

# Four reasons not to book your vacation rental through VRBO or AirBnB

## **Once upon a time in Vacationland...**

Susie had a killer vacation home in Machiasport, Maine. Because she wanted to offset some bills, Susie decided to make it available as a vacation rental. Since she loved her home and area, she was excited that she could play 'virtual tour guide and innkeeper' to the guests who stayed in her home. She paid upfront for an ad on a major online vacation rental listing site and happily answered questions about her home and many questions about the area from potential guests via phone and email. When the guest was ready to book, she made payment arrangements, usually through a check or credit card payment.

Once upon a time, Bobby wanted to go on vacation in down east Maine. He logged into a major online vacation rental site and clicked on the region - DownEast Maine. He was given a list of about 200 properties in the area. Bobby was able to narrow down with filters exactly what he was looking for — and decided to choose Susie's home in Machiasport. He had some questions about Puffin Tours and possibly ordering a custom cake for his wife's birthday. He was able to contact Susie and she provided him with the information that he was asking for — phone numbers and websites of tour companies and local bakeries. She also gave Bobby information on how to pay the deposit and he mailed her a check.

## **Today in Vacationland...**

Susie wants to offset some bills so she decides to make her wonderful vacation home available on an online vacation rental listing site (now known as an OTA for Online Travel Agency). Instead of buying an ad outright, she must now agree to pay a commission on every reservation (at a much higher rate than she used to pay for her ad). She must also agree that she will use only the OTA's payment processing system for all reservations.

Bobby wants to take a vacation to down east Maine. He logs onto an OTA and starts his search. There are no regions in Maine and, in his first search attempt, he sees properties from Kennebunk to Houlton to Calais - thousands and thousands of them - vacation homes, rooms in people's home, motel rooms and more.

So he decides to input just one town into his search - Machiasport. The results seem more manageable and he looks at a property and thinks it looks perfect. As he plans his trip and dates, he notices something odd. There is mention of a passport needed for Americans. At closer look, he sees that the property he is interested in is not in Machiasport at all, but in New Brunswick, Canada!

A closer look at his list of Machiasport rentals shows properties in Cutler, Addison and Blue Hill mixed in with Machiasport homes. So now Bobby has to start his search again and take a close look at just where exactly the property is located. Now he knows that a search for a property in Machiasport does not necessarily actually show properties just in Machiasport. But he perseveres. He comes across Susie's listing which looks perfect. But he has some questions about puffin tours and bakeries. He looks for Susie's contact info but there is no phone number and no email, but he can send a message through the OTA, which he does.

Susie is happy to answer Bobby's questions. She knows a fantastic tour company to visit the puffins and knows of an excellent bakery to bake the birthday cake. But she doesn't know Bobby's phone number or email or even his last name. She can only respond to his questions through the OTA system. So she takes the time to write about the fabulous things to do in the area and passes along the info that Bobby has asked for.

Bobby received the reply from Susie. Unfortunately it looks like this...

You can get more info about the company that provides puffin tours at their website: XXXXXXXX. The phone number to the bakery is XXXXXXXX.

Unfortunately, the OTA system blocks out any and all identifying information. So Susie is forced to try again, with a cryptic message -

If you do a google search for Robertson Sea Tours their website should pop up. The phone number to the bakery is 2 zero 7 five 5/5 ninety one o 6.

Susie feels awful because she knows presenting information in this manner is just lousy customer service but it's the only way that she can get the info to the traveler. Bobby decides to book her home. He must pay the rent via credit card through the OTA and is very surprised when there is an additional \$250 fee added to the total amount. That, Susie, explains, is the service fee that the OTA tacks on to the traveler's total. Unfortunately, that pushes Bobby's vacation over budget, so he must keep looking for a less expensive house. (Overall, Bobby has spent about four hours on this rental search so far and still has no rental).

So what can Bobby do to make his travel less frustrating?

## **Book directly from an owner or small management or listing company!**

### **Here are my four reasons to #bookdirect rather than through VRBO or AirBnB:**

1) No Service Fees. Did you know that all of the major online travel agencies add on a service fee to the traveler?

<p>AirBnB</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Traveler Service Fee</p> <p>5-15%</p> <p>with no cap</p>	<p>VRBO</p> <p>HomeAway</p> <p>VacationRentals.com</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Traveler Service Fee</p> <p>6-12%</p> <p>up to \$499</p>	<p>TripAdvisor</p> <p>&amp;</p> <p>Flipkey</p> <p>-----</p> <p>Traveler Service Fee</p> <p>8-16%</p> <p>with no cap</p>
--	---	---

*\*fees and terms subject to change - check the individual sites for the most up-to-date information.*

That's a heck of a lot of lobster and ice cream you're giving up in order to stay at your rental house. And often, these fees are non-refundable if your plans change — even if the homeowner is willing to refund some of the rent, good luck getting that service fee back. Instead of searching on the big sites, look to smaller regional sites who usually don't charge extra traveler fees or try to find the owner directly.



2) Communication between the guest and the owner. Traditionally, sites like HomeAway and VRBO and others were a way to connect owners with travelers who wanted to rent. It was an advertising platform — nothing more. Today, on virtually all of the OTA's, all phone numbers, emails, websites and all identifying information is masked and direct communication between owners and guests is impossible.



3) Avoid Geographical nightmares. At one time, vacation areas were broken up into popular regions. Now, the geographic region has more to do with the secret algorithm of the OTA (reading between the lines — which homes and regions will bring them more money). The actual home location may be in very small print on the listing and a potential traveler may be looking at a home miles from where he may actually want to be. Again — look to regional sites to simplify your search.



4) Know that it's really a home. The newest change to the listing sites are the addition of hotels, motels and B&Bs and inns to all of the listing sites (in addition to advertising spare rooms in occupied homes on AirBnB). Just to confuse your search more, there may be dozens of listings for motels and hotels on a site that claims to be "Vacation Homes By Owner". You may see a photo of a beautiful pool and think you're going to stay in a luxury home. Surprise! You just booked a room at a chain motel.