

No Doilies Here: In the Age of Airbnb, Bed-and-Breakfasts Are Coming Into Their Own

Traditional bed-and-breakfast inns are doubling down on unique décor, personalized service and flexible policies, as they seek to distinguish themselves from vacation rentals.

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By Elaine Glusac June 29, 2026

\In the first few years after opening Kenwood Gables Boutique B&B in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 2019, its co-owners, Reymond and Jayson Lazaro, would frequently welcome guests who expected to have the five-guestroom place to themselves, as if it were a vacation rental.

“They would say ‘Who are you? What are you doing here?’” Reymond Lazaro said. Since then, the couple has worked to educate potential guests. “We have made it a habit to ask, ‘Have you been in a B&B before? A traditional B&B, not Airbnb?’”

The vacation rental platform Airbnb (which was founded in 2007 as Airbed & Breakfast) has co-opted traditional bed-and-breakfast lingo even though vacation rentals don’t typically provide meals.

The two have been conflated, said Randall Bangs, who operates several bed-and-breakfasts, including the Stewart Inn in Wausau, Wis., as well as a nearby vacation rental cabin listed on Airbnb. “Now you have people who refer to any property as Airbnb,” he said.

A room is filled with sturdy Arts and Crafts-style furnishings in oak, with slatted chairs and leather couches. The floor is wood and there are wooden beams, wall trim and built-in shelves, alcoves and columns, all in natural wood. A carpet beneath the coffee table between two couches has rich colors and on one wall is a fireplace with a leafy mural surrounding it.

Terminology isn't the only headwind these small businesses face. Many have found themselves competing with hundreds of vacation rentals while trying to preserve their piece of the lodging pie.

"We have 590 short-term rentals in a 10-by-6-mile area," said Bridget Johnson, who runs the 13-room Oakwood Inn in Northern Iowa's Great Lakes region. For bed-and-breakfast owners, she said, the challenge is convincing would-be guests that their inns have something more to offer. Her goal is to "show that a couple does not have to rent a whole house to have a getaway for the same price, and sometimes even less, here."



The Stewart Inn, in Wausau, Wis.. Tom Krueger/Stewart Inn

The hotel industry has long lobbied against what it sees as inconsistent regulation and taxation on short-term rentals, which has made it harder for hotels to compete on price. But small lodging operators have discovered one competitive advantage that hasn't changed: personal service.

Realizing Their Value

Compared to full-service hotels, traditional bed-and-breakfasts — most of them independently owned — lack restaurants, business centers and gyms. But many compensate with unique décor, prime locations, interesting architecture and an insider's suggestions on what to do locally from the innkeeper.

When it comes to comparing bed-and-breakfasts with vacation rentals like Airbnb, the former include breakfast in the price and often other food-and-beverage perks, such as snacks (though individual vacation-rental hosts often provide freebies like coffee). Prices tend to be all-inclusive, so there is no charge for cleaning. While vacation rental platforms are increasingly adopting all-inclusive pricing, guests may see itemized fees for services like administration and cleaning in the details.

But Airbnb's extensive online reach has convinced many bed-and-breakfasts to list their rooms on the platform. In a statement, Airbnb confirmed bed-and-breakfasts use it, noting, "We see them as partners, not competitors."

"The traditional B&B has kind of been absorbed by Airbnb," said Sandy C. Chen, a professor in the restaurant, hotel and tourism program at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. She added that many small operators receive bookings on Airbnb, Booking.com and other digital platforms.

Some traditional inn operators think that the side-by-side comparison online benefits them. After all, a bed-and-breakfast host won't ask you to wash the dishes and take out the trash before checkout, as many rentals do.

"If you don't beat 'em, you join 'em," Ms. Johnson said, noting that she thinks her property — which includes perks like breakfast, complimentary coffee and passes to the local Y.M.C.A. — stacks up favorably on Airbnb. She said she has learned to emphasize "all those extras in order to compete."

Pillow Menus and Wine Hours

Such extras might include in-room espresso makers, pillow menus and daily wine receptions. Breakfasts are often generous and cooked to order.

