

30 Hostel Secrets Only Insiders Know

By Terence Loose / July 27, 2016



Hostels are generally low-budget accommodations where you book a bed, or bunk, in a shared room. Some hostels rent private rooms for two or four people, but they can also have dorm-like arrangements with as many as 20 beds. They usually also have kitchens and sometimes provide breakfast.

For all these reasons, hostel stays can **save you a lot of money when traveling**, as opposed to staying in hotels. But less privacy can come with downsides as well upsides. So if you've never stayed in a hostel, or want to make your next hostel experience better, check out these travel insider secrets from the experts.



1. You Can Make Reservations

You might think that hostels don't take reservations. Actually, many do, and if you're traveling to a destination during its peak season, you'll want to make them.

"Walk-ins are part of the hostel culture, but especially at smaller hostels and peak season, they do get sold out," said Netanya Trimboli, a representative of [Hostel International USA](#).



2. Check the Rates at the Hostel Website

Often, the hostel website will **offer the best rates on their beds and rooms**, as opposed to booking sites, which usually add a commission, said Matt Kiefer, a traveler who writes for [Hostelgeeks.com](#), an information site for travelers with many hostel tips. He said that you could save 12 percent or more on your stay.

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3. Five-Star Hostels Are Not Always the Most Expensive

Yes, there are five-star hostels, and they must meet certain criteria such as: cleanliness, free WiFi, a unique trait like a pool or bar, well-designed and friendly staff, said Kiefer. And, he added, they are usually not more expensive than other hostels without all the amenities. This is why it really [pays to do some research before your travels](#).



4. Be Nice to the Staff

It's easy to be tired and grumpy when traveling, but always try to be pleasant to your hostel's staff, advised Kiefer. The staff can make your stay a lot more enjoyable by giving you a room with a better view, bigger bed or one that's newly renovated. "Even though the room type will be the same, all hostels have some rooms that have better or nicer something," he said.



5. Complain With a Smile

If you do have to complain, Kiefer advised to "complain smart." If something is not to your liking or what the hostel promised, be polite and calm when you complain. "The problem will be fixed if you are nice or not, but if you smile and are fair to staff, they will often give you something for your troubles, such as a discount or a free meal," he said.



6. Use an Anti-Theft Backpack or Bag

Some hostels have lockers for your valuables, some don't, said Rob Tullis, who travels with his wife and son and provides advice through [The Expat Experiment](#).

"When there are lockers, great. But sometimes, they can be really small," he said. He suggested a Pacsafe anti-theft bag. Created by world travelers, these bags are slash-proof and allow you to lock them.



7. Read the Hostel's Reviews

Remember that when you stay at a hostel, you're essentially signing up to live with strangers for a while, so you want to know what types of guests frequent the hostel you're considering. Reviews can do that, said Tullis.

"Reading reviews will give you a good idea what demographic the hostel caters to the most," he said. From the reviews, you'll often be able to determine if it hosts mostly families, college students out for a good (i.e., loud) time, single travelers, couples and more.



8. Score a Room for the Individual Bunk Rate

If you are traveling in a group or with family members, Tullis advised you call different hostels to see if the hostel has a six-bed room available, which most hostel managers will rent at the same rate per bunk as in the larger dorm rooms.

"This is a great score, a private room for the same price as the large mixed dorm," he said. "These often lock and have a private bathroom as well. Privacy and more security — exactly what families want."



9. Hostels Are Nicer Than You Think

Yes, some hostels might not be in such great shape. But they've really improved over the years, said Barry Choi, a personal finance and budget travel expert at [MoneyWeHave.com](#). To compete with boutique hotels, many hostels — even non-five-star ones — have improved their decor.

"It wouldn't be a stretch to walk into a hostel and think you've entered an art gallery," he said, adding that the amenities hostels offer today are equally impressive. "Rooftop patios, lounges, yoga studios and theaters are just some of the things you can enjoy when staying at a hostel."



10. Check Online Before Booking Tours Through the Hostel

Many hostels will offer special tours or activities upon arrival, said Tiffany Choi, a traveler and writer with [LeaveTown.com](#), a Canadian travel booking and information site. She advised holding off until you check prices online.

"The prices the hostels state aren't always the cheapest, despite them claiming so," she said.



11. Check the Safety Rating

Hostels are wonderful places — for the most part, said Malena Cahall, a frequent traveler who works for [Miles Into Memories](#) travel site. She chooses a hostel over a hotel whenever possible.

"That said, I always look at safety ratings," she said. "My rule of thumb is it has to have over an 80 percent safety rating on [HostelWorld.com](#) to even be considered." Cahall added she then checks reviews to make sure no one had a horrendous experience there. "I am happy to say I have never felt unsafe in a hostel setting," she said.

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12. Bring Towels and Flip Flops

While many hostels provide or rent towels, Cahall prefers to bring her own fast-drying towel. She also suggested bringing shower shoes.

"Seriously. Bring Flip Flops, because some hostel showers are inevitably icky," she said.



13. Don't Leave Electronics in the Hostel

If you have any [questions about the safety](#) or the people in a hostel, carry your electronics with you as much as possible, said Cahall.

