



GOOD COMPANY
Ken Green, left, with his house guests. He offers breads, fruit, salad, beverages, and a good laugh.

A Room or House of One's Own

HUNDREDS OF PLACES TO STAY IN THE BERKSHIRES // BY CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN

UNLESS you've been living on Mars, or have been devoid of Wi-Fi, you've probably heard of Airbnb, HomeAway, and other online rental services that help people list, find, and rent homes for vacation or business. Founded in 2008, Airbnb alone has spread like kudzu and now has over 1.5 million listings in 34,000 cities and 191 countries. HomeAway, which lists entire homes exclusively, claims to reach 44 million travelers a month.

The Berkshires has not been immune to the shared-housing

phenomenon. One recent check of several websites lists hundreds of properties in the county. Accommodations range from a bed with shared bathroom to an entire house equipped with gourmet kitchen, swimming pool, and acres of land on which to roam.

Prices vary tremendously in the shared-lodging world. In the Berkshires, nightly rates range from \$60 to well over \$300 per room, not unlike the cost of a room in a traditional bed-and-breakfast or high-end hotel. Charges for houses can well exceed \$1,000 per night.

Guests also run the gamut—from young couples on a budget to senior bargain hunters. And hosts themselves vary as much as their accommodations, except for one thing: They like people.

Ken and Laurie Green launched their hospitality business in September, using their magnificent Gilded Age "cottage" as a "house that likes to live with a lot of people." Guests have the run of an elegant wood-beamed and paneled first floor that includes a large sunroom and living room with grand piano, and

an expansive, well-appointed kitchen. The Greens offer a breakfast of assorted breads, fruit salad, and hot beverages, but Ken says that very few eat. Most of the time, people leave early and return late at night.

The Greens, big Pittsfield boosters, provide their guests with a comprehensive list of restaurants, entertainment, and cultural venues in the city. And they are completely booked for the summer. One recent guest noted: "You come for lodging and leave as friends."

Ellen Lahr is a big fan of her hometown, too—the

"great little village" of Housatonic, with its variety restaurants and shopping. An avid sportswoman, Lahr directs guests to hiking and biking trails in the area. "If you're a traveler with a budget and you want to spend money on activities and shopping, you may not want to spend it on lodging," she says. Lahr offers her rooms only when convenient for herself. "You have to keep your house pretty nice all the time."

David Nailor and Donna LaCasse have been offering their home in Lee since the spring and are currently hosting three international students for the summer. "We've had half a dozen people since spring," says Nailor. "Everybody's been very courteous and respectful. They've shown up and left everything as they found it—if not better."

Not everybody is a fan of shared housing. Some traditional innkeepers worry that the Internet-driven system is not operated "on a level playing field," making it hard for them to compete. Main Street Hospitality Group's Brian Butterworth, whose group operates the Red Lion Inn, says, "They aren't required to have any safeguards in place: insurance, fire protection, things like that. They also don't

pay corporate real-estate taxes, and they don't collect lodging taxes."

While Airbnb's "responsible hosting" page lists safety and regulatory issues that hosts should consider, there is no monitoring.

Tracie Barry, director of sales at Pittsfield's Crowne Plaza, sees the arrival of several new full-service hotels in the area as having a greater impact on bookings than shared housing has.

Competition with shared housing is "not a real problem," says Mary Thibeault, co-owner with husband Bob of the Shaker Mill Inn in West Stockbridge. "We have our own set of loyal customers. We're

a business opportunity—posting their traditional inn rooms on Airbnb.

The Williams Inn in Williamstown, on the other hand, has seen an impact on its bookings. While it still draws its regular, mostly older patrons, the inn's management has found that reservations are down from weddings, college reunions, and graduations. "It's cheaper to put a family of 12 in one house," says Janine Vellucci, catering sales manager.

Lauri Klefos with 1Berkshire says demand for traditional lodging has grown over the last seven years, and with lower gas prices, bookings are on track, even with the dismal past winter. She



FOR RENT

Ethelwynde in Lenox has seven bedrooms, sits on 40 acres and is listed on HomeAway for \$5,400 per night.

always full, and there's a waiting list. In the summer, it's mostly people who have been going to Tanglewood for years; in winter we get a totally different crew—mostly skiers and families."

Entrepreneurial hosts such as the Thibeaults and the Greens in Pittsfield are using the shared housing market as

points to the Solid Sound Festival at MASS MoCA, saying, "There was a real shortage of rooms for those folks." As a consequence, North Adams was the first town in the area to focus on shared housing. In the county as a whole, she adds, "we have more people who want to stay here than we have rooms."

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