

My Somerset Life

A diary by Brian Snellgrove

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The complete Guide to booking hotels (in the UK)

I may be teaching my grandma to suck eggs* but this is the total of my experience over the years. The first hotel I ever stayed in was in 1955 when I was 11 years of age and it was at Number 7 De la War Parade, Bexhill. It was run by three formidable ladies of a certain age and all arrangements were done by telephone and letter. In those days letter writing was *de rigeur*. Everything was confirmed by letter, normally handwritten. I remember the ladies because they had huge hearing aid batteries strapped round their waists.

* the meaning is 'do not offer advice to someone who has more experience than yourself' . These days this proverbial saying has little impact as few people have any direct experience of sucking eggs, including grandmothers . It is quite an old phrase and is included in John Stephen's translation of *Quevedo's Comical Works, 1707*

so why do people suck eggs? Many years ago people would suck out the egg contents by piercing the air at both ends and then sucking on one of the ends. You could reverse the procedure and blow out the contents also.

Just thought you'd like to know

A blast from the past

Anyway, I digress. Back to the 1950's. Three months in advance my father would write a letter of request. An answer was received and we sent a cheque. This was acknowledged by letter so the whole thing took about two weeks, what with one thing and another. The telephone numbers were different in those days it would be something like Bexhill 1234 and we had a rotary phone, quite spring-loaded, so it took some effort to

dial the numbers. If I remember rightly this was classed as a long distance call and had to go through the operator. We traveled around by car. It was a black Morris 7 car with the Reg. EVB 829

How times have changed

As we would say, how times have changed. All information we need about any hotel anywhere is instantly available. You could almost say that too much information is available, so the skill is knowing what to look for. In a quaint recall of past times, search engines 'crawls' hundreds of billions of web pages. I always thought that crawling was associated with slow and laborious actions but I seem to get results in .06 of a second so I suppose it is what Terence Donovan the photographer called a speed of light job.

The main players

So if you want a hotel and use the word 'book' you will get The Usual Suspects: **Trivago, Booking.com Hotels.com last minute.com kayak.co.uk Expedia .co.uk agoda.com** and not forgetting our old friend **airbnb**. It should really be called Airb because very few of the establishments offer breakfast. Booking clients are often linked with review sites such as TripAdvisor. Hotel chains have their own system for example **premierinn.com** and **travelodge.com**.

The competition for the small percentage that the booking client gets means that the market is very competitive and therefore unless their standards are high they will drop into oblivion. If something is difficult to use, then find another booking agent. If the managers of the site cannot be bothered to keep their software up-to-date then their services are probably not very good either.

Invisible establishments

I nearly forgot, some of the local establishments do not like advertising on the internet and if you can find a local information bureau, you might get a very good recommendation normally associated with an old-fashioned small bed and breakfast which will give you brilliant service.

Air B and B?

I have had varying experiences with air BandB because there are so many places, and inspectors do not have the chance to visit every establishment (if they ever do) and check for quality so I have often discovered that what is offered is not what I actually find. When you have paid your money and you arrive on a dark evening at 7 o'clock it is really too late either to complain or to change. I can only repeat my recommendation of checking reviews and making sure they are recent ones, and going for places where they have visitor's photographs. Also, if you write an email query and someone does not respond then that is not a good sign

A test example of a booking situation

Anyway let's imagine we are going to book three nights at a hotel at a seaside town we have not visited before. It is a good idea to decide why we are going to visit this particular place. If we are going to visit someone then it doesn't really matter where it is, so long as it is within reasonable distance of your conference or meeting. If you are going for relaxation purposes the distance from the sea is probably a key thing. It is my preference but I always go for a hotel that provides breakfast. Sometimes a low rate does not involve a breakfast, I think we got that habit from America, and you need to allow up to 10 pounds for a 'full' breakfast as it is called. I have known £12.50 or £15.

