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by

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**You Have Arrived: Geotourism and Experiencing Place via Airbnb**

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**You Have Arrived: Geotourism and Experiencing Place via Airbnb**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

### **You Have Arrived: Geotourism and Experiencing Place via Airbnb**

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It is evident that travelers want an “in.” Rick Steves takes readers and viewers “Through the Back Door,” while the *Not For Tourists* series of travel books caters to those looking beyond mass appeal. Airbnb, the leader in a lodging trend called “home-sharing,” builds off the premise of “insider travel” and “living like a local” by connecting a community of hosts and guests via an online network and a trusted brand. It has grown from an apartment with a few air mattresses in 2008 to a business that currently boasts more listings than Hilton Worldwide. Valued at over a billion dollars, Airbnb’s success can be attributed to many things: the power of online networking and community brand-building, the novelty of the “sharing economy,” the fact that Airbnb lodgings are often cheaper than hotel rooms. This paper seeks to determine if Airbnb’s appeal lies in its effect on people’s experiences of place. It also seeks to determine if Airbnb facilitates what the National Geographic Society terms “geotourism,” or “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place.” Because staying at an Airbnb lodging, in most cases, puts travelers in a preexisting architectural structure within a residential neighborhood, in touch with (and profiting) a local host, and in a situation likely to be more environmentally friendly, an argument can be made that it is. At the same time, it is offering many travelers exactly what they’ve been looking for: an in.

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## **PART I: CONTEXT & APPROACH**

### **CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION**

Fifteen minutes off the Pink Line, you amble up a street flanked with brick buildings, the occasional *panadería*, and a local branch of the public library. Spotting the correct address, you pull a crumpled piece of paper out of your pocket and read the directions: “Go through the wrought iron gate to the left and descend the stairs.” Okay, you do. Halfway down a tight gangway, you approach a door and look down. The doormat reads, “You have arrived,” indicating that you’ve found the place, a garden apartment in a Chicago three-flat typical of the city’s residential neighborhoods. This one-bedroom apartment, owned and rented by Paul and Krissy LoVano, a young Chicago couple, will be your home for the next few days. It is as close as you can come—as a visitor—to “living like a local.” By the way, it’s \$59 a night, less than half the typical hotel anywhere near this part of town.

This is an Airbnb experience, but it is only one experience, in one city, with one particular lodging and host. Such possibilities for a very different type of tourist experience now exist in over 190 countries and more than 34,000 cities (Airbnb 2015, About). I hypothesize that this online “home-sharing” community of over 60 million guests and two million lodgings worldwide (Airbnb 2015, About) is changing travelers’ experiences of place. Founded in 2008, the Airbnb phenomenon is not a flash in the pan; in fact, it is revolutionizing the way people live and travel so dramatically it is demanding

that major urban destinations like Barcelona, San Francisco, Portland, and New York City reconsider existing rules and laws pertaining to travel lodgings (Borison 2015, Clampet 2014, Coldwell 2014, Edwards 2013, Frayer 2014, Kassam 2014, Kokalitcheva 2014, Peltier 2015, Soper 2014). Tourism boards and city councils don't know what to do with Airbnb; it is so new, so unique, that rules do not yet exist by which to regulate it.

My research seeks to understand if and how Airbnb, an important trend in tourism related to online networking, community consumerism, and economic relations, is affecting travelers' experiences of place. Relph claims: "To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with the place" (1976, 49). Given the immersive nature of the Airbnb phenomenon—the greater likelihood of staying in a residential neighborhood and in a pre-existing (i.e. not built for tourists) structure, patronizing local small businesses, traveling by foot or public transportation, and interacting with a local host—Airbnb lodgers will likely have and communicate a more "inside" experience of place (Relph 1976). This study also aims to assess Airbnb as a form of what the National Geographic Society terms "geotourism," or tourism that is both culturally and environmentally sustainable—to the advantage of both locals and visitors.

Specifically, I ask:

(Q1) How is Airbnb affecting travelers' experiences of place? Can tourists expect to have more immersive, "inside" (Relph 1976) experiences of place due to Airbnb?

(Q2) Does Airbnb facilitate “geotourism,” or “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents” (National Geographic 2015)?

Airbnb, a leader in what has been termed the “sharing economy,” is treading new ground in terms of business, economics, and policy-making—establishing it as a company and topic of interest for all kinds of professionals and academics. This research, however, focuses specifically on how Airbnb has changed and is changing travel for the traveler him or herself. It aims to determine if the use of Airbnb lodgings results in an improved, more “inside” experience for travelers and if it facilitates more sustainable travel practices (Relph 1976). As such, my research will address an important “real world” topic and fill a major void in tourism geography.

Furthermore, this study adds to the body of research on tourism by examining sense of place established over a brief period. As of now, Airbnb has only very occasionally been examined academically from an economic and/or marketing perspective. As a geographical study of how humans experience places when using Airbnb, this study covers entirely new ground, providing a unique interpretation of the effects of the home-sharing trend: an interpretation determined by looking at it geographically, spatially, and through the lens of human experience. As such, the results will be of interest to tourism geographers and any scholars interested in experiences of place, “insideness,” accessibility, authenticity, and cultural immersion (MacCannell 1976, Nelson 2013, Relph 1976, Tuan 1977).

Besides being a potentially more immersive or “authentic” way to experience new places and cultures, significant impacts are likely to be discovered in the area of sustainability—of built environments, natural resources, cultural character, and livelihoods of residents. As such, it is an important topic to investigate and understand more fully so society can take advantage of its positive effects and mitigate any negative issues. The results of this study could contribute to discussions about how to regulate Airbnb (and other short-term) lodgings, linking it to potentially important developments in city legislation and policies governing hosts, as well as answering the more fundamental questions: Is Airbnb a good thing? Should we contribute to developing and expanding such a service? In short, should we try to make it work?

The sharing economy (which also includes transportation utilities such as Uber and Lyft and is related, ideologically, to resale services like Craigslist and eBay) is likely to affect the everyday lives of Americans for years to come, and Airbnb is paving the way for countless other sharing services. Because of its potential for cultural and architectural preservation and conservation of natural resources, Airbnb facilitates many—if not all—aspects of what the National Geographic Society calls “geotourism”: It incorporates sustainable tourism and ecotourism, offering a way for destinations to “remain unspoiled for future generations” and protecting places’ character; it takes the principles of ecotourism (that tourism should promote conservation) and “extends it to culture and history as well—all distinctive assets of a place” (National Geographic 2015).

Because the sharing economy and Airbnb in particular are still new and developing, little-to-no academic research has been conducted on the topic. Airbnb has certainly become newsworthy, but it has yet to make its way into geographic research. As such, this study of Airbnb as an alternative lodging option and its effect on tourist experiences of place will cover new academic ground. It will impact our understanding of tourism in a changing, modern world—marking the beginning of what are sure to be many continuing studies on the sharing economy and how home-sharing, host-guest interaction, and experiences of place are affected by technological innovations and the “radically hopeful notion” that people want to meet and share their lives, homes, and cities with complete strangers (Helm 2014).

## CHAPTER 2 – EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE

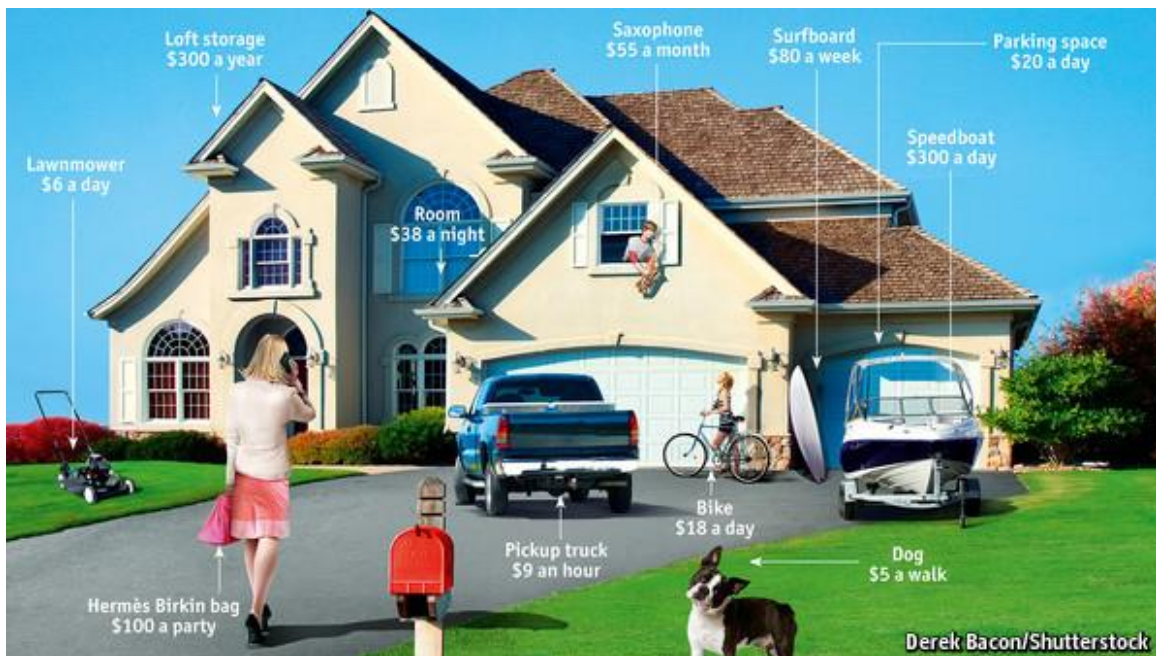
### THE SHARING ECONOMY

#### *Life for sale*

The sharing economy is exactly what it sounds like, a way of managing goods or resources based on sharing. But, rather than the old-fashioned non-monetary type of sharing—e.g. allowing a sibling to stick an extra straw in your milkshake or borrowing a cup of sugar from your neighbor—the sharing economy places a price on temporary loans of everything from cameras and musical instruments (Snapgoods), lodging (Airbnb, FlipKey, HomeAway, VRBO), bicycles (Liquid) and car rides (Lyft, Uber, SideCar), cars (Getaround, RelayRides), dog boarding (DogVacay), clothing (Poshmark), baked goods (Zaarly), even manual labor (such as extra hands to help load a moving truck) (TaskRabbit) (Forbes 2015); (see Figure 2.1). (There are similar sites devoted to bartering or trading goods, as well, such as Couchsurfing, Warm Showers, and Horizon, a hospitality-exchange program focused on community and charitable donations rather than accommodations for a fee (Meyers 2015).) The concept, which operates under and is discussed using a variety of labels: the “share economy,” the “sharing economy,” “collaborative consumption,” “community consumerism,” the “peer economy,” “peer-to-peer services,” or “peer marketplace” is essentially a way for regular people to temporarily rent goods, property, or services to other members of their community (Forbes 2015).

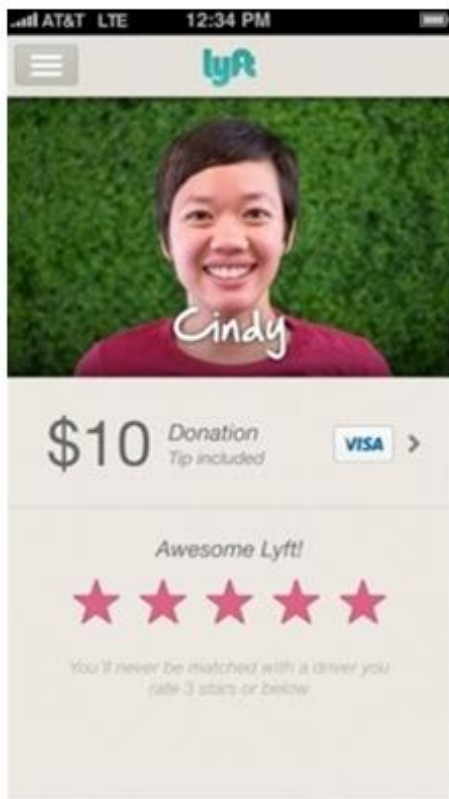


And their “community” can consist of anyone near or far; the sharing economy community connects sellers and consumers from next door to all across the world. A home-owner in Buenos Aires can rent a bedroom to a stranger from Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the same manner that an Austinite who normally drives can find a bicycle-for-rent in their own neighborhood to get around more efficiently and avoid parking during the notoriously crowded South by Southwest. As *Entrepreneur* puts it: “These platforms allow millions to connect and share assets with minimal expense” (2015); (see Fig. 2.1).



**Figure 2.1** “On the Internet, everything is for hire,” image by Derek Bacon/Shutterstock (The Economist 2013).

Part of what makes these platforms—which display information and connect users via websites, mobile applications, or (often) both—work is the fact that user ratings



**Figure 2.2** Example of a Lyft driver profile, with rating and brief review (Apptism 2012)

combined with some sort of online review system allow sellers and buyers to establish trust and accountability (Forbes 2015). Much like browsing for a restaurant on Yelp or a new book on Amazon, sharing economy networks feature user profiles, which come with a number of stars and a list of previous customers' complaints or praise (see Figure 2.2).

Conversely, sellers rate users, as well: everyone involved, on either end of the transaction, is subject to review, creating—ideally—a network of providers and consumers who can count on a level of quality control. For instance, Uber customers can choose to buy a ride

from a driver with a high rating and positive reviews; an Airbnb lodger can expect a good experience with a host and a clean room upon arrival just as an Airbnb host can expect a respectful, quiet and tidy lodger: they simply take their peers' words for it. (Or, if a lodging or guest wasn't highly rated, neither guest nor host will be surprised by a less-than-perfect experience.)

The result is a network of strangers who feel connected by a common interest, an online community, and a brand; the more ubiquitous and popular an app or site's name

becomes, the more it benefits from familiarity-based trust and social acceptance. This type of cooperative economic behavior is stimulated principally by a culture of trust (Fukuyama 1995) and “social capital,” a concept based on the idea that “involvement and participation in groups can have positive consequences for the individual and the community” (Lesser 2000, 44). This social acceptance leads prospective users to go ahead and create profiles—not only because share services are convenient and affordable, but because belonging comes with status.

## **AIRBNB**

### ***The newest thing***

As the “poster child” of the collaborative consumption sector (Forbes 2015), Airbnb has seen considerable success, and the aforementioned social status is no small part in that success. I originally came across Airbnb via mutual friends on Facebook who had posted photos from a recent vacation. These “friends” would be more accurately described as acquaintances, a coworker and his girlfriend: a couple in a similar age group whom I perceived as both “cool” and culturally “with it.” I was intrigued by this new form of vacation rental and found myself browsing Airbnb.com, plugging in locations and dates for an upcoming trip I was planning to the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico. I was astounded to find a place named “Casa Favorita,” an entire home in Mérida, Yucatán, available for \$100 per night. Split between three lodgers (my partner and best friend), we were suddenly each paying \$33 per night to stay in a residential neighborhood (rather

than a tourist strip) with our own private swimming pool, huge bedrooms with vaulted ceilings, and original Spanish colonial tile throughout (see Figures 2.3–2.5).



**Figures 2.3–2.5** The pool (top), kitchen (bottom left), and living area (bottom right) at “Casa Favorita,” Mérida, YUC, Mexico (Airbnb.com)

John Fiske claims that young people, via the “imaginative use of commodities,” can and do repurpose industrialized culture for “subcultural, resisting purposes” (1989, 42, via Chambers 1986 and Hebdige 1979). The average age of an Airbnb user is 35

years old (Hempel 2012), and it's not a stretch to say that throwing an inflatable mattress on your floor and inviting strangers to spend the night for a fee—the genesis of Airbnb in a nutshell—is an “imaginative use of commodities.” In fact, most of the sharing economy is just that: regular people reimagining their possessions and skills—things already at their disposal—as commodities. This grassroots approach to consumption gives Airbnb (and sharing economy) participants the feeling that they are “sticking it to the man,” or doing something in opposition to the status quo. Just as other consumptive practices—for instance, buying socially conscious Toms shoes rather than sweatshop-produced Nikes—“says” something about who you are and what you value, travel choices can be identity-building, as well. The old adage that we are what we eat would be more accurate as “We are what we buy.” Or, at the very least, we want to be and be identified as the type of person our purchases make us appear to be.

