store in the closet are now in zipped enclosures with a note that asks people to leave them on the bed to be laundered if used."

Airbnb spokesperson Liz DeBold Fusco says Airbnb hosts opening their doors to medical first responders as part of the company's Frontline Stays program have implemented stringent safety standards, in partnership with Larry Brilliant, M.D., an epidemiologist and chair of Ending Pandemics, a nonprofit that aims to improve how countries detect and respond to outbreaks. Examples include enhanced cleaning procedures such as wearing protective gear and ventilating rooms prior to cleaning, disinfecting with EPA-registered products after cleaning, and requiring 72 hours between stays. When normal travel resumes, she predicts many of these hosts will continue these rigorous standards.

On April 27, Airbnb announced that in May it would be launching a heightened cleaning protocol for hosts, with guidance from the former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, M.D., and leading experts in hospitality and medical hygiene. The new guidelines include a learning and certification program that covers [COVID-19 prevention measures](#) such as the use of personal protective equipment for hosts or their cleaners, disinfectants approved by regulatory authorities, and the CDC-recommended 24-hour wait period before entering after previous guests leave. Guests will be able to identify and book accommodations included in the program as soon as hosts enroll, DeBold Fusco says.

## More selective hosts

Travelers opting for home stays can expect safety-minded hosts to be more particular and inquisitive. Varain says she has many more questions for potential guests and is grateful that Airbnb sent messaging to use. Queries include: “In the last two weeks, have you or anyone you live with traveled to any areas impacted by COVID-19?” and “Do you currently have any travel restrictions in your area due to COVID-19?”

Traditionally, Varain's Maui property sees three-night bookings, but she'd now prefer longer stays to lessen the foot traffic. Indeed, DeBold Fusco notes that Airbnb has seen a 20 percent increase in bookings for longer-term stays (defined as 28 days or longer) as compared to last year, and that 80 percent of Airbnb hosts now accept longer stays.

Finding rentals may be trickier for travelers, as well. States including Florida and Hawaii have deemed vacation rentals a nonessential business, making it illegal for homeowners in these states to rent on platforms like Airbnb and [HomeAway](#) until further notice from local governments. Portland, Maine, and other cities have also banned short-term vacation rentals.

## Guest-friendly rules

Travelers who do book home rentals will find more flexible cancellation policies. Unlike with a hotel booking, guests must pay for the bulk of their home rental in advance. In March, Airbnb said it would give 100 percent refunds to guests who had already booked reservations between then and April 14, writing that “Airbnb's Extenuating Circumstances policy allows hosts and guests to cancel eligible reservation with no charge or penalty.” The policy has since been extended to May 31.

Vrbo said it would ask hosts to refund a minimum of 50 percent of what customers paid, if they are not willing to rebook at another date. “We expect vacation homeowners and property managers to be flexible with travelers who had to cancel,” Kwong says. Vrbo recently created a cancellation badge for properties with flexible policies, plus it's also refunding 100 percent of traveler service fees (a nominal fee collected by the company, not the homeowner) for trips canceled due to the coronavirus.

Last month, Airbnb introduced some tools and programs called More Flexible Reservations to help hosts and guests navigate uncertainty as plans are canceled or postponed. If guests need to cancel bookings made through June 1, Airbnb will also refund its nominal guest service fee as a travel coupon redeemable on a future trip.

## Still, no guarantees

Despite the extra cleaning measures, host-guest education and flexibility, companies like Airbnb, HomeAway and Vrbo aren't liable in the same way hotels are, stresses David Sherwyn, a hospitality professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Ultimately, the homeowners, not the booking platform, decide how thoroughly they clean their home and whether to issue a refund, Sherwyn says. "Home rental companies can say, "We tell our people to follow these procedures," but they cannot guarantee it," he notes. "You are counting on the homeowner."

For that reason, "hotels will definitely be my preferred accommodation for the foreseeable future," says Bill Cummings, a 67-year-old retiree who lives in the Villages, a Central Florida retirement community. "I'm reluctant to believe every homeowner is going to follow proper cleaning standards. It's a gamble I don't want to take." Cummings has found emails from hotel brands such as Hilton and Marriott touting extraneous cleaning steps and flexible cancellation and change fees reassuring.