What is more subtle are the services. If you are coming by

car, it is quite rare for sea front hotels to have free parking. In big cities you have to be prepared to pay up to 20 pounds per day to park your car. In seaside towns there may be some free parking or you may have to use the street parking which unless it is a place like Brighton which I call London by the sea, may not be too bad. If it is free overnight and starts charging from say 8 am you have to be on the ball and go and feed a meter or pay your charges to avoid a fine.

Reviews

We perform checks on reviews. ⓘ

Traveller rating



This one should be examined carefully and the content read because the number of one star reviews are significant. If you wish to stay there provided the prices are good, then see what people found lacking so when you go to your room you can check that all is in order.

Trip Advisor – how to use

Of prime importance are reading the reviews before you make any bookings. Looking at TripAdvisor is an art in itself you will always get someone to give a one star review. You will find that they found a hair in the shower, and the staff were rude. They will say they will 'never darken their door again'. Strangely other reviews describe the staff as pleasant and cooperative. Why is that I hear you ask. As the old saying goes, It Takes Two To Tango and if you are polite and positive you will receive good service in exchange.

Dizzying price variations

I think it fair to say that you get what you pay for but here we have the problem of the airline type booking service. At one extreme I recall a hotel in Las Vegas that changed its prices every 15 minutes according to the weather and thus according to the demand plus if there was a pop concert or convention going on at the time. It really is a free market. Yesterday I wanted to book for a hotel with booking.com for a date two weeks away.

In my recent case It was a certain price, I think 130 pounds for two nights when I looked yesterday. It did warn me that only two rooms were available at this price. When I looked today, the price had gone up to 146 pounds. It is really a game of cat and mouse. The booking client is trying to figure out when people are most likely to book and therefore how much they need to charge in order to tempt people. If I look at the same hotel looking for tomorrow, it was 67 pounds.

A word of warning. Such are the systems available today that it knows when you have visited a site and got a quote. There is some software that interprets the revisit as a decision to go ahead so frequently the price goes up a little bit. You might like to make your final booking on another PC or mobile device.

Another warning – premium numbers. You can pay 14 ppm if you call 0870 or some such. Search and find the local hotel number (you can tell by the prefix) so you do not get ripped off.

Test case

So now I am going to try booking at a hotel that I stayed at before, which was the Holiday Inn Express near Swansea. If I book in for tomorrow it's 144 pounds with free breakfast and free parking. It is described as best value and the most popular. If I book in for a night two weeks hence the price

for free breakfast and free parking is 125 pounds and that's for one night.

Each hotel chain and system has its own policy so it is really worth spending time and energy doing your research. It does not have to be a lengthy process, just a focused process. You will find inevitably that Saturday nights are more expensive probably because there is entertainment for which people are prepared to make a special journey. I remember a travel lodge in Cardiff which was normally about 45 pounds only but went up to 110 pounds on the Saturday night. It is worth considering whether you are prepared to travel during the week or whether you have to spend weekends away particularly a Saturday.

There are some hotel groups who operate near or at service stations on motorways. Inevitably they do not offer breakfast but you will find a cozy arrangement with an adjacent shopping centre where there is an establishment that will do the job.

Check the booking conditions

Booking.com have a very good arrangement that you can book the hotel but not have to pay until a few days before. I find this respectful because if you change your plans it doesn't matter, you just cancel and you don't pay any money. Many hotel groups have different rates depending on the flexibility you might need. For example, fixed non-refundable rates are normally the cheapest and the most expensive are the ones where you can change your mind even at the last moment.

Complaints



What happens if you are arrive at a hotel and find that the room is not to your liking? Proprietors are very well aware that you could give a black mark to them on TripAdvisor so they will try and accommodate you. This happened to me when I went to a hotel in Milton Keynes which by the way is a god-awful place full of concrete and no soul but never mind. The room did not feel right so I asked for another one and got one straight away and it was great. Don't do this Oliver Twist thing 'can I have some more porridge?'. You are paying for a service, don't forget.