Airbnb takes this concept and applies it to the “fashion” of travel lodging. It allows hosts to turn garages, coach houses, spare bedrooms, entire homes, even backyard tents into profit and offers a reimagined product to guests (who choose from listings categorized under “shared room,” “private room” or “entire home/apt”); in doing so, Airbnb gives users a sense of independence and appeals to a crowd of consumers looking for a “new” way to do things. After all, newness itself lies at the core of all things “hip”; it is essential to the selling of both commodities and ideas (Fiske 1989).

While chain hotels—Airbnb's primary competitor—are far more likely to offer the “shiny newness” that Fiske claims is so attractive to consumers (in the form of



modern architecture and squeaky clean facilities (compare Figures 2.6 and 2.7 to 2.8 and 2.9), the shiny newness of an idea—more than the product itself—is key to Airbnb’s success (1989, 42). The contemporariness of the sharing economy and the novelty of Airbnb itself are proving more attractive to many users than a pillow-top Serta mattress,



continental breakfast, and valet parking. (Conversely, Airbnb is also more exciting than typically affordable options like Super 8s and Motel 6s.) The desire to be “up-to-date” pervades American society: It explains



**Figures 2.6 and 2.7** The lobby and security guards (top) and exterior view (bottom) of the NH Calderon, Barcelona, CAT, Spain; note the “plethora of shiny surfaces” and “pervasive use of glass” in the lobby and architecture (Fiske 1989, 39); also see discussion of NH CEO against Airbnb, Chapter 6 (photos by author).



**Figures 2.8 and 2.9** Panoramic views inside (top) and from the balcony (bottom) of Angelo’s “Cozy Loft in center of Barcelona,” CAT, Spain (photos by author)

the endless iterations of smartphones and ongoing generations of gaming consoles that continue to sell—not when the old version breaks (or even becomes obsolete), but when the new version appears. Fiske agrees that there is plenty of evidence that up-to-dateness is a “common desire,” and he contends that it is often embraced by youth and subcultures, in particular (Fiske 1989, 40-42).

Airbnb did start out as a subculture, a group of people willing to “risk” staying with and hosting strangers, but its quick ascension to major lodging competitor is a testament in itself to the strong ideology of progress and Americans’ desire for it. In the same *Inc. Magazine* story that designates Airbnb the 2014 “Company of the Year,” the author states: “Admit it. When you first heard about people renting rooms in one

another's homes over the internet, without much more than a friendly email exchange to break the ice, you thought it was a crazy idea. Maybe a little creepy” (Helm 2014). Creepy or not, it has come to represent the type of subversive text that Fiske asserts is implicit in commodities, even those as formalized and dominant as travel lodging (1989, 42). The same type of people who rethought the concept of fundraising with such “crowdsourcing” sites as Indiegogo and Kickstarter, who started making their own comedy series and posting them to video-sharing sites like YouTube and Vimeo (*Broad City* or *High Maintenance*, for example), and who share and sell music on SoundCloud and Bandcamp were bound to see the potential in subversive collaborative lodging, as well.

The attractiveness of this “ideology of progress,” Fiske claims, “has pervaded the economic, political, and moral domains of post-Renaissance Christian capitalist democracies” that “see time as linear, forward moving and inevitably productive of change” (Fiske 1989, 40). “The forward movement of time and the changes it brings,” Fiske continues, “are then made social sense of by the concept of progress, improvement, and development” (1989, 40). For those drawn to the sharing economy, Airbnb and its world-community of travelers offers just that: a progressive, more highly developed option for their travel consumption.

As a common topic on National Geographic’s “Intelligent Travel” blog and a favorite among savvy globe-trotters like award-winning travel bloggers Larissa and Michael Milne (who claim to “live at Airbnb”), Airbnb is not just a trend in travel, it is



*trendy* travel (Huff Post 2014). People feel smarter, more cosmopolitan just for knowing about Airbnb—let alone using it to do the very thing that makes one a cosmopolite: traveling. In Fiske’s terms, being part of Airbnb’s consumer culture is both “progressive and empowering” (1989, 41): Despite being a business with CEOs, a headquarters, and staff, Airbnb’s power lies in the hands of its users; as such it is an anti-establishment type of travel. Participating in Airbnb culture even comes with a profile, not unlike a Facebook or Instagram account. Airbnb’s primary commodity is lodging space, but another sub-commodity it provides both hosts and guests with is a “legitimated public identity” as someone on the cutting edge of travel. Being a part of the Airbnb community means one is “participating in the ideology of progress” (Fiske 1989, 40). Using Airbnb is, in essence, joining the cool kids’ travel club.

### ***Power to the lodging people***

Besides a sense of being “with it” and traveling in a more respectable, less commercial way than “typical” or “old-fashioned” tourists, Airbnb puts lodging power in the hands of the “producers” and consumers (i.e. hosts and lodgers) themselves: it takes out the middle man. It connects people with people in a way that is both liberating and often more affordable than traditional lodgings. For many, it has opened doors to international travel that were previously closed merely due to financial restrictions. According to Fiske, those in underprivileged positions in the social sphere that are denied the sort of “goal achievements” of those in higher classes—that is, travelers with less

money and therefore prestige—often resort to other means of “establishing themselves in a controlling rather than dependent relationship to the social world” (1989, 42).

In the case of Airbnb, those who previously couldn’t afford a month in Europe, for instance, now find they can (see Chapter 4). In turn, they spend a month in Europe and subsequently consider themselves a more culturally sophisticated person for doing so. Furthermore, their prestige—despite socioeconomic status—may actually leap over those who travel traditionally and more expensively, staying at resorts or using chain hotels. Airbnb empowers travelers of fewer means to take part in a world of international travel that was previously out of their reach.

When asked, “Was Airbnb a cheaper option for you than a more traditional hotel lodging? Furthermore, was your trip more financially feasible because of Airbnb?” one respondent who used Airbnb in Milan, Rome, and Sicily said, “Absolutely” on both counts. Another participant who used Airbnb in New York City, Dublin, Madrid, Rome and Athens, claimed: “Airbnb has been substantially cheaper than hotels and hostels. Had Airbnb not been included in my travel arrangements to Europe it would have taken several more months to save for traditional lodging. I’m sure that I saved hundreds of dollars by using Airbnb. I’ll never stay at a hotel again.” Overall, 91 percent of research participants answered positively to the former question and 65 percent to the latter (see Appendix for full Airbnb Guest Questionnaire).

### ***Grow and tell***

As is the case with much of the sharing economy, many popular articles on the topic of Airbnb exist, but periodicals and blogs have so far been the primary medium for discussions of this relatively new trend. In-depth academic studies on Airbnb—as well as Uber, Lyft, TaskRabbit, etc.—are lacking overall, with a few exceptions in the realms of business and economics. Economists are, of course, interested in how Airbnb is affecting the income of more traditional lodgings and the hospitality market in general (Zervas et al. 2015). In an ongoing study on Airbnb and its impact on hotels in Texas, Zervas et al. found that low-end hotels are most affected, as Airbnb users tend to be bargain hunters; business travelers and those who frequent high-end, four-star lodgings, on the other hand, are likely to continue to do so (2015).

Airbnb, however, is now reaching out to the business traveler, directly courting and signing deals with big-name companies such as Google, Salesforce.com, SoundCloud, and Vox Media (Newcomer 2015). The company has even designed and implemented a human resources-friendly dashboard for tracking company spending, making managing large-scale business travel easy for large companies (Newcomer 2015). A San Francisco-based software development company, Twilio, uses Airbnb during the initial stage of relocating new employees: “That gives them enough time to figure out San Francisco,” says Twilio’s travel manager, claiming that it “provides recruits with a more authentic experience than a hotel would offer” (Newcomer 2015). Airbnb currently estimates 10 percent of its business comes from business travel (Newcomer 2015).

Correspondingly, business scholars seek to understand the power and development of “user-generated” brands (Yannopoulou et al. 2013), examining the impact of community and online networking on building trust and establishing a recognizable “brand” and identity among both producers and consumers. Yannopoulou et al. found that the more ubiquitous a brand name—such as the now-nearly household “Airbnb” or appropriately uber-popular Uber—as well as their icons (see Figures 2.10 and 2.11) and associated images become, the more new users are likely to trust the particular service and become involved (2013).



**Figures 2.10 and 2.11** Uber’s logo (left) and Airbnb’s logo (right) (courtesy of Google Images)



Airbnb, as a popular and ever-growing link between people and place (as well as between geographically disparate people), is fundamentally connected to temporary leisure migration, mobility, and place experience; in other words, it is intrinsically a human geographical subject—and should therefore be studied as such. And “ever-growing” is no exaggeration. Conceived as a way to make extra money by roommates (and company founders) Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia, Airbnb began as “Airbed and Breakfast”—a service offering an air mattress to sleep on and the promise of a home-cooked breakfast in the morning (Crook 2014) (in many cases, the second “b” is no longer applicable). The company now boasts more listings than Hilton Worldwide or

InterContinental Hotels Group or any other hotel chain in the world (Helm 2015). As the Milnes put it, Airbnb has “done for the vacation-rental business what eBay did for just about everything else” (2013).



**Figure 2.12** Still from “Welcome to Airbnb” commercial; for the Airbnb experience in the company’s own words, double-click the icon below to watch:



Welcome to Airbnb.mp4

## TOURISM STUDIES

### *Tourism and shame*

According to tourism scholar Dean MacCannell, “It is intellectually chic nowadays to deride tourists” (1976, 9). He recounts the declaration of an Iranian student of his in Paris: ““Let’s face it, we are all tourists!”” the student half-stammered, half-shouted; then, “rising to his feet, his face contorted with what seemed...to be self-hatred,

he concluded dramatically in a hiss: ‘Even *I* am a tourist’” (MacCannell 1976, 9). Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote: “Travel and travelers are two things I loathe—and yet here I am, all set to tell the story of my expedition” (1968, 17, via MacCannell 1976, 9). And historian Daniel J. Boorstin quotes a nineteenth-century writer who likens “these creatures” to sheep dogs, easily herded and taking cities over in “droves” (1961, 87-88, via MacCannell 1976, 9).

But why such distaste? The simple definition of tourist is “a person who is traveling, especially for pleasure” (Dictionary.com 2015). One might assume, then, that the derision is due to the “pleasure” aspect, that it’s better to travel for educational purposes, for instance. And tourism geographer Velvet Nelson acknowledges that even the study of tourism has “been dismissed as the study of fun” (2013, 1). But the issue of pleasure or fun that comes with travel and “vacationing” is not the issue at the core of the shame associated with being “a tourist.” The problem is one of depth—or, in the case of the modern (and not so modern) tourist, lack thereof. There is an assumption that typical tourists are shallow and are therefore looking for shallow cultural experiences—perhaps even “fake” experiences.

Like MacCannell, I find it interesting the lengths to which people (myself included, see Figure 2.13) will go to distance themselves from this presumed superficiality; he notes a “moral superiority” that inhabits talk and assumptions about tourists and rightly claims that “tourists dislike tourists” (1976, 9-10). Nelson agrees: “We are all familiar with the highly satirized images that have appeared in everything

from classic literature to popular films in which tourists are characterized as overly pale (or conversely, badly sunburned), wearing loud print shirts and black socks with sandals, wielding cameras, brandishing maps and guidebooks, talking loudly, and eating ice cream” (2013, 3). (In figure 2.14, for instance, visitors to Parc Güell can be seen lining up to take photos next to Antonio Gaudí’s “El Drac” sculpture; I opted to get my picture taken facing the opposite direction to avoid the crowd.) Due to this overwhelming popular culture image of the tourist, the word itself has taken on negative connotations. For instance, it is not at all unusual to hear the advice, “Don’t go to [a particular district or neighborhood]; it’s “*touristy*.” We all know what that means: it’s pandering, shallow, superficial, inauthentic—not “real.”



**Figures 2.13 and 2.14**  
An incognito grocery store photo of jamón Ibérico (left), taken with the camera held low for fear of appearing “touristy,” and a reverse-direction photo with Antonio Gaudí’s “El Drac” (the dragon) sculpture in Parc Güell (right), Barcelona, CAT, Spain (photos by author)

One concept that may help explain such assumptions about tourists is that of *habitus*, or an “embodiment of cultural representations in human habits and routines” (Scott and Marshall 2009, 299). Despite our knowledge of what makes a tourist, we still take endless photos at tourist attractions, wear too little sunscreen and get burnt in

warmer climates, and depend on maps, guidebooks, and GPS to find our way in unfamiliar places (see Figure 2.15). These are not necessarily things to be ashamed of, but they are attributes ingrained in the act of travel, and they are widely looked down upon as obvious signs that one is an “outsider.” The irony is that, of course travelers and tourists are outsiders; the very fact that they’ve chosen to visit a place for pleasure and experience indicates that it is new. This is precisely what is exciting about travel!



**Figure 2.15** One of countless similar images elicited by a Google Image search for “stereotypical tourist” (image from “Self-proclaimed Paragon” blog); also see discussion of Martin Parr, page 51.

According to Bourdieu, *habitus* refers to “subjects' internalized system of social structures in the form of dispositions” (Jenkins 1992, 97). In his view, individuals act in “conventionalized ways that are to a large extent the product of the incorporation of social structure” (Baker 2009, 282, via Lui 2012, 1169). Taking the idea a step further, Linguistics and classics scholar Jinyu Lui describes *habitus* as when “a certain behavior



or belief becomes part of a society's structure” so much so that “the original purpose of that behavior or belief can no longer be recalled and becomes socialized into individuals of that culture” (2012, 1169). Urry explains this phenomenon as acting “below the level of individual consciousness” yet “inscribed” within our “orienting practices, bodily dispositions, and tastes and distastes” (1990b, 79). We act like tourists because tourism is the activity we are engaged in; as Nelson says, tourism is “something we *do*” (2013, 3). The doing, then, becomes both a personal embodiment as well as a socially constructed and socially constructing act. In other words, our identities as travelers are not strictly personal; they are very much reflected upon socially by others and those reflections are internalized and repurposed by us, then projected onto other tourists. In that sense, we are all in this together: loving to travel and yet loathing ourselves (and others) for being tourists. Our disdain for these shameful creatures who are “content with obviously inauthentic experiences” (MacCannell 1976, 94) makes us suspicious of those who embody the stereotype—and inspire us to try desperately to distance ourselves from it.

MacCannell believes that “all tourists desire...deeper involvement with society and culture to some degree; it is a basic component of their motivation to travel” (1976, 10). I agree that this is true for many, though I am reluctant to say “all” tourists seek this deeper involvement, as there is a market for purely resort and relaxation tourism, which might not even be called “tourism,” as nothing is being toured. Using Relph’s spectrum of insideness-to-outsideness, this type of tourist experiences “incidental outsideness,” where place is experienced as “little more than a background or setting for activities”

(1976, 52). In the example of resort tourism, that activity might be lounging near a non-descript pool or beachfront with a ubiquitous cocktail in hand; per Relph, this type of outsidersness applies to places toward which “our intentions are limited and partial: (1976, 52). But, yes, with the exception of some purely extravagant resort destinations that are designed to remain relatively culturally isolated—such as Cancún’s “Zona Hotelera” (an area Torres and Momsen refer to as “Gringolandia,” 2005, see Chapter 5)—travel usually involves some desire to see the “other,” to experience something new and “different.”

