

One of the biggest disrupters of the hotel industry in recent years, find out why millions are flocking to this fast-growing travel accommodation service.



A Beginner's Guide to

When you're planning a vacation, staying in a stranger's house instead of that swanky hotel might be the last thing on your mind, but that's exactly what over 150 million travellers are doing, thanks to Airbnb, the world's biggest accommodation sharing website.

Since its inception in 2008, Airbnb has grown into one of the biggest disrupters of the hotel industry, proving access to millions of cheap and unique places to stay in over 191 countries. Here's what you should know.



BY TARANA RANA

Easy to use online accommodation marketplace

Airbnb is an online platform that allows people to rent out their spare rooms or entire homes to guests. Hosts from all over the world list spaces available for short-term rent and guests can search for properties to stay in. All payments are made through the Airbnb website and hosts receive the money 24 hours after check-in.

Anyone can create an account

for free – all you'll need is an email address or register using your Facebook or Google+ account. When filling out your profile and verifying your identity, Airbnb keeps the process quick and straightforward, whether you're signing up as a host or guest.

Justin Hansen from New South Wales, Australia, became an Airbnb host this past year and describes the sign-up process as incredibly simple. "Airbnb walks you through what it is you have to share and how you would like going about doing it."



Photos: Airbnb/Facebook, iStock, @thewanderear/Facebook



Usually always cheaper than a hotel

Here's why most people like Airbnb: the price is usually always right. Guests get great value accommodation in prime locations. Sabrina Pannu, an accountant from Surrey, BC, has been using Airbnb as a guest for the past four years. "I have used Airbnb in Canada, USA, and Europe and I think it's amazing for group travel because you get more space for your money than a hotel room. Hotels are usually pricier in good locations."

Airbnb also offers a range of price points for every budget. You can book an entire home or condo or opt to rent a room in a shared house. One budget-friendly advantage of Airbnb is that you usually have access to a kitchen. Preparing quick breakfasts or the occasional dinner on your vacation is a sure-fire way to keep costs down.

Plus, many Airbnb hosts also offer free breakfasts or keep well-equipped kitchens with the basic necessities. "Most times I share complimentary breakfasts and dinners with my guests," says Hansen.

Unique and memorable spaces

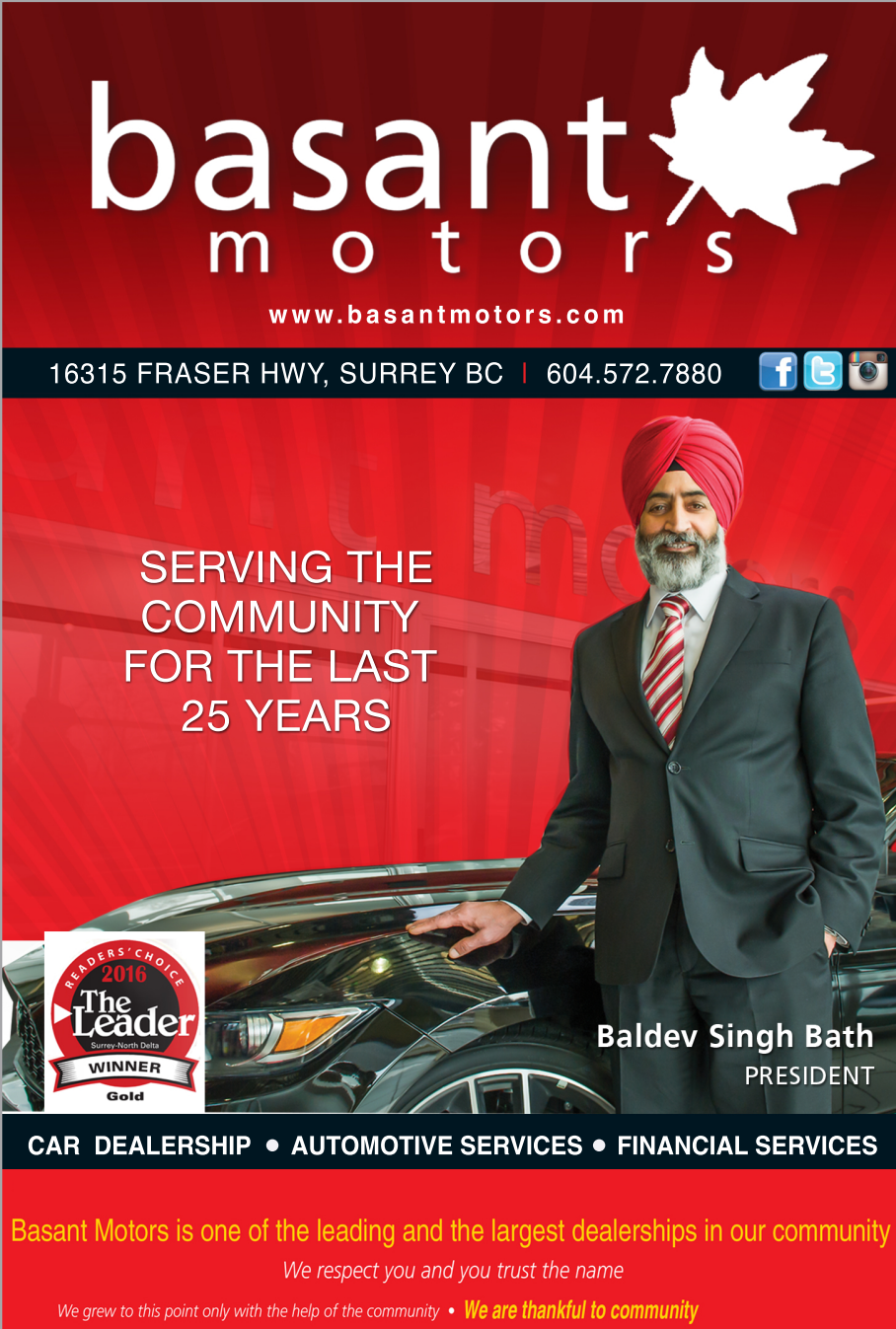
Besides the typical houses and apartments, Airbnb also lets you list and rent a variety of accommodation, such as castles, tree houses,