If you're not happy then you're not happy and that's it.

I remember on another occasion the TV did not work and because there was no engineer in the evening they gave me another room. I advise you not to unpack unless you are satisfied. On another occasion the room was very near a large ventilation fan. The hotel was fairly full but they did move me. On another occasion the room was right down the end of a long corridor and I asked if there was a room closer to the reception.

Dealing with receptionists

A word of advice here about dealing with receptionists. I noticed that they are often abused especially if the day of the new arrival has not been particularly good. I always treat receptionists with respect. I do not grovel to them but just treat them as human beings and if I have any questions I've tried to bunch them together. I like to make a joke or two. I

will complement them on good reviews if they had them and if I'm returning a second time I will ask if anything has changed and say how much I'm looking forward to staying with them.

I have had very few bad breakfasts in fact I can't remember the last bad one I had but having a quiet word with someone, not forcing them into a defensive position will always bring better results.

Advice about reviews

So back to reviews for a moment, ignore the one star ones and ignore the gushing five-star ones. If you find 80% of the reviews are five star and four star then you have a winner. Oh, and do check the dates of the review. There should be at least a couple per month and if no recent ones appear it may be that the management have changed. Some bad reviews are prior to a management change so the last year's worth are the ones to take notice of.

Extras and conditions

Another thing to look out for is the provision of Wi-Fi. I don't need it myself but sometimes in areas which don't get a decent signal you may need one and be prepared for fairly substantial charges. Sometimes the hotel will have a Wi-Fi which is free for say half an hour. Be prepared for a little bit of confusion in finding the service provider and signing in. If you go to reception and tell them you have difficulty it will only be the fifth time that week that they have been asked so they will help you.

When I enter the room I do look for a letter of greeting from the manager and it gets my attention if it is up to date and relevant. It is also very nice if the details of the food available in the restaurant – if there is one – is announced. I do not do food in the room because I find on the one occasion I used it the food arrived cold and I had to pay a

lot for it.

As for drinks, hotel prices I am afraid are more expensive than pubs though this is changing what with the recent tax on beer thank you Jeremy Hunt our UK Chancellor. If I was really mean I would sneak in the bottle of white wine and drink it while watching TV but that would put me down as a cheap skate wouldn't it.

Noisy neighbours



As for noisy neighbours and shouting in the corridor I'm afraid this is part of being in a hotel and I don't recommend that you get in your dressing gown, open the door and complain as you might get a response that is more direct than you might wish for.

The noise will die away but if it doesn't, a call to the receptionist could send the night porter up to have a word. Friday and Saturday 'post party' guests can be a pain.

As for choosing a room it is sometimes a good idea to avoid a street facing room though you can never tell because if the double glazing is good it doesn't matter and sometimes room spacing the back is just as noisy because of fans, delivery vehicles, dust carts that arrive first thing in the morning etc.

You may be tempted to pay extra for a sea facing room or a larger room but let's face it most of us just want to go back into our room, watch TV and flop into bed.

Are you sure you need a car?

As for the location of the hotel, I should have mentioned this before, it may pay you to leave your car and use the existing bus service to move around . Seaside places normally charge quite a lot for parking and you don't want to have to think to yourself, 'will we be here one hour or two hours?' . If you are of a certain age like I am you have a free pass (don't expect that to work in Wales) then just get a day pass and save yourself some petrol and the worry about parking.

Coaches are ridiculously cheap (outside holidays). I can get to London from Bristol for £2.99 via Flexbus.

and finally

When I have finished my holiday I consider it a point of courtesy to write a review in TripAdvisor, I have written about two thousand over the years and I like to think that I have made some difference to the quality of someone's experience.

Anyway folks I hope that has been of some help for you. The summary is, don't feel rushed by pop-ups saying these are the last two rooms, decide how important a sea front hotel is, what to do with your car, and look for unmentioned add-ons.

Happy Traveling

Ed.

My Somerset Life by Brian Snellgrove

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