To that end, MacCannell goes as far as referring to other tourists as his “colleagues” and notes that “everywhere on the face of the earth, [tourists are] searching for peoples, practices, and artifacts we might record and relate to our own sociocultural experience” (1976, 4). Like Mason McWatters, whose *Residential Tourism* explores foreign retirement communities in Latin American “paradises,” I recognize the negative connotations that are tied to the term “tourist” in our society, but have chosen to use the term because it depicts an “identity and practice with which most readers can relate” (2009, 3-4). In that sense, it is not very different from the word “traveler”: the implication is that the subject of the term is in a new, different place than where they usually reside.

“Traveler” is likely the term most Airbnb users would prefer, as the Airbnb community is making great strides to turn the stigma and shame of tourism on its head. It may be redefining—or perhaps avoiding—the terms “tourism” and “tourist” altogether. By connecting guests with local hosts and asserting an image of cultural immersion, having an Airbnb profile and “persona” acts, in a sense, like a travel-specific version of

Facebook: it allows users to say, “This is who I am; this is the life I want people to think I live,” regardless of the reality. In this way, it adds to the social constructivism of travel and “traveler” as an identity, but puts a positive, “hip” spin on what has very often been looked at as a trite activity—unless one is a “serious” traveler, one who makes a living writing philosophical and literary tomes about it, a Paul Theroux or Alain de Botton, for instance. If capitalism demands that we are individualized and competitive in the labor market, and if *habitus* puts a value on distinction and “uniqueness,” then Airbnb helps avoid a “mass produced” experience and thereby lets us feel that we are ourselves less uniform and standardized and therefore more unique and valuable.

If tourism, as MacCannell implies, is a set of practices (1976), Airbnb is reconstructing tourism through a *new* set of practices designed with the “serious” traveler in mind—the one who wants to distance themselves from the cheap and homogenized embodiment that “tourist” implies. Airbnb is taking a global, multibillion-dollar business (Nelson 2013, 3) and putting more emphasis than ever on the *non*-material aspects of travel: the commodity of “pure experience.” Rather than spending time abroad in the ever-more-common “tourist bubble,” “tainted” by familiarity and commercialization—an Applebee’s along the waterfront in La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico, or the ease with which one can grab a Burger King Whopper or Starbucks Caramel Macchiato along Las Ramblas in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain—Airbnb travel experiences are facilitated by a local host and situated, literally, in a foreign home (1976, 21).

### *Explorers and drifters*

In the television show *Mad Men*, a drama about a renowned New York advertising agency in the 1960s, Creative Director Don Draper asks, “How do you say ice water in Italian?” (2009). The answer? “Hilton.” He goes on: “How do you say fresh towels in Farsi? ‘Hilton.’” “How do you say hamburger in Japanese? ‘Hilton.’” “Hilton. It's the same in every language” (*Mad Men* 2009). This is what Americans wanted in travel in the mid-twentieth century, what Draper describes as “the thrill of international travel with the comfort of home” (*Mad Men* 2009). Hotels offer comfort, indeed, but is it really the comfort of home? Or is it the comfort of luxury? Whose home, for instance, features a hypermodern moving-waterfall “wall” (see Figure 2.16), round-the-clock security, and the convenience of room service? The target audience of such an ad might also equate “comfort” with familiarity—the appeal of a guaranteed-to-be-homogenous experience.

**Figure 2.16** Tourists and luggage in the lobby of the NH Calderon, Barcelona, CAT, Spain; note the waterfall décor is moving video (rather than a still work of art); see discussion of NH CEO against Airbnb, Chapter 6 (photo by author).



“We’re not chauvinists,” Draper explains, “We just have expectations” (*Mad Men* 2009). But the expectations of tourists have changed—in a new century and especially among a younger generation of travelers. As mentioned previously, the average age of an Airbnb user is 35 years old (Hempel 2012). The average age of guest participants (hosts were not asked their age) in this study is 27 years old (though it should be acknowledged that convenience and snowball sampling were used, and the author is 36 years of age, see Chapter 3). The thing these younger travelers are in search of is exactly the opposite of what Don Draper is selling: They want to ask for ice water *in* Italian; in fact, they likely don’t want *ice* water at all, because the common Italian way to take H<sub>2</sub>O is *acqua frizzante*—sparkling water. They don’t want fresh towels, either (of course, they do in the first place, but refreshing linens daily is not only unnecessary, it’s discouraged in this type of travel for its environmental frivolity; see Chapter 6).

And they don’t want a hamburger in Japan, either—unless it’s the famed “Kuro Burger,” a black-themed fast-food cheeseburger with black bun, sauce, and cheese (*kuro* means “black” in Japanese) (Hathaway 2014). They are more likely on the hunt for sushi, ramen, or okonomiyaki. In fact, Airbnb guests are often fortunate enough to dine on home-cooked meals with their hosts: one research participant, for instance, remarked on the traditional Greek breakfast served by an Airbnb host in Athens: “I loved it so much that I’ve adopted it as my own breakfast every morning. I still eat a variation of it to this day” (see Figures 2.17 and 4.1, as well as “Eating like a local” in Chapter 4).

On the other hand, Airbnb *does* offer what Draper claims of Hilton: the thrill of international travel with the comfort of home—but it’s not the “home” we’re used to; it’s someone else’s home. The “comfort” aspect comes in because the amenities of home—a full kitchen, often an outdoor space, knickknacks and art chosen by a local residents—are part of most Airbnb rentals. There are also the comforts of standard household appliance: even if you don’t know how to use the washing machine in



**Figure 2.17** An Airbnb breakfast in Athens, Greece (photo provide by research participant); also see Chapters 4 and 5.

your Spanish loft at first glance—there is one, because you’re residing in an actual dwelling, a for-real home, and figuring out that washer with its unusual knob and *en Español* directions is part of the fun of Airbnb.

In fact, the ordinariness—the sneak peek that Airbnb affords into the “regular” lives of local residents—makes Airbnb travel *more* of an adventure: experiencing something “ordinary” means you’re participating in the “real world,” which is more exciting and perhaps riskier (or at least more open-ended) than a “programmed” vacation.

According to MacCannell, “sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived” (1976, 94). That regular, typical, everyday experience is exactly what Airbnb users are looking for, and what staying in a local residence delivers: “Everything in a new place is different and unknown,” says Nelson, which gives us a “greater sense of curiosity and excitement. Activities that seem mundane in our daily lives—driving from one place to another, taking a walk up the street, going to the store, finding something to eat—can suddenly turn into an adventure” (2013, 268).

MacCannell acknowledges this different type of tourist, as well: those interested in simpler living, conservation, and experiencing “authentic otherness” (2002, 150)—those who, he says, actively curb more ego-driven tourist experiences (2002). While some travelers are not interested in “seeing behind the scenes” in places they visit, and a previous generation of tourists may have been placated with “staged authenticity” (MacCannell 1976, 96), the Airbnb wave of travelers is less gullible—and its members pride themselves on this savvy. Airbnb makes it simple for travelers to avoid the “mass” aspect of tourism and skip a grade, so to speak—landing themselves on the “inside” (Relph 1976). They seek the truly authentic, even if that means the totally ordinary. Nelson calls these types of travelers “explorers and drifters” (2013, 270), acknowledging that there is a market wishing to actively avoid the sort of homogeneity that mass tourism and cookie-cutter hotels cater to—thus creating a demand elsewhere. Airbnb is satisfying this demand—and its success is a testament to the strength and numbers of travelers looking for exactly what Airbnb has to offer. Answering the request by countless

travelers to visit places “not for tourists” or “through the back door,” as so many NFT and Rick Steves travel guides have put it, Airbnb offers a new type of travel experience that was previously unavailable, or much more difficult to find.

### *What's in a gaze?*

Tourism and travel are inherently geographic—they involve literal movement of humans across the globe, to greater and lesser degrees, and the exposure of these humans to certain other humans. But tourism geography encompasses a broad range of sub-topics, as well, from discussions of development and sustainability (National Geographic 2015, Cleantech Group 2014) and issues of gendered accessibility (Nelson 2013) to psychological motivations for travel (MacCannell 1976, 2002) and questions of regional development and landscape (Relph 1976). There are, of course, also myriad tightly focused case studies of particular destinations (Ben-Dalia et al. 2013, Edensor 1998) and critical examinations of tourism-affected communities (Torres and Momsen 2005). But most tourism studies, regardless of primary discipline, borrow a groundbreaking concept from sociology: that of the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990b).

The tourist gaze exists in two forms: The romantic gaze emphasizes a private, personal, even spiritual relationship with what is gazed upon (Urry 1990b). The collective gaze, on the other hand, does not mind—in fact, gains from—the experience of sharing the tourist commodity (in an economic sense) with a crowd (Urry 1990b). Urry argues that these social divisions of tourism have a profound impact on issues of congestion and positionality in regard to the tourist economy (1990a). The two types of tourist gaze,



incidentally, bring about conflicting arguments about the preservation of natural beauty—which is inevitably ruined by multitudes of visitors—versus managing and constructing sought-after tourist sights in a fashion that can accommodate congregation (Urry 1990a). There is, of course, the argument that “what a few may enjoy in freedom the crowd necessarily destroys for itself” (Mishan 1969, 142)—that an increase in numbers can only mean ruin.

J.A.Walter brings up the issue of representation and signposting: the fact that consumptive (and often collective) gazes are directed, everywhere, to the “appropriate” end-goal (1982). This reality begs the questions: How much are people’s experiences influenced and shaped by previously embodied images—internalized ideas and information about particular places. MacCannell calls this type of information “markers” (or the signifier) and their objects “sights” (or the signified) (1976, 117, 123-124). Markers help designate certain sights and offers explanation as to what makes them worthwhile to visit. But Walter and MacCannell both question how valuable (or harmful) it is to have the “right” thing to experience pointed out. MacCannell claims that “everywhere on the face of the earth, there are patches of social reality growing out of the collective experiences of tourists” (1976, 141). Attractions do just that: attract. That attraction is based on the social reality created by tourists and markers: literal and figurative signs saying “*This* is the thing to see; *here* is the place to be.” Airbnb doesn’t remove this from the greater consciousness, and Airbnb travelers aren’t exceptions to this rule, but they realize there is value to be found in sights that don’t (yet) have markers.

The Airbnb experience acknowledges free will and individual taste, saying, “You can discover something worth seeing on your own.”

Like Nelson’s “explorers and drifters” many travelers prefer attempting to find their own “treasures” of the places they visit. Of course, some sights of interest are going to be desirable to every visitor—even those seeking a strictly “underground” experience. For instance, the most wayward, obstinate explorer to Barcelona would be foolish to skip La Sagrada Família (and likely wouldn’t), despite the fact that it attracts 2.8 million visitors a year and is the most visited monument in Spain (St. Louis 2013, 84; also see Chapters 5 and 6). MacCannell says, “The actual act of communion between tourist and attraction is less important than the *image* or the *idea* of society that the collective act generates” (MacCannell 1976, 14-15, his emphasis), implying that you *have* to be there with others, in some cases, to achieve the “ceremonial ratification” of a sight. But Relph cautions against meaningless “mass identities” of place that are “beyond the realm of immediate experience” and leave one with “superficial identities of place” (1976, 58)

Despite the undeniable lure of major attractions (and the risk of inauthentic experiences due to their commodification), the desire to gaze “romantically” upon a destination-at-large can often be fulfilled by other, more flexible explorations. Take the same city, Barcelona; while Gaudí’s church must be shared—or gazed upon collectively—wonderful paella, another endemically Catalanian experience, can be had on just about every block. In the case of experiencing culinary and linguistic attributes of a culture—eating tapas and paella or hearing Spanish spoken with a lisp in our

example—the romantic gaze can be fulfilled for many visitors simultaneously—without the crowd-destruction so many fear comes with popular destinations.

Airbnb is one modern aspect of travel that's facilitating the dispersal of gazing tourist eyes, yet still putting travelers in close enough proximity to the Sagradas Familias of the world. Because Airbnb disperses tourists more widely throughout urban destinations by its very nature (see Chapter 5), it naturally addresses the potential problems caused by signposting and the increasingly collective gaze. Those who want to see the "big" sights still will, but they might find that their neighborhood paella place is their favorite (see discussion of Airbnb's "Guidebook," Chapter 5). In enabling these sorts of everyday discoveries, the Airbnb experience also satisfies what MacCannell claims is the true desire of the tourist: to experience a place as it really is (1976). After all, if tourism is essentially the selling of experience, isn't it the hottest commodity a unique one? Fiske, likewise, points out that the most exclusive, desirable commodities appear to be "limited" (1989, 39); they are presented in an environment that employs a "one in million" aesthetic. Although he's referring to the presentation of fur coats and haute-couture dresses in high-end shops, the appeal is the same if you take cost out of the equation: people want something they think others can't have and, in travel, a unique experience is just that.

Indeed, intriguingly, tourism is an industry based around the fact that people will spend money and time on "commodities" they cannot actually possess. MacCannell proposes the puzzling question of how one of the world's largest industries can be based

around a seeming lack of economic rationale (2002). His answer, based on cultural analysis, economics, and psychology, is that major corporate attractions—from areas of urban reconstruction to theme parks and even museums—consistently offer an ego-mirroring component that humans find immensely, narcissistically satisfying (2002). Cohen, similarly, asks what the nature of tourist experience is: Is it “trivial, superficial, frivolous pursuit of vicarious, contrived experiences” (1979, 179), a “pseudo-event” per Boorstin (1964)? Or is it “an earnest quest for the authentic (MacCannell 1976)? From my view, I prefer the middle-ground of J.A. Walter, a sociology and leisure studies author oft-cited by Urry (a sub-chapter in *The Tourist Gaze* actually borrows its title from Walter’s “Social Limits to Tourism”). Walter sees a world full of possibility, the discoveries to be had reliant on the type of traveler in charge: “There are gems to be found everywhere and in everything,” he says, “if only you will get out of your car and use your eyes and ears; there is no limit to what you will find” (1982, 302). This is exactly the kind of democratized exploration that Airbnb facilitates in otherwise signposted tourist destinations.

### ***Saving place***

I’ve just claimed that Airbnb facilitates “democratized exploration.” What I mean by this is the opportunity for individualized experiences that are free to be determined by the wayfinder themselves (i.e., travel “by the people”). The term “democratized” also implies a sense of equality. While Airbnb does help make notoriously expensive and

exclusive tourist destinations more affordable and therefore accessible to “average” people (see Chapter 4), the more important equality might be in the leveling of the playing field when it comes to choices as well as players. It would be foolish to say “all” places are now available travel destinations due to Airbnb, but it is accurate to say that more places are available to more people, due to both price and ubiquity of Airbnb accommodations. While sheer number of people and places does not equal “democracy,” the fact that power lies in the hands of travelers and hosts does. Property-owners *anywhere* can become Airbnb hosts, making their homes suddenly available to the world. The service has hosted over 60 *million* guests in more than 34,000 cities and 190 countries (Airbnb 2015, About), and the search-ability of the Airbnb platform and trustworthiness of its community make these places viable options.

But one of the main goals of this research was to determine if Airbnb facilitates not just an expansion of touristic options, but what is specifically deemed “geotourism.” Geotourism is defined by the National Geographic Society as “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents” (National Geographic 2015). In other words, geotourism has the veritable lifeblood of a place—“the human and physical characteristics...that make it unique” (Nelson 2013, 10)—in mind. It is concerned with the appreciation and preservation of all the living, natural, and material things that contribute to a destination’s identity, as well as what that identity itself depends on for

survival. Geotourism acknowledges not just that variety is the spice of life, but that highlighting that variety, in turn, is invigorating to residents' livelihoods.