"Locks keep honest people honest, but don't really keep out determined thieves," she said. "I typically bring my electronics in my day pack and just leave clothes behind. I've always been careful, and I've never had anything stolen using this method."



14. Bring a Cable Lock

Bringing a lock with you is a good idea. Bringing a lock that will work is an even better idea. "Everyone says bring a lock, but they don't tell you that many hostels have lockers that won't fit a standard U-shape padlock," said Shelly Najjar, a travel writer with [TheGoalList.com](#).

She advised bringing a flexible cable lock — she uses the Lewis N. Clark TSA Cable Lock — that can bend to fit in any lock loop. "This will prevent you from choosing between renting a special lock from the hostel, if available, or leaving your valuables unprotected, and can double as a luggage lock when going to and from your destination," she said.

15. Power Outlets Are Sometimes Scarce

In the modern age, we all have lots of electronic devices that need daily charging. Unfortunately, many hostels were built long ago, or have packed more beds into rooms than they were made for. So a great asset to bring is a power strip, said Megan Stetzel, a traveler with [ForksandFootprints.com](#).

"Bring a small power strip, and you'll be everyone's new best friend, allowing multiple people to use the same outlet at the same time," she said.



16. Hostels Sometimes Have Curfews

If you're a night owl, or just plan on taking in the local nightlife, check to see if your hostel has a curfew, said Russell Hannon, a travel writer with [BreaktheTravelBarrier.com](#). If it does, there's a chance you could get locked out for staying out too late.



17. If You Use a Booking Site, Check for Booking Fees

If you don't want to call individual hostels, but prefer the convenience of an online booking site, Hannon said you can still get out of any surcharges for the service. Some don't charge extra fees. [Hostelbookers.com](#) and [Hostelling International](#) are two of his favorites.



18. If You Like Camping, Try a Hostel

Believe it or not, some hostels have garden and outdoor areas in which they allow camping, said Kiefer. He said that it's much cheaper, and you still get to use all the hostel amenities. Kiefer also added that "camping gardens" are more common in African countries, Ireland and some European regions.

19. You Can Get a Beer at a Hostel

Many hostels have bars, and many of them are really great places, said Kiefer.

"And the coolest part? You can even go there and have a drink without actually staying at the hostel. A place like this is LemonRock Hostel in Granada, for instance," he said.



20. Don't Always Take 'Booked Full' for an Answer

If you have your heart set on a certain hostel, but it's booked up, give them a friendly call or message, suggested Kiefer.

"Sometimes, they do have beds left for walk-ins, apartments nearby or other options," he said.



21. Book Early — But Not Too Early

To get the best rates and availability, book early, said Kiefer. But he added that it's also possible to book too early. From his experience, most of the time, two months out is the best window to ensure availability and get the best rates.



22. Use Social Media

If you have found a few hostels you are interested in, follow them on Facebook and other social media sites before your trip, advised Kiefer. Often, this is where they post some fantastic deals, he said.



23. Volunteering Could Get You a Free Night's Stay

If you want to do at least a few hours of good during your travels, you could get rewarded with a night's stay.

"Travelers interested in volunteerism can stay for free at certain Hostel International USA hostels during January and February as part of its Great Hostel Give Back program," said Trimboli. The offer applies to groups of eight or more, and you can score up to five nights each.



24. Check for Bedding

Many independent hostels don't include sheets, blankets and pillows for the beds, said Trimboli, who added that all HI USA hostels do. So, if you don't plan on using your own bed linens, make sure they're included.



25. A Lot Could Be Included

Before making a decision based on price, check all that's included. For example, many hostels offer free breakfast, free WiFi and free activities, so you could end up spending less than you would at a place that charges separately for those things, Trimboli said.

26. Bring Earplugs

Whether you share a bunk, a room or have your own private room, noise is something that most hostels come with. Especially if you're a light sleeper, earplugs are a must, said Trimboli. Besides, they're small, light and easy to travel with. Better safe than sorry — and awake.

27. Check for Alcohol Rules

Many hostels have rules about alcohol, said Trimboli. Some ban drinking on the premises, whereas others have full-blown bars. Whether you want a drink or want to stay on the wagon, make sure you check on this.

28. You Have a Choice Between Coed and Same-Sex Rooms

If you're more comfortable bunking with the same sex, or if you prefer a mix, you can find a hostel to accommodate you, said Trimboli.

"Hostels offer coed dorms, all-male dorms, all-female dorms and private rooms, with dorms ranging from four beds to 20 or more," she said. "If a hostel doesn't have your preferred room type, another one will."



29. Dress In Layers

This tip isn't just for hiking Everest. It's also for sleeping in hostels, according to an article by StudentUniverse, which advises college students. It pointed out that, although you might think it's chilly when you go to sleep, a room full of bodies can generate a lot of heat. So come 2 a.m., you might be peeling off a few layers.



30. Bring a Sleep Sheet

A sleep sheet is a pair of sheets sewn together to create a sort of sheet sleeping bag. You can use a double sheet and sew up the bottom. This can come in handy in a few ways, according to StudentUniverse. Many hostels provide linens, but you might be more comfortable in your own. Alternatively, some hostels rent sleep sheets, so you'll save money.

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