

Exploring the pros and cons of staying at an Airbnb

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

A lot has changed in the world of travel recently, but one of the most significant phenomenon in the past decade has been the emergence of Airbnb. Starting with an idea in 2007, it has become bigger than the five largest hotel chains combined.

The odd name originated with two young cash-strapped roommates in San Francisco who saw an opportunity when a major conference came to town and hotels were fully booked. They set up a website indicating that they would rent out air mattresses in their apartment. It went over so well that they saw the makings of a business that eventually became a multibillion-dollar operation.

These days, it is unlikely that you will sleep on an air mattress. The other confusing part is that the “bnb” in the name is an obvious take-off on “bed and breakfast,” but breakfast is rarely included. Hosts who offer breakfast tend to be the exception rather than the rule.

Airbnb doesn't own properties but rather provides a booking platform for those with a room to rent. While it started off modestly with mostly spare bedrooms, today the offerings range from single rooms to complete apartments, farm houses, beach-side villas, tree houses, castles — you name it. Listings number in the millions and

include almost every country in the world.

Using Airbnb has its pros and cons.

The biggest advantage is often cost saving because you can generally find Airbnb listings for less — sometimes a lot less — than hotels. If there's access to a kitchen, you could prepare some of your own meals instead of relying on restaurants. Many places provide excellent value, but some cost more than hotels.

The other advantage is the opportunity to get away from the impersonal nature of hotels and meet people who live in the place you're visiting.

There are also many cons.

With a hotel, simply make the booking and you're done. Booking with Airbnb requires more fussing around. You have to open an account and provide basic background information, and when you book, confirmation may not be immediate. Except where the listing is tagged “Instant Booking,” the host has up to 24 hours to respond before confirming. While this might not be critical when booking far ahead, it could be a concern when planning on short notice.

When you book a hotel, you can show up at 4 p.m. or midnight; it usually doesn't matter. With Airbnb it's necessary to co-ordinate an arrival time when the host is there to let you in or arrange to pick up a key.

With traditional bed and breakfasts, owners are usually licensed and members of an association that imposes certain standards. Not so with Airbnb. Pretty much anyone can list on Airbnb and be up and running almost immediately. In effect, monitoring of standards is done through guest



Cost-savings is a big advantage, but not entirely knowing what you're getting into can be a major disadvantage when renting an Airbnb. | GETTY IMAGES

reviews. If things aren't up to snuff, or if the property listing is misleading, it will soon get bad reviews; with enough bad reviews, Airbnb may take down the listing.

A new listing with great-looking facilities at a low price but no reviews might look tempting, but it comes with some risk. It may be perfectly fine, but there's no way to verify it. A common practice is for a

new listing to offer an attractive rate to encourage visits and then up the price after a few positive reviews.

Things sometimes go wrong. The host might cancel a booking with little notice. The place might fall far short of what is promised in the listing. Occasionally there are horror stories of things going wrong, though horror stories crop up with hotels as well. Fortunately, all of

our experiences so far have been positive.

There are a few ways to better your odds when booking.

The most important is to closely look through the reviews and verify that the place has a long track record of visitors being happy with their stay.

Another is to book with super hosts. These hosts have a track record of good reviews, quick response times, listings that realistically portray the actual property and a reputation for not cancelling bookings. Also, pay close attention to cancellation policies because these may differ from place to place.

You can also narrow your search by choosing a price range, the kind of accommodation (such as a single room or an entire apartment), the amenities you require (such as a kitchen or air conditioning), and the currency for payment. Fortunately, you can book anywhere in the world and pay in Canadian dollars.

Airbnb differs from other booking sites in that reviews work both ways. Not only do guests review hosts, but hosts also review guests. Because hosts often open their homes to strangers, they can see if any red flags have been raised by other hosts before accepting the booking.

There is no doubt that Airbnb has dramatically increased the possibilities for travellers. But before using this option, it is best to first get acquainted with its many idiosyncrasies and then decide if it suits your style of travelling.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.

Review could lead to overhaul of education system in Manitoba

Education minister hopes a new commission will look at whether all of the province's school divisions need to be kept

BY ED WHITE
WINNIPEG BUREAU

Manitoba is finally moving to begin planning a potentially major overhaul of its kindergarten-to-Grade 12 education system.

Two political heavyweights have been brought in to head a commission that will review the present system and come up with a plan to fix chronic problems, a plan that could include anything from moderate changes to entirely abolishing school divisions.

“Something clearly is not working in the system,” said Manitoba Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen in announcing a panel headed by former provincial finance minister Clayton Manness and former Saskatchewan finance minister Janice MacKinnon.

“Our results don't show that we are doing better than other provinces in the core courses that we would hope that young people would be doing better in.... Manitoba has been sliding over the last 15 to 20 years.”

Indeed, Manitoba students have ranked last in a number of annual national surveys of academic achievement and the situation has grown worse.



CLAYTON MANNESS
EDUCATION COMMISSION

During the same period, Saskatchewan improved its standing.

While some changes have been introduced in recent years, including reforming the math and literacy curricula and teaching methods, the slide to the bottom of the national pack has not been reversed.

“It's not because our kids don't have the ability,” said Goertzen.

The review will file a report in February 2020, after which the government will study it and then release it to the public.

Politically, it will be overseen by Ian Wishart, the Portage La Prairie MLA and former education minister, who is now Goertzen's legislative assistant.

“Ian is going to be actively engaged with the commission,” said Goertzen.



JANICE MACKINNON
EDUCATION COMMISSION

Wishart is also the former president of Keystone Agricultural Producers and a long-time agriculture and rural policy wonk.

MacKinnon, who served in the Roy Romanow government during a time of intense financial pressure and major re-engineering of government services, said the commission will not deal with financial matters, but will explore all the issues that are causing Manitoba's education system to stumble.

“There are no pre-determined outcomes here,” said MacKinnon. “We are initiating this task with a blank slate.”

The largest part of the commission's work will be to hold public hearings to hear from parents, students, educators and the public.

Manness said the commission will try to work toward consensus with its report, but realizes it will be dealing with contentious issues.

“There is going to be some hard steering along the way. We know that,” he said.

Goertzen said finances and the financing model will not be explored in this review because how and how much to fund the system will rely upon the government knowing “what the system looks like.”

That means the issue of whether school taxes should be applied to farmland, placing a heavy burden on farmers and farmland owners, will not be dealt with for at least another year.

Goertzen did not shy away from discussing the school division issue.

“Do you have less school divisions? Do you have school divisions at all?” said Goertzen.

“We have 290 school trustees involved with running our divisions and our schools. I need to be convinced that this is the right number.”

Nova Scotia eliminated school divisions after reviewing its provincial system. Other provinces have amalgamated school divisions.

Manitoba's system has often been criticized for being opaque and

lacking true democratic accountability because few Manitobans are aware of what their local school divisions are doing, how it's spending their money, and even who their school trustees are.

For instance, Winnipeg has six public school divisions, as well as Roman Catholic and other non-public school authorities.

Dozens of school divisions govern education in rural Manitoba, even though the population of most rural areas has plunged in recent decades.

While the provincial government has left it up to the commission to find its own solutions to the chronic problems in the present system, Goertzen said the government promised to fix the system.

“I get ... frustrated when I meet with school divisions and I ask the question, ‘who's responsible for improving results?’ and I get the same answer: ‘Well, we're all responsible.’ Well, if we're all responsible then really nobody is responsible,” said Goertzen.

“I'm not sure there are really clear lines of responsibility in the system in the ability to drive change and to drive performance because of that.”

ed.white@producer.com