Geotourism is related to (and often confused with) ecotourism and sustainable tourism, and both must be understood to move deeper into this place-centric re-envisioning of tourism. As Nelson explains, ecotourism is frequently equated with "nature tourism," though she notes that they are different from a theoretical standpoint (if not often from a practical one) (2013, 55). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (Nelson 2013, 55). The concept springs from the idea that, if tourism can prove as profitable—but not as detrimental—to an area as mining and logging, which degrade the environment and often don't benefit local people, then it could replace such industries with one more beneficial to the land itself as well as those who live there (Nelson 2013).

Ecotourism exists in both "hard" and "soft" variants, the latter being closer to pure nature tourism, or tourism that offers opportunities for appreciation of natural attractions, often with particular attention paid to local flora and fauna. (Sport tourism may combine with nature tourism to form "adventure" tourism, as well.) What makes any of these subdivisions "eco," however, is true environmental sustainability as well as a connection to local people who have a direct stake in the industry in a way that improves their quality of life and "fits with their values and lifestyle" (Nelson 2013, 55). The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural

areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (Nelson 2013, 286). This could mean, for instance, designating an area for hiking and selling local handicrafts at points along the path with scenic views rather than degrading the same area with deforestation or mining. The National Geographic Society adds that revenue from ecotourism should promote conservation directly (2015).

Sustainable tourism, on the other hand, is very literal interpretation of the terms from which it is made: tourism development and management intended to *sustain tourism*. Its goal is that “the demands of present tourists...be met without eroding the tourism base that would reduce or prevent tourism in the future” (Nelson 2013, 23). The National Geographic Society puts it more directly: sustainable tourism does no harm and avoids loving a destination “to death” (2014). Some equate the concept with niche tourism, which Nelson claims is inaccurate due to the facts that niche tourism can be highly *unsustainable*, and mass tourism *can* be undertaken sustainably. Besides destinations protecting their commodity—the destination itself—sustainable tourism also aims to conserve resources and respect local culture and traditions, the latter point including an effort on tourists’ parts to learn local etiquette, courtesy words in the native language, and social customs and expectations (especially those that differ from their own) (National Geographic 2015).

So where does geotourism fall? It embraces ecotourism’s commitment to environmental sustainability, though it may or may not involve nature/adventure activities. In any case, it is committed to “conserving resources and maintaining

biodiversity” in tourist destinations (National Geographic 2015). Geotourism is similarly concerned with sustaining current tourist activities in an environmentally responsible way—as well as planning and developing in a manner that will allow them to continue to offer the destination in an “unspoiled” way to generations of tourists to come.

But geotourism goes further: It places equal emphasis on being *culturally* responsible, meaning tourism that is “committed to respecting local sensibilities and building on local heritage” (National Geographic 2015). Geotourism doesn’t just work to honor the culture and heritage of locals, however; it strives to facilitate cultural exchange between locals and tourists. Residents are encouraged to learn about visitors’ cultures through meaningful interaction with tourists while simultaneously discovering aspects of their own culture to take pride in and showcase as a result of this interaction.

Perhaps most importantly, geotourism is synergistic, meaning it “brings together all the elements of [a place’s] geographical character to create a travel experience that is richer than the sum of its parts and appealing to visitors with diverse interests” (National Geographic 2015). It is not just concerned with sustainability of resources and the preservation of culture, it is concerned with emphasizing what makes a place unique and rewarding visitors and locals who share this aim. It values the tenets of environmentally conscious and economically smart tourism but makes paramount a focus on preserving—and building upon—geographic character, or a destination’s “sense of place” (National Geographic 2015). (See Chapters 4 through 6 for further analysis of Airbnb as geotourism, as supported by research participants and participant observation.)



## SENSE OF PLACE

### *From map to meaning*

Travel and tourism studies are naturally linked to place; in fact, they exist solely because humans are drawn to experience and move through places for various reasons: curiosity, ties to other humans, leisure, business, education (Ben-Dalia et al. 2013, Cohen 1979, Nelson 2013). In determining whether or not Airbnb facilitates geotourism, this study seeks in part to explore the effect of Airbnb on travelers' experiences of place. Of course, a fundamental component of understanding *experiences* of place is understanding *place* itself—almost universally described by geographers as a tricky, hard to grasp concept. Adams (forthcoming) claims that—despite being among the top three most important concepts in geography—place is constantly reinterpreted and redefined, its meaning shifting and renegotiated depending on author, time, and context. Tuan's outlook is perhaps even less hopeful, as he claims “most definitions of place are quite arbitrary” (1996, 455).

This notion of place as something difficult to pin down or define in any sort of exact way might come as a surprise considering that place, as Cresswell puts it, “is a word that *seems* to speak for itself” (2004, 1, emphasis added). However, as is often the case with theoretical discussions of “everyday” words, the existence of place as a “common sense” idea or familiar concept actually complicates matters. Not only does the meaning of place shift from one academic thinker to another, but the myriad commonplace notions of place clutter its meaning, as well, clouding our minds with

preconceived ideas—which is still to say nothing of the influence of personal experiences related to place and their effects on our working definitions of the term.

One commonly employed approach to understanding place is to imagine it as composed of three separate yet interrelated components: location, locale, and sense of place (Agnew and Duncan 1989). By “location,” what is meant is a discrete, particular geographical spot in space, what Cresswell calls “the simple notion of ‘where’” (2004, 7). Place expressed in this manner is often communicated by quantifiable data such as geographical coordinates or perhaps by a name—though place names bring in deeper notions of meaning, symbolism, and representation that take place beyond simple location. “New York,” however, thought of as simply a recognizable spot on a map, would be an example of location just as  $40.7127^{\circ}$  N,  $74.0059^{\circ}$  W is. Speaking of latitude and longitude, Cresswell (2004) does acknowledge that location can be specific and *not* fixed, knowable yet not stationary, as in the example of a ship on a voyage. It is a location where someone can certainly be, but its placement on the globe cannot be defined as easily as suggested by toponymy or coordinates: letters and numbers.

The second component of Duncan and Agnew’s triad is locale (1989). Per this model, “locale” adds material settings and social relations to the simpler notion of a recognizable or nameable location on a map (Adams forthcoming, Cresswell 2004). Locale contextualizes the idea of location, allowing one to think of a particular place as it relates to the communities and individuals who use it and the areas surrounding it. It considers a location as a sum of material characteristics that are “co-constituted with” the

social—which includes rules, norms, expectations, and social events particular to each locale (Adams forthcoming). For Cresswell (2004) and Agnew and Duncan (1989), locale specifically includes such material aspects as buildings and roads, but Cresswell further explores the idea of nested locales, imagining the material aspects of a child’s room inside the locale of a building in a neighborhood in a city and so forth (2004, 7).

Duncan and Agnew’s third component of place is also its most complex: sense of place (1989). “A “sense of place” can be thought of as place as it relates to humans’ capacity to “produce and consume meaning” (Cresswell 2004, 7). The fact that this “sense” of place is directly related to human experience is a clear testament to the subjectivity of its nature (Adams forthcoming). As Tuan says, “emotion tints all human experience” (1977, 8), and this emotional tinting affects our experiences of place just as it affects our experiences in general. Tuan goes on to describe place as a “concretion of value,” an “object in which one can dwell” (1977, 12). Because we can “dwell” in place, we experience it; because we experience it, we attach meaning, emotion, and value to the experience, creating an overall “sense” that is intrinsically linked to ourselves. (This sense can even take the strong emotional form of love, resulting in what Tuan termed “topophilia” and discusses at length in his eponymous book, 1974). For this reason, discussions of sense of place often draw on phenomenological philosophy, particularly Heidegger’s description of human experience as *being-in-the-world* (1962), which echoes Tuan’s assertion of dwelling in place as an essential part of making it human and individualistic. This, in turn, supports Adams’ notion that sense of place is developed as a

result of the “constant interplay” between self and world (forthcoming). Indeed, human beings are, as Casey puts it, “ineluctably place-bound. More even than earthlings, we are placelings, and our very perceptual apparatus, our sensing body, reflects the kinds of places we inhabit” (1998, 19).

Further complicating matters, this world with which humans interact, identify, inhabit, and develop meaning does not necessarily have to be “real.” Cresswell insists—as do many humanistic geographers—that sense of place can and does exist in fictional works, as well (2004). And why not? Just as actual material aspects make up the locale of the child’s room or the city in which it exists, imaginary material aspects (or descriptions of them) make up the world of fictional characters, building a “place” for readers to have an experience. Take, for instance, the sense of place created in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. Readers can envision and, in a way, *experience* the main character Pip’s world; the description of his locales, when combined with the fictional experiences of the character and the interpretation of the reader him or herself (which includes their own preconceived notions of various places and their own place experiences), evokes a sense of place—so much so that generations of readers have all felt “there” with Pip, whether that particular “there” means his flat in Barnard’s Inn or the greater “there” of mid-nineteenth century London or perhaps the “there” of his sister and uncle’s country home in the marshes of Kent. Clearly, these places and a sense of “being there” have been grasped by many a reader, not to mention recreated in countless film adaptations. (And

this is only one example from the great expanse of places and their concomitant senses that exist in the minds of readers, viewers of film and art, and even oral storytellers.)

Moreover, Aitken and Zonn (1994) claim that media have the ability to bring spatially diverse audiences together via shared experiences that are connected by art; they argue that commonalities are formed around themes and ideologies, not to mention beloved (or despised) stories and characters. Tuan asserts that “no two persons see the same reality” and “no two social groups make precisely the same evaluation of the environment” (1974, 5). As such, it is particularly meaningful to individual members of society to discover that a particular form of media has elicited at least a similar response from someone else—especially a stranger. Sense of place is part of these media-based communal (or perceived to be communal) experiences just as identification with the protagonist, for instance, is part of the shared experience. In this way, media such as art, music, television, and film have allowed viewers and listeners to experience the phenomenon of togetherness despite lack of geographical or social closeness (Adams 1993). Arts-based affinity between strangers extends to place—especially when a strong sense of place is present in the artwork facilitating the togetherness and sense of community between fans of particular works. While not “media” in this particular sense, Airbnb does achieve a similar shared “fanhood” and therefore enables users to feel part of an empathetic community—a community of providers and users—thanks to communications technology (as well as through the medium of photography; see Chapter 3 and examples of participant photography throughout). This community—while perhaps

not having senses of particular places in common—is, in fact, built around a fascination with place and the desire to experience and interact with places other than their own. What's more, they want to interact with these place in a certain way: the Airbnb way.

In this sense, Airbnb users contribute to what Massey has termed a “global sense of place” (1994). While many express fears that time-space compression and capitalism are leading to a loss of place and homogenization of cultures (Entrikin 1991, Harvey 2010), Massey asks, “Can't we rethink our sense of place?” (1994, 147). She asserts that, rather than assuming a defensive, place-preserving fear of “outsiders,” increased access and mobility can actually contribute to a shared understanding of the world—and a new knowledge of and appreciation for cultures other than and different from our own. Perhaps a proper understanding of the place of Airbnb requires access to “both an objective and selective reality,” what Entrikin calls a “betweenness of place” (1991, 5).

### ***In, out, and absence of place***

Relph claims that identities of place are found within the links between a place's general and specific attributes (1976). He outlines his own three components of place: static physical setting (natural or built), activities (creative or destructive), and the meaning of places, a harder-to-grasp “component of significance” that is based upon human intentions and experiences (1976, 47). It is this *meaning* of place, in Relph's framework (1976), or the *sense* of place, in Agnew and Duncan's (1989) that this study concerns itself with when discussing travelers' experiences of place using Airbnb.

Particularly applicable to this tourism- and lodging-related research is Relph's differentiation between *inside* and *outside* ways of experiencing place. "It is not just the identity of a place that is important," claims Relph, "but also the identity that a person or group has with that place, in particular whether they are experiencing it as an insider or as an outsider" (1976, 45). The question at hand is whether the nature of place experience is changing as a result of the new home-sharing economy—more specifically, this study seeks to determine if Airbnb facilitates a deeper degree of *insideness*.

Cresswell adds to these concepts the notion of *belonging*, stating that "place" can refer to the properness of something's location or existence: There is an awareness of whether something is "in its place"; we sometimes need to "know our place" in order to act appropriately (1996, 3). Cresswell uses this concept primarily to discuss transgressions of place and the relationship between place and behavior—paying particular attention to how marginalized groups feel that marginalization as a reaction to place and acceptance or rejection in certain social spaces. Here, again, is a link to Airbnb. Being accepted into the home of a local when traveling gives tourists the feeling of being more appropriately "in place": it is something participants cite again and again as a positive aspect of the Airbnb experience: belonging. One survey respondent said precisely this: "I love the fact that my host and their neighbors did not treat me as a tourist" (see more on feeling like a local and host interaction throughout Part II). Relph says that "from the outside you look upon place as a traveler might look upon a town from a distance," but "from the inside you experience a place, are surrounded by it and

part of it” (1976, 49). Airbnb aims to bridge that gap, taking the traveler in so that they can see and experience places in a new way—from an inside perspective that is both considerate and savvy. This new way is advertised as being more culturally immersive and, in turn, better (see Chapter 4). Per MacCannell, “Cultural experiences...are the ultimate deposits of values, including economic values, in modern society”; he goes on to say, “The value of...scenes and situations of modernity...is a function of the quality and quantity of *experience* they promise” (1976, 23, his emphasis). Airbnb promises just that: a more real—and therefore higher quality—experience.

Similarly, Tuan describes what is necessary for a place to feel “intimate”; using examples from literature, he demonstrates that “home” can be found in another human, in an everyday object, or in the recognition of something familiar in art or “real” life (1977). Recalling Walter (1982), he intones the importance of looking out of the corner of one’s eye, away from the prescribed point of interest and further—into the details that make it personal, particular, intimate. These notions will be considered when interpreting Airbnb users’ assessments of their lodgings as well as their interactions with hosts—and the bearing of both on their travel experience (see Chapters 6 and 5, respectively).

While humans can feel “out of place” and “inside” or “outside” of place to greater and lesser degrees, place itself can be lacking details and character to the extent that there is figuratively “less” to inhabit. Relph termed this “placelessness” (1976)—though it is a notion that has been used in varying ways by numerous authors since his 1976 publication. It is also a feeling that—with or without a name—people are familiar with.



For instance, I encountered placelessness when traveling the country by camper van. When not dispersed camping in National Forests, I parked overnight in Walmart parking lots (because it is permitted and free). At one Walmart, I noted the street address was “[some number] Walmart Avenue.” Typically, the areas I would find a Walmart in were shopping districts made of clusters of homogenous chains: Chili’s and Olive Garden restaurants, Best Buys and Bed, Bath, and Beyond stores that all looked the same. Once in the shopping cluster, there was usually little to indicate any specific part of the state or even country. Besides native plant life or obvious landscape clues (like the Rocky Mountains behind a Walmart in Frisco, Colorado), I would have not have had any clues to my whereabouts. This is a placeless experience.

But placelessness doesn’t necessarily have to do with recognizable-but-nonspecific chain stores or homogenous consumer developments. Nelson—a more recent author to discuss Relph’s concept of “placeless geography,” or settings that lack individual character, having “both a look and feel of sameness”—includes a photo of wooden lounge chairs all along a palm tree-lined white-sand beach in *An Introduction to the Geography of Tourism* with the question: “Is there anything about this scene that might give you a clue as to where it is?” (2013, 264). There are no people in the photo, either, and nothing to distinguish which paradisiacal vacation spot this is from the countless beaches with loungers and palm trees. Kunstler’s *The Geography of Nowhere* (1994) and Augé’s *Non-Places* (1995) extend the idea to include chain hotels as homogenizing factors of placelessness. In fact, Kunstler derides hotel complexes as

“Orwellian” (or antiutopian) (1994, 2), and Augé goes so far as to say “the traveler’s space may be the archetype of *non-place*” (1995, 70)—indicting airports, supermarkets, and motorways along with hotels.

