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Su Casa Es Mi Casa

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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You may not get room service or a terry cloth robe, but what Airbnb vacation rentals lack in amenities, they make up for in unbelievable, sometimes rather bizarre experiences.



Frederik Buyckx

One of urban life's uncommon diversions is the chance to ransack the drawers of an anonymous neighbor. Airbnb is the Internet service, for those of you who don't have a Danish architect leafing through your local Lonely Planet at your kitchen

table right now, that lets “hosts” rent their extra bedrooms or entire apartments, mansions, tiki huts or goatskin yurts to travelers. In only five years, Airbnb has created a marketplace that offers 300,000 listings in 35,000 cities in 192 countries. It’s been so successful that half the tech start-ups these days go around flattering themselves with Airbnb comparisons: there’s an Airbnb for boats, and one for power tools, and probably one that will let you rent out your extra sheep to fertilize somebody’s lawn. Airbnb, for its part, might bill itself as a cheaper, roomier, warmer way to overnight — less deracinated than a hotel, but without the creaky-floorboard unease of a bed and breakfast — but the great unadvertised draw is the chance to spend time amid somebody else’s trappings.

In olden times if you wanted to sleep in strangers’ beds, you generally had to have sex with strangers; Airbnb lets you book their linens from your phone. There’s been a lot written about the “sharing economy”: on the one hand, services like this make for more efficient resource allocation; on the other, they offload what was once regulated institutional risk onto the consumer. But somehow these arguments, which will be worked out in the courts and capitols, have tended to ignore what’s actually weird and interesting about this new mode of travel: Airbnb indulges the fantasy that we might temporarily inhabit another life. It’s in part because of this lived experience that Airbnb guests aren’t just users, they’re evangelists. I recently lit out to sightsee three other people’s lives in three nights in three European cities: London, Stockholm and Antwerp.



Artwork in the London duplex (framed), and the surrounding Shoreditch neighborhood. Gavin Rodgers/Alamy; Gideon Lewis-Kraus

The voyeuristic frame gives some Airbnb experiences a kind of erotic charge, or at least it did during the impromptu Airbnb get-together I somehow ended up throwing in London, where I was staying in a duplex warehouse in Shoreditch. While I'd been waiting in the freezing courtyard to be let in — Hotels 1, Airbnb 0 — I'd read down the list of my neighbors-for-the-night, which read like the billing for a trip-hop reunion: the tenants had such names as Darq and Magnetised. The owner, who was "surfing/working" in Australia, had described the apartment in an e-mail as "a good space to chill and paint, so feel free to paint if you'd like!" Once I finally got inside, the flat revealed itself to be perfectly contiguous with its Shoreditch environment: with its casually abused pleather settees, mannequin torso and panels of decoratively broken surfboard, it looked like one more cafe-bar-bike-repair joint. In Airbnb's spirit of connectedness, I Instagram-crowdsourced descriptions of the owner's artwork; one friend commented that it was "Warhol goes Ke$ha." My bedroom, in a windowless basement, had a stairway that curved upward to meet curtains, which in turn hid a cardboard wall.

I hadn't planned to bring anybody back with me, but the more I talked about the place over drinks at the pub with friends, the more the gang assembled clamored to see it. They could sit around and whinge at the pub any night, but it wasn't often

they got to have a hotel party at a neighbor's flat. "It's 'Queer Eye for the Absent Guy,' " my friend Tom said, flicking the switch that backlit the Euripides bust by the bongos, in front of the skateboard-mounted vinyl couch. The group noted the unreconstructed "Point Break" aesthetic and the fact that everything from the lime-green shag to the wall mirrors had been set at rakish angles. They argued over the rent (probably £4,000 to £6,000 per month), the municipal legality of windowless bedrooms and the merit of the Tesco-brand sweet potato, coconut and chili soup in the fridge. My new friend Anna had never heard of Airbnb, and asked if she could do this in her own flat, up the road in hipper Dalston. I showed her listings on her block. "Do I have to let them use the bathrooms?" she asked.