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cottages, houseboats and lighthouses to name a few, ensuring a trip you won't easily forget. And while Airbnb guests should not expect hotel-quality service, many hosts are going out of their way to ensure guests have a memorable, comfortable stay.

"I ensure that my guests have an abundance of breakfast options, high quality bedding and towels, and I always make sure I provide new toiletries for each guest. Little touches like bottles of water by the bed and chocolates on the pillow go a long way," says Hansen, who rents out spare rooms and on occasion, his entire house when he's away. "I believe travellers...by choosing the Airbnb option, they are looking for that feel-at-home experience, so that is what I try and give them."

Guests can also always communicate with their host with any questions or issues they face during their stay through the mobile app, which allows you to call and message the host.

Safety and security

But is it safe? Since your Airbnb rental is not a hotel, there are certain safety tips guests should follow to avoid disappointment or worse.

The most important thing you can do is to shop carefully. "Read all the reviews, you can find good information in them," advises Pannu. Airbnb listings all come with pictures, a write-up, a list of amenities and guest reviews. "Read a listing thoroughly before booking. Also check the house rules as sometimes a host is not very flexible with check-in and check-out times." It is also advisable to contact hosts prior to booking a place – the ones who reply quicker are usually the better, more organized hosts.

Pannu recalls a disappointing experience in Rome, Italy, when her Airbnb host was three hours late to check her group in. "I also once had a host cancel a



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reservation a few days before the stay.” Another way to avoid disappointing stays is to try and rent accommodation from ‘Super Hosts’ – these hosts are selected by Airbnb for meeting outstanding hospitality requirements and can be identified by a badge on their profile.

Airbnb has also implemented practices to ensure the safety of both guests and hosts by having users verify their identity, improving profile and reviewing systems and implementing a guarantee that reimburses eligible hosts for damages to their property up to \$1 million.

So is it right for you?

Airbnb comes with its unique set of pros and cons but when used right, it can be a great tool for finding cheap and memorable places to stay. However, it does pay to take your time doing your research, and interacting with the host beforehand. Above all, it also helps to keep an open mind and treat the property and host with courtesy and respect. “I have [also] been an Airbnb guest for nearly three years,” says Hansen. “I’ve found it a wonderful way to travel the globe and meet new people.”

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