Tourists often seek familiarity to help them feel more comfortable in a world that is “different,” and carbon-copy hotels—while achieving this goal—eliminate the “depth of meaning” associated with unique places (Nelson 2013, 264). There is, after all, a reason certain areas are called “tourists traps”: travelers feel they’re “caught” in something inauthentic, expensive, or over-crowded. Nelson (2013), Urry (1990b), Walter (1982), and Relph (1976) all discuss—and, to some extent, disdain—mass tourism as responsible for, if not ruining places, reducing their enjoyableness and authenticity. Nelson says mass tourist destinations are “typically characterized by multinational companies that build resorts and restaurants in the same style and offer the same services regardless of location” (2013, 267)—resulting in placelessness and reducing travelers to “passive observers” rather than participants (Nelson 2013, 270). Urry, discussing Mishan, reiterates concerns that “geographical space is a strictly limited resource” and highlights the pessimistic (or realistic) view that the “next generation will inherit a world almost bereft of places of ‘undisturbed natural beauty’ (Mishan 1969, 142, in Urry 1990b, 40). This degradation of place doesn’t threaten only natural beauty or highly visited tourist attractions, either. Zukin (2011) and Jacobs (1961), for instance, lament the decline of diversity and authenticity in urban spaces, as well, citing gentrification, standardization,

and homogenous development as culprits—and, in Zukin’s case, the detrimental effects of marketing diversity as a place attraction.

While Relph criticizes media, advertising, and “opinion-makers” who support superficial mass identities and, in doing so, destroy the “bases for identity with places” (Relph 1976, 58). He does offer a glimmer of hope, admitting that with “considerable...social effort” we might be able to transcend the “superficial and trivial identity for places which increasingly pervades all our experiences of places” (1976, 59). While my outlook is not so gloomy, I *have* been using Airbnb for the last two years. Rather than superficiality, I have been privy to travel experiences that celebrate something closer to what Jane Jacobs described as cities’ “flourishing diversity” and ability to “sprout strange and unpredictable uses and peculiar scenes” (1961, 238). Like Jacobs, I and the Airbnb users I surveyed and interviewed are looking for—and delighted by—the unpredictable and “strange” in our travels; we see these attributes not as drawbacks but as “the point” of travel itself (1961, 238).

## **FLEETING GLIMPSES**

### ***Ephemeral experiences***

Having a true experience with place—or being able to develop the meaning associated with a sense of place—has often been said to require something tourists often do not have: time. Tuan sets forth the problem of experiencing intimacy in “vacation” places or away from “a whole world of known sights, sounds, and smells” (1977, 147).

That said, he does acknowledge that human interaction can yield intimacy (see Chapter 5). Typically, human geographers agree that “sense of place is rarely acquired in passing. To know a place well requires long residence and deep involvement” (Tuan 1975, 164).

While Nelson (2013) observes that traditional human geographical research on the experience of place has focused primarily on the familiar, with little attention paid to how people (in this case, tourists) experience “new” or less familiar places, she isn’t as definitive as Tuan; rather, she approaches the question of whether a person can develop an understanding of a place’s identity without residing there for some time as just that, a question (2013). As a tourism geographer, it is more advantageous to think people can achieve a sort of temporary rootedness, an in-depth place experience despite fleeting temporality. But it is also important to note that tourists are not seeking—and will not find—a universal “identity” for a place. The question remains: Can a tourist develop and attach a sensitive and particularistic meaning to a place based on a short-term visit?

This study assumes that a sense of place *can* be developed in the course of a vacation or short visit. It may not have the same significance or as nuanced a meaning as a sense of place realized over longer residence and experience, but if sense of place builds on “locational and social elements” to create an “organized world of meaning” (Adams forthcoming, 7; Tuan 1977, 179), we can assume that those elements exist regardless of time spent and that the resulting “world of meaning” may be created by various people in varying degrees and depths. Philosopher Edward S. Casey claims, “Local knowledge is at one with lived experience”; if one accepts that tourists are living

experiences, then even they can be said to be gaining little bits of local knowledge (1998, 18). Additionally, if Airbnb users are living a more local experience when traveling due to deeper immersion in residential areas (Chapter 6) and interaction with local hosts (Chapter 5), they are perhaps gaining even more knowledge. Casey goes on to say, “To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in” (1998, 18). By staying with—and living like—a local (see Chapters 4 and 5), even for a short time, then, is to know a place better than the typical tourist who is further outside the local. Granted, some aspects of local identity become standardized, homogenized, and, in many cases, marketed. But residing with a local optimizes a place experience beyond these aspects.

***See your selfie on the road***

If tourism is “fundamentally based on the temporary movements of people across space and interactions with place” (Nelson 2013, 8), and taking photographs is “almost obligatory to those who travel about” (Sontag 1977, 162), then it naturally arises that tourists take photos. (In our modern world of smartphones that double as cameras, this has culminated in the invention of the “selfie stick,” a telescoping wand to hold one’s phone at a distance with a button for triggering the camera feature itself.) But it doesn’t take a logical statement to arrive at this conclusion; we all know it to be true. The stereotypical tourist-photographer has been made fun of via a variety of media, perhaps most famously in Martin Parr’s *Small World*, a collection Amazon describes as capturing

“global tourism and the tourist’s search for authentic cultures that are themselves destroyed in that search” (Amazon.com 2016). There is a simultaneously hilarious and sad affect in Parr’s photographs, which themselves often depict people behind the camera. They are at once a critique of and a joke about the typical tourist—the one who is so caught up in capturing a preserving an “experience” that they fail to have one altogether.

MacCannell (2002) and Urry (1990a) both point out the fact that tourism is really the only industry in which people spend (and make) money off commodities that cannot actually be possessed. MacCannell, in particular, puzzles over the question of how one of the world’s largest industries can be based around a seeming lack of economic rationale, arriving at an explanation based on the narcissistic satisfaction of ego-mirroring behaviors (2002). He also notes that such explanations for tourist activity do not necessarily apply to those interested in simpler living, conservation, experiencing “authentic otherness,” and actively curbing the demands of their egos (MacCannell 2002). This is a fascinating argument regarding travel motives when taking Airbnb into account, as users and hosts create an online identity for themselves (not unlike Facebook or other social media) and clearly construct and associate some aspects of their self-image with their “membership” in the Airbnb community; there is a sense that being involved in Airbnb is something to be proud of.

But how do we “capture” experience? Per Susan Sontag, “photography is “acquisition”: a photographic images can act as the “surrogate possession of a cherished

person or thing” and may also be possessed “as information (rather than experience)” (1977, 155-156). When it comes to travelers documenting their experience with photographs, Sontag would argue that the resulting images are extensions of the subject itself—not to mention the photographer (1977, 155). In this way, photography is “a potent means of acquiring [and] gaining control over” subjects (1977, 155). So it follows that photographs are very often a tourist’s way of “possessing” the experience of travel. As Sontag puts it: “Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality” (1977, 163). Then that reality can be cherished on a personal level (used to remember an experience, for instance) or shared in a public way, to tell to the world (or just your Facebook friends): “I was there.” “The camera is indispensable to the tourist, for with it he can prove to himself and to his neighbors that he has actually been to Crater Lake” (Tuan 1974, 95).

We’ve established that travel is an activity—the literal movement of humans across the earth. But, more and more, the physical activities of tourists—their actual positioning across geographic space—is becoming not only apparent to the rest of the world, but *broadcast* intentionally due to what Wilson terms “conspicuous mobility” (2012, 1268). This “peculiar form of geographic information” refers to the fact that people are developing the desire to let the world know not just where they’ve been, but where they *are*—via “checking in” online (Wilson 2012, 1266). As such, tourists are taking—and sharing—more photos than ever, and they’re perhaps more self-conscious than ever about the photos they do share: Their online personas depend on it. As discussed earlier, travel, especially of the nouveau high-brow culturally-immersive

Airbnb nature, is a source of prestige—something to brag about. Social media and photography make bragging and showing travel off easier than ever (more on photography as a research method in Chapter 3).



## CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY & PARTICIPANT DETAILS

### WHEN, WHAT, WHERE, HOW...

#### *Good intentions*

At the outset of this study, my goal was to determine if—and how—Airbnb is changing the way travelers experience place. More specifically, I aimed to discover if tourists could expect, generally, to have more immersive, “inside” (Relph 1976) experiences of place due to using Airbnb—especially when traveling abroad, a situation that tends to make travelers have more stress and anxiety due to language barriers, distance from home, culture shock, and generally feeling out of place (Nelson 2013). I set out to answer these questions and to determine if Airbnb is facilitating what the National Geographic Society calls “geotourism,” or “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents” (National Geographic 2015).

My research set out to assess the effects of Airbnb use on travelers’ experience of place particularly in urban settings and/or major tourist destinations, with a focus on Barcelona and Cancún. As will be discussed in more depth in Part II, I chose Barcelona because it is a major tourist destination where Airbnb had recently come under fire due to unlicensed short-term rentals (Frayser 2014, Kassam 2014, Kokalitcheva 2014, O’Sullivan 2015) (see Chapters 6 and 7). As a known “mass tourism” destination notorious for “packaged” vacations (Nelson 2013, 48; Torres and Momsen 2005), Cancún seemed like

another interesting setting for Airbnb. I wanted to see if an “inside” experience of place was possible in such a marketed-for-outsiders destination.

This research assumed a constructivist worldview, aiming to “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Cresswell 2014, 8). Commensurate with much humanistic geographical research, it also embraced a phenomenological approach, focusing on the “lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Cresswell 2014, 14). In this case, the phenomenon being examined was participants’ experience using Airbnb and its related effect on their travel experience as a whole. Questions specifically focused on their takeaway “sense of place” regarding the site they visited and how they felt Airbnb affected that. Echoing philosopher Edward S. Casey, I felt “a phenomenological approach...in its devotion to concrete description, has the advantage of honoring the actual experience of those who practice it. As Kant insisted, ‘There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience’” (1998, 16).

I intended to interfere as little as possible with participants’ experience using Airbnb and then extract information regarding their perceptions of the experience—particularly how “inside” or “outside” they felt and how immersive or local their experience was. As such, I contacted all participants after they had already stayed in at least one Airbnb lodging and asked for after-the-fact descriptions of their experiences, including a survey that allowed for some qualitative data gathering as well as qualitative,

open-ended questions and the option to submit photographs from travel experiences using Airbnb (see Appendix for surveys).

I initially set out to compare hotel and Airbnb lodgers in Barcelona and Cancún; by limiting the research to these two locations, I hoped to streamline the data in a way that would be immediately comparable and elicit strong, conclusive results. The idea was to compare mental maps drawn by each type of lodger in each city. (I did elicit three mental maps of Barcelona, see Figures 5.14–5.16). I would also compare photographs from travelers to each study site, divided by lodging type. I planned to use only English-speaking American tourists and wanted to focus as much as possible on people traveling for leisure, what I defined as “tourism/sightseeing” on guest surveys (see Appendix A), rather than business or what's called "VFR": visiting friends and relatives (Ben-Dalia et al. 2013, Nelson 2013; also see Figure 3.2).

### ***Revised reality***

After visiting Barcelona and Cancún in the summer of 2015<sup>1</sup>—and failing to recruit more respondents via TripAdvisor (despite sending a total of 291 messages to hotel lodgers in each city)—I concluded that I had not acquired enough participants to conduct the research as I had intended: comparing two discreet groups of travelers in two specific locations. So I revised my research approach to include Airbnb guests who, while still English-speaking Americans, had used Airbnb in locations all over the world

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork funded in part by a Robert E. Veselka Endowed Fellowship for Graduate Research Travel.

(see Figure 3.1) and in lodgings ranging from single family homes and apartments to a Moroccan *riad*, a canal boat, and a greenhouse. I asked guest participants a variety of questions that all essentially got at the similar idea of immersion, cultural authenticity, and “insideness,” with questions also specifically focused on affordability, architectural preservation, and their experiences interacting with local hosts (see Appendix A). Guests were invited to share stories about and photographs of their experiences; stories had no length limit and were optional—meant to gain insights to guests’ experiences that might not have come across via the standard questions in the rest of the survey.



**Figure 3.1** Worldwide map marking every location a guest participant stayed at an Airbnb lodging (map created by author using ZeeMaps.com)

I also surveyed my own Airbnb hosts as well as hosts recruited via various online tools (which are discussed in more detail below). I included questions about how much Airbnb contributes to hosts' incomes, what type of expenditures they made on utilities, and what their favorite part about hosting is. I also inquired as to safety, legality, and neighborhood problems that may have arisen due to their hosting, asked if they owned their rental spaces (and were therefore renting them legally), and if they used Airbnb as a guest, as well. The questions were designed to see what the benefits to hosting are, if any, and what types of challenges arise as a host. They were also crafted to determine how much the reality of hosting reflects headlines that often paint Airbnb lodgings as illegal, unsafe, and a nuisance to neighbors, and against the welfare of cities and landlords (see Appendix B for full host survey).

More in-depth in-person and email interviews were conducted with my own Airbnb hosts, who were considered "key informants" working in a professional capacity. I spoke with one additional key informant, a tourist information clerk in Barcelona.<sup>2</sup>

### *On the use of photography*

I invited guests to submit photographs because, as Sontag points out, "To photograph is to confer importance" (1977, 28). Specifically, I gave guest participants this direction: "Attach one photo from your trip(s) that demonstrates something particularly 'Airbnb' about your travel experience. This could be as straightforward as a

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<sup>2</sup> Research involving human subjects approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin, Protocol Number 2015-03-0080.

photo of your accommodation, for example, or something along the lines of a neighborhood park you visited that was near your lodging or a photo of you with the bartender of a local watering hole you visited due to a host recommendation.”

Of course, as Rose points out, visual renderings of the world—even the photograph, an “optical-chemical (or electronic)” *reality* of sorts (Sontag 1977, 158)—are “never innocent” (2001, 2). They are still “richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them” (Sontag 1977, 180). Although one must recognize that photographs are “always context-specific” (Rose 2011, 300) and not necessarily “evidence of the real,” they are nonetheless compelling—and offer participants another way to express themselves and their travel experience other than through words or answering questions on a form. These representations are just as real as—if not more so—than the survey responses. I say this because they were taken without the directive of communicating something particularly “Airbnb” (that is, as a regular “vacation photo”) but later decided to be indicative of the Airbnb experience. There is something inherently nonchalant, even innocent, about their creation as pertains to this study. They were in existence before being requested, representing something real and capture-worthy to the camera operator. And, as Sontag says, “photographic images” are “more real than anyone could have supposed” (1977, 180).

Both interesting and true is Sontag’s statement that “knowing a great deal about what is in the world...through photographic images” often leaves travelers “disappointed, surprised, unmoved when they see the real thing” (1977, 168). I had this experience

myself when, as a 16-year-old on a high school trip to England, I and my fellow busload of students were told by our tour guide not to say we thought Stonehenge would be bigger; I recall beholding it and turning to my best girlfriend, April, and both of us whispering to the other: “I thought it would be bigger.” Similarly, before leaving for my Barcelona fieldwork, a professor in my department mentioned that Barcelona was the only European city he had visited that “lived up to expectations”—some of the expectations, no doubt, due to the amazing photography available of Barcelona’s many Gaudí structures.