At the Stewart Inn, a five-room bed-and-breakfast in a 1906 Arts and Crafts mansion designed by the architect George W. Maher, Mr. Bangs normally serves breakfast — vegan on request — at 8:30 a.m. If a guest declines, he offers to make it earlier. “I serve five out of seven days a week before 8:30,” he said.

In Middlebury, Vt., Matthew Robinson runs the Swift House Inn with what he calls “old-school hospitality,” including free yoga classes, concierge service for reservations at restaurants and golf courses, and special access to places such as a local whiskey distillery, normally closed to the public, where he can arrange a tour.

“In a world where you scan your own groceries and QR codes for menus, I think people want to be taken care of,” Mr. Robinson said.

There’s evidence that Airbnb agrees. Last year, the platform added services that travelers can book in conjunction with a rental such as massages, personal training sessions and catering.

A large 19th-century wooden house is painted yellow with white trim. A pergola with white columns covers a slate walkway that goes past a smaller yellow and white residential building and leads to the larger house. There is a stone fountain on a patch of lawn, and in the background is a calm bay.

The Seven Gables Inn, on Monterey Bay in California, is part of the Kirkwood Collection of small hotels. Credit...Kirkwood Collection

Alex Kirkwood, the founder of the Kirkwood Collection of nine small hotels in California, said he thought bed-and-breakfasts were great uses of historic properties in need of rejuvenating makeovers, both in terms of style and service.

Forget the Fussy Factor

He has added several inns since 2018, including the 25-room Seven Gables Inn, on Monterey Bay, and the nine-room Hideaway Santa Barbara, with the goal of maintaining the warmth and intimacy of a bed-and-breakfast, updated with technology such as text-based concierge services and contemporary design.

Rooms at the Ballard Inn in the Santa Ynez Valley, for example, have white walls and crisp linens with modern furnishings and occasional antiques.

The inns are “always within walking distance of a restaurant or bar,” Mr. Kirkwood said. “It’s like a wealthy grandma’s summer home.”

But not the grandma with Hummel figurines in the hutch.



The Seven Gables Inn, on Monterey Bay in California, is part of the Kirkwood Collection of small hotels. Kirkwood Collection

“You’re not going to find any doilies here,” said Mr. Robinson of the Swift House Inn, where rooms might feature statement wallpaper or a locally made cherry wood bed. “For a lot of people, a B&B has a connotation of a fussy old-school creation. Everything we’re trying to do here is very design-led.”

The variety of room sizes dictated by older architecture means many bed-and-breakfasts offer a range of rates, from budget-friendly to luxury. At the Swift House Inn they run from \$199 to almost \$500 a night.

In other ways, bed-and-breakfasts owners have loosened up. Mark Reichle, the chief executive of Select Registry — a group of about 240 bed-and-breakfasts, inns and small hotels, most in the United States, that are vetted for quality — said the rigid 4 to 6 p.m. check-in rules are gone thanks to remote check-in options.

“Self check-in has allowed flexibility and catered to people who may not want to have a full interaction with the innkeeper or staff,” Mr. Reichle said.

What’s in a Name?

The ways in which people search online has forced some inns to drop the term bed-and-breakfast altogether. The nonprofit California Association of Bed & Breakfast Inns was founded in 1991 to promote bed-and-breakfast stays. It later changed its name to the California Association of Boutique & Breakfast Inns and then recently changed it again to Boutique Hotels of California.

People are more likely to search for boutique hotels and we wanted to align with that,” said Raneë Ruble-Dotts, the organization’s marketing and creative director.

The group makes the point that many hotels now include breakfast in their rates, especially at brands like Hampton by Hilton and Holiday Inn Express, even though the experience of staying at a chain hotel is homogenized compared to that of a bed-and-breakfast, where no two are alike.

“‘Boutique Hotels’ is a little bit more inclusive and representative of what we’re trying to do,” said Lynn Mohrfeld, the president and chief executive of Boutique Hotels of California, noting that its members, many of whom still serve breakfast, range from urban addresses to renovated motels and ranches.

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