Stockholm's Gamla Stan (Old Town); the entryway of the Swedish apartment (framed). Michael Robinson/Corbis; Gideon Lewis-Kraus

But the promise of voyeurism can undermine itself: once you've introduced the kind of self-consciousness that results from having to put verified photos of your upholstery on the Internet, at least some owners take down their Euripides busts. It's been increasingly noted that one of the unfortunate surprises of the contemporary Internet is the proliferation of corporate uniformity. This is nowhere more apparent than on Airbnb, where it often seems as though each residence is striving to out-Bulthaup the next. The place I'd booked in Stockholm was an altar to minimalism, showcasing the no-place of international design with the star(c)k

accouterments of a boutique hotel: Vitra chair, antique apothecary bottles, home D.J. kit, paperback of Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom." My host, Erik, who'd e-mailed me from an H&M address, met me and my friend Christian, whom I brought along from London, at the door in a nice-looking outfit recognizable from one of a variety of commensurate urban enclaves: a fitted denim shirt, indigo knit tie and jeans cuffed up over handmade British boots.

Erik didn't seem put out as we inventoried the possessions that had become, by dint of our arrival, decorations: in the foyer, Comme des Garçons cologne and Lonely Planet's "Fiji"; in the kitchen, home-pickled carrots and dried goji berries. Perhaps to compensate for his recent Airbnb experience in New York, in which the host had dropped off the keys and split, Erik very kindly offered to spend the rest of the afternoon showing us around. As we walked in the fashionable Sodermalm neighborhood, Christian asked him what was new in Sweden. "Exercise," Erik ticked off, "and sourdough." By the latter, he explained, he meant a certain consciousness of time, a methodical slowness — foraging for your own mushrooms, going sailing, anything that would get you offline for a while. We strolled through the area where, Erik said, they'd filmed the "Dragon Tattoo" movies, though he admitted with pride that he hadn't seen any of them. "I am also proud to be the last person on earth who hasn't seen 'Gangnam Style.' " The whole experience was an almost cartoonishly apt example of how handily the Internet drove anti-Internet culture: we'd picked Erik's flat for its international homogeneity, but what we got was a meandering day with odd and engaging Erik.

The entrance to the Hypothalamus bar (framed); Antwerp's central square. Gideon Lewis-Kraus; Atlantide Phototravel/Corbis

Antwerp, home of such designers as Martin Margiela and Ann Demeulemeester, is exactly the sort of place where the austere tyranny of international design has made a lot of the Airbnb offerings seem sort of bland — sleek and overcurated. I looked, in turn, for the most deranged-looking option: a “Bohemian” flat crowded with Brazilian antiques that seemed entirely sui generis. My host, Tania, was from Rio, and had just begun to list this apartment, atop a bar that she owns with her husband. They kept another flat for themselves across the street, over their Brazilian-Mexican restaurant. They had decorated the place with work imported from a collective in Minas Gerais, Brazil. On the walls floated jetsam palings emblazoned with disembodied religious limbs: a bloodily outstretched arm over the four-poster bed, a slim cut of a naked torso over the door to the kitchen. There were sculptures made of mounted whale vertebrae, and a coffee table book, captioned in Dutch and Italian, on the life of Steve McQueen. As Tania ran up and down the stairs looking for an entirely unnecessary replacement bulb for the bedside lamp, I gave Erik, of Stockholm, an effusive five-star review on my phone. Christian grumbled that, Tania’s kindness notwithstanding, sometimes you just wanted to check in and get on with it. As far as I was concerned, the place was great, and Tania’s antics were neurotically endearing.

We went over to Tania's restaurant for nachos and fajitas over Duvels before going in pursuit of the "alternative" scene Tania had mentioned to us. We washed up at the Hypothalamus, one of those bars at the end of the world. The '80s pink patterned wallpaper clashed coherently with the Delft tiles. A drunk quartet of clairvoyants took up their instruments and moved from "Proud Mary" through "Danza Kuduro" to "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." (It was our duty as Americans to supply the Axl Rose caterwauls, which earned us some light applause.) A Lebanese leprechaun wearing a neat Lincoln beard collected donations in an inverted cymbal. Fresh out of euros, we threw our remaining kronor into the cymbal, and he bowed. This was precisely what Airbnb travel, at its best, might offer, if you don't mind the waiting to be let in, the agonizing search for a functional light bulb and the voluble owners who, after a long day of travel, stand between you and a drink. But if, despite all that, you've got the foolhardy curiosity to stay in Antwerp's only boho-Brazilian lodging, you've got a decent chance at ending up at the kind of place no guidebook and no concierge in his right mind would ever think to endorse. We toasted to Airbnb's special diminishment of ease in travel. Which, for some of us, isn't a price to pay; it's the reward itself.