Sidaway (2003) and Rose (2001) both acknowledge the long history photographic images have in geographical fieldwork, but they also urge researchers to consider processes of representation: What was the photographer trying to capture? And how—in contrast (or not)—do we interpret those photos and intentions as researcher? (2003) Per Rose, “Geographers argue that photographs are not simply mimetic of the world they show. Rather...the production, circulation and consumption of photographs produce and reproduce the imagined geographies of the social group or institution for which they were made” (2000, 555). This, surely, is true of the Airbnb community as it would be of any other social group. However, it must also be noted that—while the images provided by guests participants might have been shared via online media sites such as Facebook and Instagram—they were elicited here with a directive: show me what Airbnb is to you.

## **AND WHO?**

### ***Participants in detail***

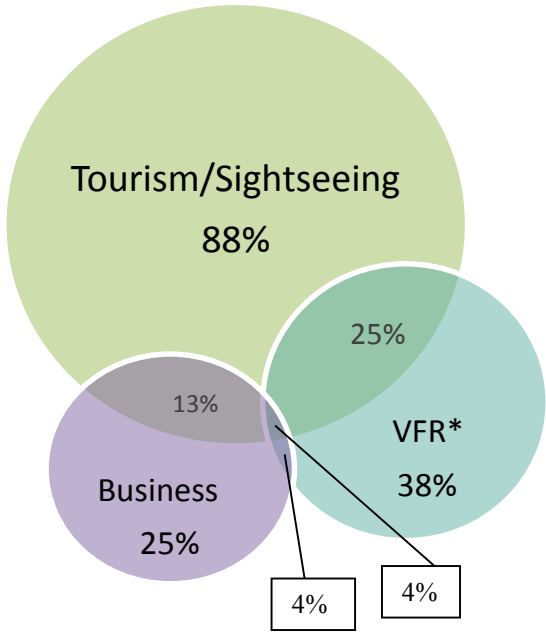
I ended up with 40 total participants, 27 guests and 13 hosts. These participants were elicited using flyers, handouts, and in-person recruitment in airports and at major tourist attractions in the original research sites; such web tools as Reddit, Facebook, Trip Advisor, and contacting travel bloggers through their own sites; convenience sampling of colleagues and snowball sampling from there. My guests ranged in age from 19 to 55 with every participant other than either of the extreme ends were in their twenties or thirties. Sixteen guest participants were women (supporting Nelson’s claim that “more females [are] traveling than ever before (2013, 77), 11 were men; the gender breakdown of hosts was seven men and five women, and one couple (though the woman was the primary communicator). Guests’ professions ranged from forestry management, stay-at-home dad, and pizza delivery driver to attorney, IT architect, software developer, nurse, carpenter, electrician, and several university students (undergraduate and graduate). Blue collar, white collar, and “no collar” (the stay-at-home dad and students, for instance) were all represented, even in such a small sample. Furthermore, the majority of guests used Airbnb for “tourism/sightseeing,” with some mixed-use response (see Figure 3.2).

I also conducted observations as a participant myself, using Airbnb as much as possible for over two years (see Figure 3.3). My Airbnb guest locations include: Mérida and Progreso, Yucatán, Mexico; two separate lodgings in Cancún, Quintana Roo, Mexico; two separate lodgings in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain; two separate lodgings in



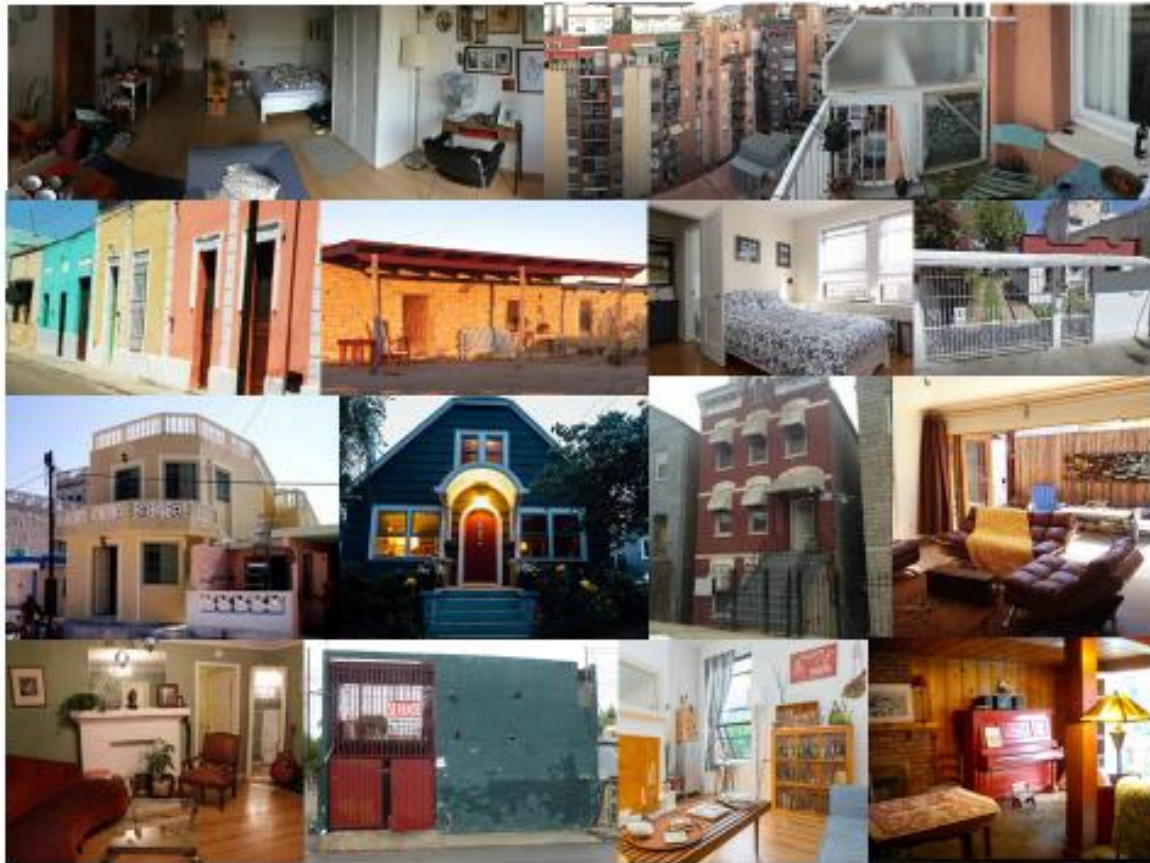
**Figure 3.2** Venn diagram showing reasons for travel among guest participants (created by author)

\*VFR = visiting friends and relatives



Chicago, Illinois; as well as other domestic lodgings in Seattle, Washington; Terlingua Ghost Town, Texas; Brooklyn, New York; and Burbank, Venice Beach and San Francisco, California.

Throughout Part II, I will analyze the results of participant surveys and interviews and draw conclusions based on those results and my own experiences using Airbnb. Each section explores a particular aspect of the Airbnb experience that supports the claim that Airbnb does facilitate geotourism: Immersion and Affordability, Spatial Dispersion and Host Interaction, and Architectural and Environmental Preservation. Each section also begins with a brief autobiographical vignette encapsulating an Airbnb experience that is indicative of the topic to be discussed further using participant responses.



**Figure 3.3** Collage of all the author's Airbnb lodgings. Top row: both Barcelona, CAT, Spain. Second row: Mérida, YUC, Mexico; Terlingua Ghost Town, TX, USA; Chicago, IL, USA; Cancún, ROO, Mexico. Third row: Progreso, YUC, Mexico; Seattle, WA, USA; Chicago, IL, USA; Venice Beach, CA, USA. Fourth row: Burbank, CA, USA; Cancún, ROO, Mexico; Brooklyn, NY, USA; San Francisco, CA, USA (photos by author or from Airbnb.com)

## **PART II: RESULTS & ANALYSIS**

### **CHAPTER 4 – IMMERSE YOURSELF: GETTING THERE AND FITTING IN**

A former coworker of mine once told me, “I haven’t really traveled much because I’ve never had much money.” I shook my head in commiseration. That was before Airbnb was on my radar. Now, travel *can* happen “on a shoestring,” as a popular series of Lonely Planet travel guides puts it. Airbnb is often more affordable than traditional hotels; that’s why many travelers initially visit the site. It’s only after they see what they can get “on a shoestring”—apartments and homes belonging to actual residents, featuring all the personal details and real-life accommodations that a local would need in their everyday lives—that they realize Airbnb offers more than just a good deal. It offers a way to “live like a local” once you get where you’re going.

#### **LIVING LIKE A LOCAL**

*SUMMER 2014: MÉRIDA AND PROGRESO, YUCATÁN, MEXICO; SUMMER 2015: CANCÚN, YUCATÁN, MEXICO*

*My Mérida is brightly colored walls, far too high to see over, surrounding every residence, making skinny dipping not a possibility, but a given. It’s practicing Spanish with the shopping mall hustlers, knowing they’re just trying to take us to the place with*

*the turquoise and amber jewelry, the hammocks and Mexican vanilla and bottles of xtabentún, that anise and honey liqueur of the Maya, but enjoying the small talk anyway. It's eating with the hip kids packed between green tile walls into Pizzeria de Vito Corleone, drinking too many Indios but still remembering that when they say "salchicha" they mean hot dogs, not Italian sausage. It's standing in a windless corridor behind 20-some people, waiting to use the ATM, sweat running in droplets down strands of my best friend's hair and falling onto the white cotton of her blouse; it's taking a little too long to type in my PIN and accept the fee and choose a denomination because the ATM booth is air-conditioned. I don't feel guilty because everyone else does the same thing.*

*My Progreso is a three-story rooftop "patio" you have to dodge a downed power line to access. It's being eaten alive after a huge downpour by more mosquitos than I ever hoped could exist in one place. It's sitting on the beach, alone during a weekday, and watching cars drive four miles back and forth down the longest pier in the world. It's beautiful blue tile and iguanas in the backyard and getting the clerk at the Bodega Aurrera to retrieve a bottle of whiskey for me, presenting a little card from the liquor department; it's marveling that you can get a motorcycle at the same place where you buy booze, toilet paper, and little marshmallow cookies called arco iris—rainbows.*

*My Cancún is pre-teens dancing and singing to Abba and Queen, belting out proclamations of sexuality and romantic desire and being barked at by an instructor who chose these songs because they mean so much. They do it every weeknight, getting ready for their big end-of-summer tribute spectacular. It's the incessant rain and sandia aguas*

*frescas and quesadillas that are unlike any other and the hostel-focused mini super, with its cigarettes, TP, booze, and toothpaste—anything a transient degenerate might need. It's walking to Parque Las Palapas to get a cup of elote and watch the neighborhood kids drive little plastic vehicles—decked out in lights and themed for boys and girls—all around the plaza in a super-low-speed miniature demolition derby every night.*

*My gas station is the ubiquitous Pemex with hot sauce-soaked chips and the wedge-shaped sandwich unit we're all familiar with, but instead of egg salad or turkey and cheddar, it's jamón, cream cheese, and jalapeños—just a little more Mexican than 7-Eleven. It's tables outside flanked by cactus wrens singing from high up on the palm trees, begging for crumbs while you're there and coming to get them the moment you leave. It's bacon-wrapped hot dogs and federales riding in pickup trucks, carrying huge guns but happy to give directions.*

*This is Mexico via Airbnb. This is my Mexico.*

### ***Belong anywhere***

One of Airbnb's biggest advertising campaigns boasts the slogan "belong anywhere," promising travelers an often hard-to-find feeling when abroad: that of belonging—experience place as if you lived there. Another claims you are "never a stranger" when using Airbnb (a tactic perhaps meant to assuage fears about staying with people who, despite being part of the shared Airbnb community, are, indeed, strangers (Beer 2015). As most travelers—especially international travelers—know, sudden

displacement in a foreign environment can be stress-inducing, disorienting, humbling at best. “Belonging” is often not the primary emotion experienced when one finds themselves thrust from an airplane into a completely different culture. Airbnb claims to allow travelers to feel more “at home” when traveling abroad, thus “belonging” as an insider rather than sticking out and calling embarrassing attention to themselves as outsiders.

It must also be acknowledged that “belonging” is exactly what some travelers seek—and perhaps find—by booking lodging in tourist districts at familiar chain hotels. This type of belonging, however, champions familiarity and a sense of comfort gained from recognizing one’s own culture in a foreign place (for instance, booking at resort in Cancún that is filled with Americans is, of course, going to help an American visitor feel as if they “fit in” with their immediate community, but it could be argued that this is only a travel experience in that it literally takes one from a certain place to a certain other place; that is, the body has *moved*, but the experience of cultural exchange is not taking place. This type of traveler—knowing they are surrounded with similarly displaced persons (i.e. tourists) and having the option to dine at a recognizable chain from home like Applebee’s or Burger King—feels more “at home.” Because of this, they may feel they “belong” more than they would if plunged into a lodging environment filled with foreigners rather than fellow Americans (in this instance). The twist on this that Airbnb is trying to deliver is the feeling of belonging and being “at home” when actually immersed in a foreign city and living *among* foreigners. For those seeking an authentic, culturally

immersive experience, “belonging” is often not possible. Or, at least it had been harder to find prior to the existence of Airbnb.

Belonging, for some, can be attributed simply to the ability to blend in. Keller, a 26-year-old pizza delivery driver and substitute teacher, relayed this anecdote: “It helped to have a place that felt like a home when you’re so far away from your own. Especially with how my anxiety can get, I had never traveled out of the country in my life until this trip [to Italy]. The apartments we stayed in felt so secluded and private. Not like a hotel where other people are going in and out all the time. It helped me feel more like I was blending in and less like I was intruding.” In this case, the mere placement of the traveler in an environment filled with locals—rather than tourists—made her feel more like “a local”: unnoticeable, part of the tapestry of the area. Anthony, a 35-year-old bookstore manager and graduate student, echoes this sentiment: “Because the usual Airbnb experience places tourists in the middle of a local neighborhood, there is a sense of being a guest, which comes with more responsibility. There are no huge groups of tourists clustered together, stampeding the neighborhood to make life convenient for tourism. There's almost a sense of wanting to fit in, because you are the foreign presence.”

Sometimes, however, this fitting in is more easily aspired to than achieved. Anthony goes on to recount an experience in Morocco that exemplifies the “out of place” feeling many encounter when traveling abroad: “Marrakech is a twisty maze that will get any traveler lost. You make two turns and you can't figure out where you are. We got lost [trying] to find a personal tour guide and ultimately returned to the *riad* [a traditional

Moroccan home]. We were upset, a bit defeated, and unsure about how we were going to see the city without a guide.” In this case, Anthony and his fellow travelers may have found themselves out of luck if they hadn’t been lodging with Airbnb. He goes on: “There was a knock at the door. When we answered it, a young man stood with a motorcycle. He spoke very little English, but he was sent by the [Airbnb host] to make sure we had everything we needed. We somehow communicated our problem and he guided us to our meet up location after calling the tour guide to explain the situation. It was incredible. That was an incredible experience.”

Clearly, needing a tour guide is proof positive that you’re *not* a local, but the anxiety and disorientation that Keller and Anthony felt, respectively, was assuaged by the fact that they had chosen to lodge with Airbnb; in one case, by the mere inclusion in a real home within a local building and neighborhood, in the other by the goodwill of their host (see Chapter 5 for more on the benefits of host interaction). As Nelson points out, “The process of negotiating an unfamiliar place can scary for anyone” (2013, 274). Feeling “in place” (Cresswell 1996) and knowing a local play a large part in making Airbnb the best, most comfortable choice for some travelers.

### ***Eating like a local***

According to a study on Airbnb tourism in Barcelona, 96 percent of visitors want to “live like a local” and 76 percent say they are interested specifically in “cultural tourism” (Airbnb 2015, New Study). The study also found that Airbnb lodgers in



Barcelona “spend 2.3 times more money and stay 2.4 times longer than typical Barcelona visitors” (Airbnb 2015, New Study). Charles, a 19-year-old inspection officer who uses Airbnb as a guest and is also a host in California, noted the money he saves when lodging with Airbnb allows him more funds to spend on dining out (further discussion of Airbnb’s affordability begins on page 77). Mark, a host in Chicago, agrees that “lower [lodging] prices give tourists more money to spend on other things in the community.”

Another reason Airbnb guests spend more money is because they are often around longer. A graduate student host who has also used the service as a guest mentioned that it was essential to her fieldwork in India: “I needed to stay...for no more than \$15 a day, as I was there for several weeks,” she responded, noting that Airbnb provided her that option. Staying in an area longer allows for deeper exploration of one’s neighborhood, which often translates into patronizing a variety of local business—including grocery stores.

One aspect of “living like a local” that respondents returned to time and time again was the ability to shop at local markets and grocery stores and use their Airbnb kitchens to prepare meals. In fact, many study participants mentioned preparing meals *with* their hosts and/or eating a meal prepared by their host as one of the more memorable parts of their Airbnb lodging experiences. In either case, the lodger is experiencing an aspect of everyday living—eating—that goes beyond the typical tourist tactic of going out to dinner at the starred restaurants in their Fodor’s guide.

Dan, a 35-year-old carpenter (whose Grecian breakfast is depicted in Figure 2.17), said, “I would frequent the nearby food market stores and often cook where I was staying, but I was also finding my way into nearly every pub/bar that I passed.” Similarly, 33-year-old IT architect Mason—who also delighted in the local pubs of his Airbnb neighborhood—noted how impressed he was by the kitchen in his Italy Airbnb: “[It] was fully decked out and had so many cheese knives, [it] was great.”

Chloe, a 29-year-old intelligence analyst drew a connection between place and food, as well: “The host in New Orleans gave us beer as soon as we got in from our 8-hour drive, which was a nice welcome. Our host in Bend [Oregon] had an assortment of teas and granolas with yogurt available to us the whole time. Both very indicative of the cultures in each city.” Anthony adds, “In Marrakech... a housekeeper and cook were part of the package, and her breakfasts and dinners were just incredible.” Similarly, one of my Airbnb hosts, Patricia in San Francisco, included a welcome package with her “Garden (Inlaw) Apartment”—which was reminiscent of an old-fashioned ship with its compact “galley” and beautiful natural wood throughout—that included California wines, local cheese, and fruit jams made by her daughter.

Adriana, a 27-year-old “nomad” and videographer who has used Airbnb all across Europe, concurs: “I bought fresh eggs every morning from our next-door neighbor and meat from the local butcher. In Rome I ate pesto made by my host made from coriander picked from her garden” (see figure 4.1). Oz, a host in Canada, is another of many respondents to mention how “guests can buy groceries [and] have access to kitchens”; he

goes on to say guests are more likely to eat out in local neighborhoods (versus “standard hotel restaurants”) because host recommendations help them “avoid the tourist ‘traps’ that chain hotel concierge desks would recommend” (also see discussion of Airbnb “Guidebook,” Chapter 5).

In all of these cases, the acquisition and preparation of food became an immersive affair—either because of preparation by local hosts, use of a local’s kitchen, purchase and consumption of ingredients of a local nature, or all of the above. With Airbnb, having a truly “local” experience is literally a matter of taste.

### ***The charm of the ordinary***

While, for some, luxury is the most sought-after commodity when traveling (take those, for instance, who buy all-inclusive resort packages and never leave the pool-side lounge at their hotel), more and more travelers want to experience life as it is lived by locals, to have a more “real,” immersive experience. In fact, a recent *Fast Company* story claimed: “It’s far from an industry secret that the idea of an authentic, unique travel experience is particularly hot right now in consumer travel” (Beer 2015). And—according to this study—more and more travelers are able to satisfy their curiosities about the everyday lives of residents where they travel thanks to Airbnb. In fact, 91 percent of all guests participants surveyed answered, “Yes, Airbnb facilitates a more immersive travel experience.” Furthermore, a whopping 100 percent of guests surveyed agreed that Airbnb “allows travelers to ‘live like a local.’”

One respondent noted, “It was even weird things [about lodging with Airbnb] that made it even better. For example, when I stayed in Malaga in Spain, there was a gas bottle under the kitchen sink which was used to heat the hot water system.” Little “everyday” details like this are what led not just most, but *all* guest respondents to say they felt they had “lived like a local” with Airbnb. Here are just some of the ways they described their Airbnb experiences: “much more immersive,” “allows you to get more ‘into’ wherever you’re going,” “more authentic experience,” “greater opportunity to experience an authentic ‘local’ experience,” “deeper,” “more personal.” Jenalene, a 20-year-old undergraduate student who had only used the service once, in Japan, said, “Airbnb made me feel like I experienced how locals lived their everyday lives...I feel like I got to experience Osaka on a deeper level.”

Oz echoes her thoughts from the host perspective:

Both parties benefit from a ‘cultural exchange.’ I’ve hosted people from Ireland, Belgium, Chile, Taiwan, China, the U.S. and bunch of cities in Canada. A LOT of people from Canada travel to the Caribbean during the winter on ‘package’ vacation deals. They arrive at the airport, get shuttled off to a resort, spend a week there without leaving the premises, are shuttled back to the airport and fly home. That concept never appealed to me. I always thought... wouldn’t it be nice if you could maybe stay in a local house or spend some time with locals ... and Airbnb is about just that.

When asked specifically about Airbnb as a form of geotourism, Adriana (our young nomad/videographer), said: “I do believe that Airbnb enhances and sustains the

character of each city. In England I took long walks with my host's dogs.... In London I stayed in a canal boat and drank wine with the local boat owners, played guitar and danced on the boat. In Somerset I also went canoeing and jiving on the weekends.... You get to interact with locals, and you are completely immersed in the culture and environment, which makes it a much more profound travel experience.”



**Figure 4.1** A research participant's photographic contribution to the study. From her questionnaire: "In London [England], I stayed in a canal boat and drank wine with the local boat owners, played guitar and danced on the boat."



**Figure 4.2** One participant's photographic contribution depicting her pet-friendly\* Airbnb lodging in Palm Springs, CA, USA. Guests noted dog-friendliness as another aspect of feeling "at home" while traveling; this also saves on the cost of boarding pet while away. (\*Not all Airbnbs are pet-friendly; it is up to the discretion of each host.)

**Figure 4.3** One participant's photographic contribution depicting the backyard at his Airbnb in Mount Pleasant, SC, USA. While he had a bad (or at least strange) experience with his host (see Chapter 5), he still said he would use the service again due to getting more "bang for his buck" compared to hotels.



## **AFFORDABILITY**

*SUMMER 2014: MÉRIDA AND PROGRESO, YUCATÁN, MEXICO; SUMMER 2015: CANCÚN, QUINTANA ROO, MEXICO, AND BARCELONA, CATALONIA, SPAIN*

*On the “request off” slip at my ten-dollar-an-hour bookstore job, I wrote “any two weeks in a row I can get.” I didn’t have a plan; I just wanted some uninterrupted time off. When I actually got it, I had to make a plan, and—for some reason—“road trip to Mérida” was the first thing that came to mind. When people asked if I planned to take my decrepit-looking 1998 Volkswagen Cabrio with almost 200-thousand miles on it all the way to the tip of the Yucatán Peninsula, I said, “Sure! Why not?”*

*I knew the why not, but beggars do not choose when there are not options to choose from, so I took the car I had. It was when I started poking around on Airbnb.com that I really got excited about the possibilities. A private pool in a walled garden was suddenly an option for \$33 a night in Mérida. The choices in the smaller coast town of Progreso were even more enticing: a three-story home with rooftop deck, all to myself? For \$21 a night per person? Yes, please.*

*And so I found myself drinking min-mart rum out of a coconut on the beach and going ahead with the impulse purchase of a giant conch shell for my garden in Austin, not only eating a wonderful chile relleno en nogada at the famed Casa de Frida, but going ahead and splurging on the cuitlachoche, as well (a delicious truffle-like fungus), while Coco the bunny hopped around the dining room (see Figure 4.4).*



*The next summer, when the scalding sun beat down on my pale skin during June in Cancún, I rented a beach umbrella from the local beach-stuff hawker, while two young girls in G-strings soaked up the sun instead, eating potato chips and drinking Tecates while a baby slept under an umbrella, like me.*

*When the same thing happened on top of Tibidabo—scalding sun in dry Spanish air rather than the moist puff of summer on a Gulf playa—before getting lost in Barcelona’s Parc de Collserola, I had a surplus \$13 to spend on gift-shop sunscreen.*

*And later, in the warm light and smoke of Angelo’s living room—a place I booked for its pretty photos and sunny windows and \$80 a night price-tag—full of paella and cava and sangria and tapas galore, I fall in love with Courage the Dog befriending a*



*beaver in Spanish. Engaged in the totally normal act of watching TV in someone’s living room, I am so happy to be there, so glad to have been able to go anywhere at all.*

**Figure 4.4** Casa de Frida’s “house bunny,” Coco, Mérida, YUC, Mexico, (photo from TripAdvisor.com)



### ***The price is right***

One of the primary principles of National Geographic’s definition of geotourism is that tourism “informs both visitors and hosts,” that “residents discover their own heritage and how the ordinary and familiar may be of interest to outsiders” (2015). It “encourages residents to show off the natural and cultural heritage of their communities, so that tourists gain a richer experience and residents develop pride in their locales” (National Geographic 2015). None of this would be possible if people *didn’t actually travel*. In-person cultural exchange cannot take place if people from different cultures don’t interact. And guests consistently came back to the affordability of Airbnb as one of its most important features. (See Chapter 5 for discussion of an Airbnb I booked in Cancún for only \$8/night.) Some of the guests interviewed—65 percent—said their trip was *more feasible* because of Airbnb, with 91 percent of guests surveyed answering “yes” to the question, “Was Airbnb a cheaper option for you than a more traditional hotel lodging?” Airbnb facilitates geotourism by facilitating travel. Period.

Dan, the lodger who claimed to save “hundreds of dollars by using Airbnb,” concluded, “There is just no reason to not use Airbnb. It is inexpensive and you have greater opportunities in having real experiences and interactions with other peoples of the world, wherever you go.” Freddy noted that, in addition to feeling more “at home,” he loves all the free amenities that are often thrown in with Airbnb lodgings, like coffee, breakfast items, and the potential for “hook ups” on entertainment (see page 111). Adriana also mentioned that Airbnb is often comparable—or even “considerably less expensive”—than hostels, an option she used to consider when trying to save money.

Another guest noted that she was starting to feel “too old” for hostels, and was grateful to have Airbnb another, more adult option for affordable travel.

Mason, who used Airbnb as a guest before becoming a host, says you can book “really nice places for a very affordable price...much less than hotels.” Part of the niceness that guests often cite is merely having more room—and more rooms. Dan L., a 25-year-old graduate student who traveled to Italy with his girlfriend, elaborates: “Our one hotel room in Milan was much smaller than all our Airbnbs and did not include many of the amenities the Airbnbs included. The trip was definitely more financially feasible because of Airbnb. The full kitchens we had access to allowed us to go grocery shopping and make home-cooked meals and reuse leftovers from the nights we went out to eat. All of the Airbnbs we stayed in had coffee for us, and this saved us from going out to a coffee shop in the morning. Our Airbnb in Milan included croissants and eggs for us to make breakfast. It is a much better deal than staying in hotels.”

Similarly, Anthony mentions that saving money on food—due to its inclusion or the ability to cook at home—was a major component of the affordability. Although he says Airbnb is still often a great option for saving money, he claims it was even more affordable before its rise in popularity (he used Airbnb first in 2011 and is comparing it to more recent bookings in 2014). But, he adds the inside tip that “you [can] get better places for better prices if you are just willing to walk up steps.” He’s describing the affordability of Airbnb lodgings that are on high floors of buildings without elevators, a phenomenon I experienced, as well (see Figure 6.4). Travelers who are willing to lug

their bags up several flights of stairs can save money and get great bird's-eye views. It should be noted, however, that these types of lodgings are not options for those with physical disabilities or who need wheelchair accessibility.

Jenalene relays an incredible deal on her trip to Osaka: "It cost me around \$92 for 5 days of stay," she said, "I would not have gotten a barely decent hotel at that price." And John, a 34-year-old stay-at-home-dad and former lawyer who expressed having difficulties with his host in South Carolina (see page 115), still said he would definitely use Airbnb again because it's "absolutely cheaper, particularly when it comes to bang for the buck." He goes on: "We were visiting family that lived right on the beach. Getting a hotel near them would've cost I think somewhere between 50-100 percent more for a pretty bare bones room. In comparison, we had our own room, run of a kitchen, and a house with a lovely deck that overlooked a very pretty stream" (see Figure 4.3).

My small sampling of visitors to Barcelona who submitted mental maps (see Chapter 5) also listed their specific lodging costs (in an earlier version of my guest survey): The one hotel lodger spent \$125-\$132 a night on hotels (one of which was the NH Centro, see Chapters 6 and 7), compared to \$46.50 and \$28 per night spent by the two Airbnb lodgers surveyed. Incidentally, all three travelers stayed in the same general neighborhood, the central Eixample district.

Megan, a 36-year-old rehabilitation director, said Airbnb isn't "necessarily cheaper," but she finds it to be consistently "different and cooler" than hotels. Becky, a 36-year-old academic administrator, agrees it's not *always* cheaper, but she says a plus is

that Airbnb offers unique accommodations or unusual amenities—such as the option for extended stays, lodgings that can handle large groups for events like family reunions, and more options in “rural/secluded settings”—that make it a better deal overall.

The affordability of Airbnb does depend, to some extent, on location and timing. In fact, several hosts claimed that they increase rates during high-demand times such as during popular festivals or peak weather seasons. But it seems the value-minded lodging-shopper can certainly find satisfying deals on Airbnb if that is what they’re after. I have experienced this time and time again myself, though certain cities that are notoriously expensive can be similarly steep when it comes to both hotels and Airbnbs. A few exceptions to the “always cheaper” Airbnb rule are Portland, Oregon; San Francisco, California; and Boston, Massachusetts. In fact, I am staying at a hotel for the first time in a very long time when traveling to San Francisco to present on this very thesis at the 2016 American Association of Geographers annual meeting because it was a cheaper option within walking distance of the conference (in Union Square). When passing through San Francisco only a few months earlier, however, I stayed with two other lodgers at Patricia’s Airbnb in Outer Richmond for \$41 per night per person.

Chapter 7 will address some of the issues leading to higher-priced Airbnb lodgings (such as gentrification and short-term lodgings taking over previously affordable house) in cities like San Francisco, the birthplace of Airbnb, as well as other problems that have arisen due to this relatively new phenomenon. But first we will extensively discuss the other positive aspects of experiencing place via Airbnb, beginning with the

fact that Airbnb tends to disperse travelers deeper into residential neighborhoods and puts them in contact with locals who live and work in their travel destination.

## **CHAPTER 5 – IN THE MIX:**

### **SPATIAL DISPERSION AND SOCIAL INTERACTION**

The type of social gatherings designed for guests who aren't previously acquainted to meet and interact with one another are often called “mixers”—and Airbnb gets travelers mixing with local communities in more ways than one. The first step toward interaction with new people in new places is actual physical placement within local communities. After all, going on vacation and seeing and socializing mostly with other tourists (especially those from your own country) isn't all that exotic. Airbnb lodgings tend to reach further into the residential neighborhoods of destinations, placing Airbnb lodgers in exactly the right place to mix with locals—and not just their hosts. Airbnb hosts often recommend local businesses, and guests tend to patronize off-the-beaten-path establishments on their own precisely because that's where they are already situated. Outside of predictable and homogenous tourist “traps,” there are locals eager to share their culture (and share in the tourism profits). Whether or not you're gregarious by nature, Airbnb is helping to make the world one big mixer—and everyone's invited.

### **GREATER SPATIAL DISPERSION**

*SUMMER 2015: CANCÚN, QUINTANA ROO, MEXICO*

*It's raining so hard that I choose to wear Aqua Socks as regular shoes, knowing I'll be ankle deep during my trek to the outskirts of Cancún, waaay out to Region 200,*

*where Lilia Bujan rents a room, short-term, for eight dollars a night on Airbnb. It's perfect, her listing says, for mochileros—backpackers.*

*It's raining so hard that sheets of water cover parking lanes and form rivulets down every gutter. The windows of heavily air-conditioned businesses are covered in water, too, streams of condensation gaining momentum with each accumulated bead, mirroring the street outside and clouding the view of patrons drinking café and eating huevos Veracruzanos.*

*I step outside, hoping to hail to a cab. Every one that speeds by already has a passenger, its rooftop light turned out, a happily dry passenger in back. Every one that speeds by also sends a tidal wave of gritty water on to the sidewalk, bathing my legs and feet in the product of hurricane season, also known as Yucatán June.*

*Every feeling is wet, every sound a splash. A woman emerges from the restaurant where I, too, just enjoyed the wonder of eggs bathed in black bean sauce topped with crema and crumbled chorizo. She offers to call a local cab company. I thank her profusely, and we both stand awkwardly as her phone's busy signal echoes the falling rain. Nothing doing. Suddenly—I spot one: a cab going my way. And that's part of the problem, I am headed away from the Zona Hotelera, where a white tourist would typically be going to enjoy the beach (or, on a day like today, to drink margaritas in the hotel restaurant and look out at a view of gray fog and angry waves).*

*I tell the driver I want to go to a Soriana near Lilia's place; her address is cryptic enough that I'm not about to attempt it in broken Spanish. In fact, I'm not even*

*sure it is an address; it's more an intersection and a description. Lilia's is officially in the "wrong part of town" for someone like me (so much so that my university wouldn't grant me permission to stay the night there, citing the fact that Lilia didn't have enough Airbnb reviews). The driver seems surprised by my request and confirms the destination again. I insist this is my goal, so off we go, making small talk in Spanish as frantic wipers work rhythmically against the deluge.*

*I obtain a small pack of children's magnets from Soriana so I can put a flyer for my research on Lilia's fridge, then walk two blocks too far down Avenida Puerto Juárez—things are not labeled well here. A man, easily recognizing me as an anomaly, slows his car and asks if I know where I am. I say, "Yes, I just went a little too far," realizing he probably interprets "little" as the 16 or so miles from the hotel zone.*

*The opposite side of the street is a shanty town: homes built from what look like shipping palettes, walls of ramshackle parquet topped with tarps. The smell of fried chicken and pork rinds wafts from an unattended stand, their crispy skins brilliant under a heat lamp—the only spot of light on a dreary day.*

*Recognizing the building from her Airbnb listing, I turn at the correct intersection this time and find Lilia mending the front gate, paint splattered over her loose T-shirt and jeans. She takes me in, offers me bottled water and yogurt, then gives me a tour: six rooms, spare but clean, everything freshly painted menthol green or cherry red, the only décor an illustration of Jesus wearing a bandolier. Rain pecks at the metal roofing. Lilia*



*gestures to a can of poison and dead roaches in one corner. I say, “Tenemos cucarachas en Tejas, también\*,” and she smiles. [\*We have cockroaches in Texas, too.]*

### ***Beyond Gringolandia***

Martí (1985) calls the area across the street from Lilia’s Airbnb a “lost city,” while Torres and Momsen refer to it as the *Colonia Puerto Juárez* “shanty town,” part of the *Franja Edjidal* (or “fringe community”) that “spontaneously developed with the arrival of impoverished immigrant populations seeking work” (2005, 316) (see Figures 5.1–5.3).

Extending on the idea of “living like a local” in Cancún means venturing beyond the *Zona Hotelera* (Hotel Zone) to where locals actually live, which is in lower income neighborhoods that are visually and demographically quite different than the glitz and



**Figure 5.1** Colonia Puerto Juárez “shanty town” across Avenida Puerto Juárez from Lilia’s Airbnb, Cancún, ROO, Mexico (images from Google Maps)



**Figures 5.2 (top) and 5.3 (bottom)** Colonia Puerto Juárez “shanty town” across Avenida Puerto Juárez from Lilia’s Airbnb, Cancún, ROO, Mexico (images from Google Maps)

glamour of the waterfront’s extravagant mega-resorts (see Figures 5.1–5.3), where well-recognized names in high-end lodging dot the shoreline: Westin, Ritz-Carlton, Royal Caribbean, Marriott, etc. The neighborhoods one can infiltrate using Airbnb—like Lilia’s—are the areas of Cancún that house the workforce behind the “circuslike spectacle” referred to as “Gringolandia” by locals (Torres and Momsen 2005, 314).

Of course, the majority of travelers to Cancún have no intention of leaving the 14-kilometer-long island that houses—and isolates—the heart of Gringolandia, an area that was actually conceived of and developed by FONATUR, Mexico’s Fondo Nacional de

Fomento al Turismo (The National Fund for Tourism Development) for the exactly the purpose it serves (Torres and Momsen 2005). Per Torres and Momsen: “Many visitors...never leave this bubble, remaining oblivious to the extreme poverty that lies only a few miles away on the mainland” (2005, 317). Cancún’s reputation as a “mass tourism” destination specifically developed to provide travelers a “packaged” experience (Nelson 2013, 48; Torres and Momsen 2005) is exactly why I felt it would be a worthwhile destination to try Airbnb.

The first of my Cancún Airbnb lodgings was located on the west side of what Torres and Momsen deem the “tourist downtown,” but that is also the area of the city FONATUR intended as a “service city for local government and workers” (2005, 316-317). My lodging was advertised as a “Cozy Apartment in Artsy Area” (see Figures 5.4–5.7) and was, indeed, surrounded by parks rife with street art and mixed crowd of locals and international travelers housed in a nearby hostel. The mini-mart that I frequented from Hector’s evidenced the profusion of hostel-lodgers, as it offered means for partying—liquor and beer, ice, cigarettes—as well as out-of-towner essentials like toilet paper and toothpaste.

Despite the close proximity to souvenir-wonderland *Mercado 28* and fact that tourists were still to be seen in and around Hector’s neighborhood, they were more typically European backpackers who seemed to be seeking an experience other than the Margaritas-in-a-lounger-by-the-pool promise of Cancún. Furthermore, Hector’s section of downtown featured actual Mexicans (who weren’t just at work in resorts), and most



businesses I patronized did not default to English (as the hotels and restaurants in the *Zona Hotelera* do). Hector’s “cozy apartment” also goes for \$39 a night.



**Figures 5.4–5.7** Exterior (top left), living room (top right), and patio area (above) of Hector’s “Cozy Apartment in Artsy Area”; surrounding neighborhood on Calle Orquideas near Parque Las Palapas (bottom right), Cancún, ROO, Mexico (photos by author)

But an even deeper deal was to be found at Lilia’s Airbnb, which I was pleasantly surprised to find existed quite far from the tourist bubble. A main goal of this study was to discover if Airbnb allowed a traveler who wanted to get further *in* to a city to find lodgings off the beaten path, as it were, and Lilia’s did just that—and for \$8 a night (see Figures 5.8–5.11). Lilia explained that she was fairly new to Airbnb, but she had hosted two sets of lodgers before me, one a couple all the way from Russia. Of course, her lodging, being over 15 miles from the Hotel Zone and beaches, is not the most convenient for those looking for what Ben-Dalia et al. call “sea and sun” tourism (2013) or “3S: Sun, Sea, and Sand” tourism per Nelson (2013, 47). According to one Airbnb reviewer: “The location is interesting, it gets you out of the hotel/tourist Cancún which is nice but it took us about an hour and a half by bus to get to the beach.” However, it is, as advertised, perfect as a cheap, interesting place to stay the night for those who might just be passing through, such as backpackers.

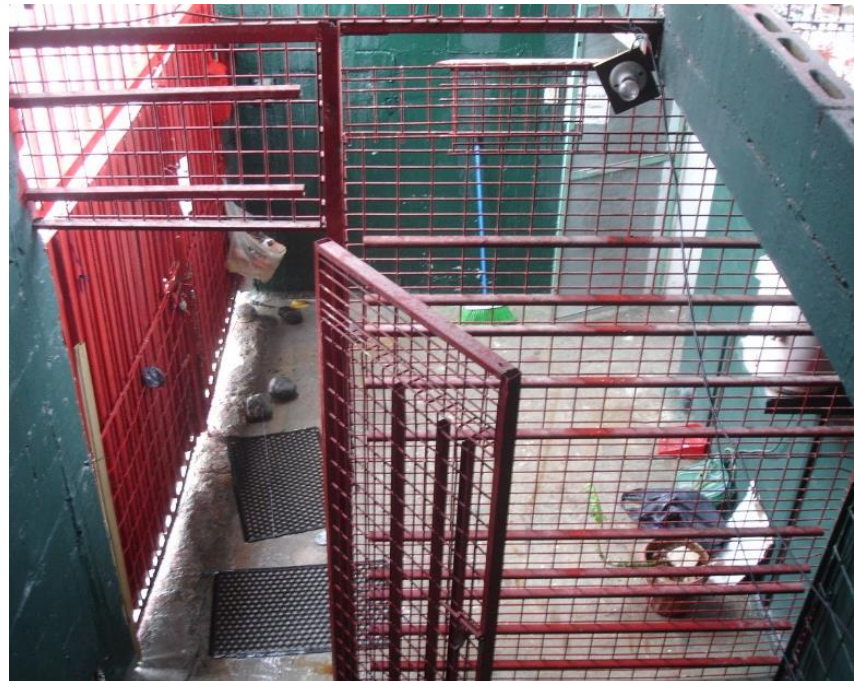
**Figure 5.8** The modest bedroom at Lilia’s “*excelente para mochileros*” (excellent for backpackers) Airbnb, Cancún, ROO, Mexico (photo by author)





As mentioned above, the travel authorization board at the University of Texas at Austin did not actually approve my staying at Lilia’s Airbnb lodging (citing a lack of reviews on Airbnb’s site; at the time, there were none). But her listing does include a photo of the shanty town across the street, and I am left to wonder what really turned the review board off to her bare-bones lodging (what the same reviewer called a “prison feel,” see Figure 5.9). In order to remain in compliance, I simply paid her for the night and interviewed her, but—after having visited the lodging and met Lilia—I would have been happy to stay. This is, in part, due to the feeling of ease one gets from meeting a local host (discussed further beginning page 102).

**Figure 5.9** The double-gated entryway of Lilia’s Airbnb, Cancún, ROO, Mexico, illustrates the “prison feel” reported by one reviewer. While perhaps not the most aesthetically pleasing choice, the metal grating is an affordable and practical building material that provides security and promotes airflow (the room is furnished with an air conditioning unit, as well) (photo by author).

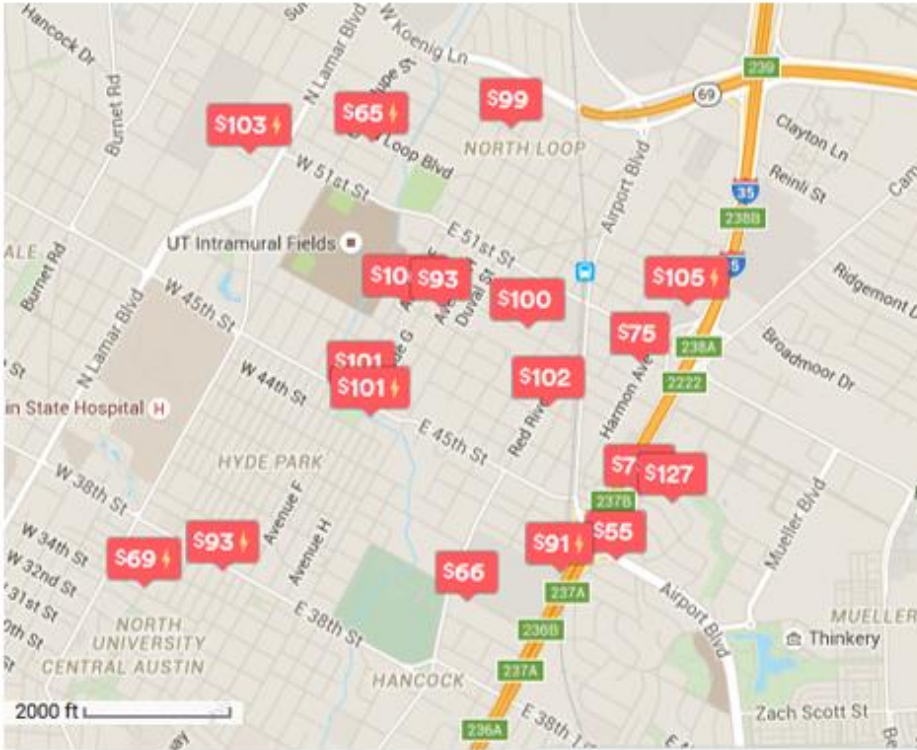




**Figures 5.10 and 5.11** Exterior (above) and interior hallway (left) of Lilia's Airbnb, Cancún, ROO, Mexico. (photos by author).

***The street less traveled***

For the sake of a more ordinary example (i.e. a site not designed explicitly for tourism), let's take a look at the dispersion of Airbnb lodgings in my own neighborhood—the Hyde Park/North Loop area—in Austin, TX, compared with the availability of hotels (see Figures 5.12 and 5.13, below).



**Figure 5.12** Spatial dispersion of Airbnb lodgings in the Hyde Park and North Loop neighborhoods of Austin, TX, USA (created using listing search feature on Airbnb.com)



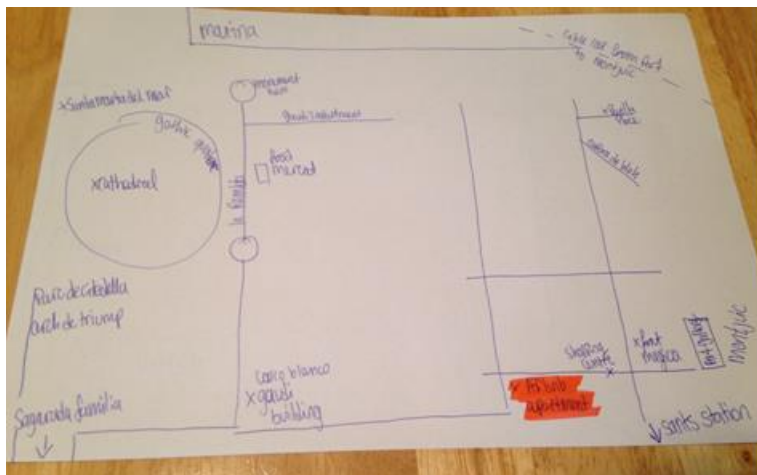
**Figure 5.13** Spatial dispersion of hotels in the Hyde Park and North Loop neighborhoods of Austin, TX, USA (created using Google Maps)



It's easy to see that hotel lodgings are clustered along the intersection of two freeways, I-35 and East 290, while Airbnb lodgings are available throughout the mapped area, appearing in a variety of clusters much further west into middle-class residential neighborhoods. By putting travelers in residential neighborhoods, Airbnb gives tourists greater accessibility to aspects of everyday life in a place, again recalling what MacCannell says is the true desire of sightseers: to "see life as it is really lived" (1976, 94). It also exposes them to local small businesses and spreads their spending in a destination to areas beyond the traditional tourist districts, which are often populated by national or international chains. This last point is further exemplified by an admittedly limited mental mapping exercise conducted with Barcelona subjects.

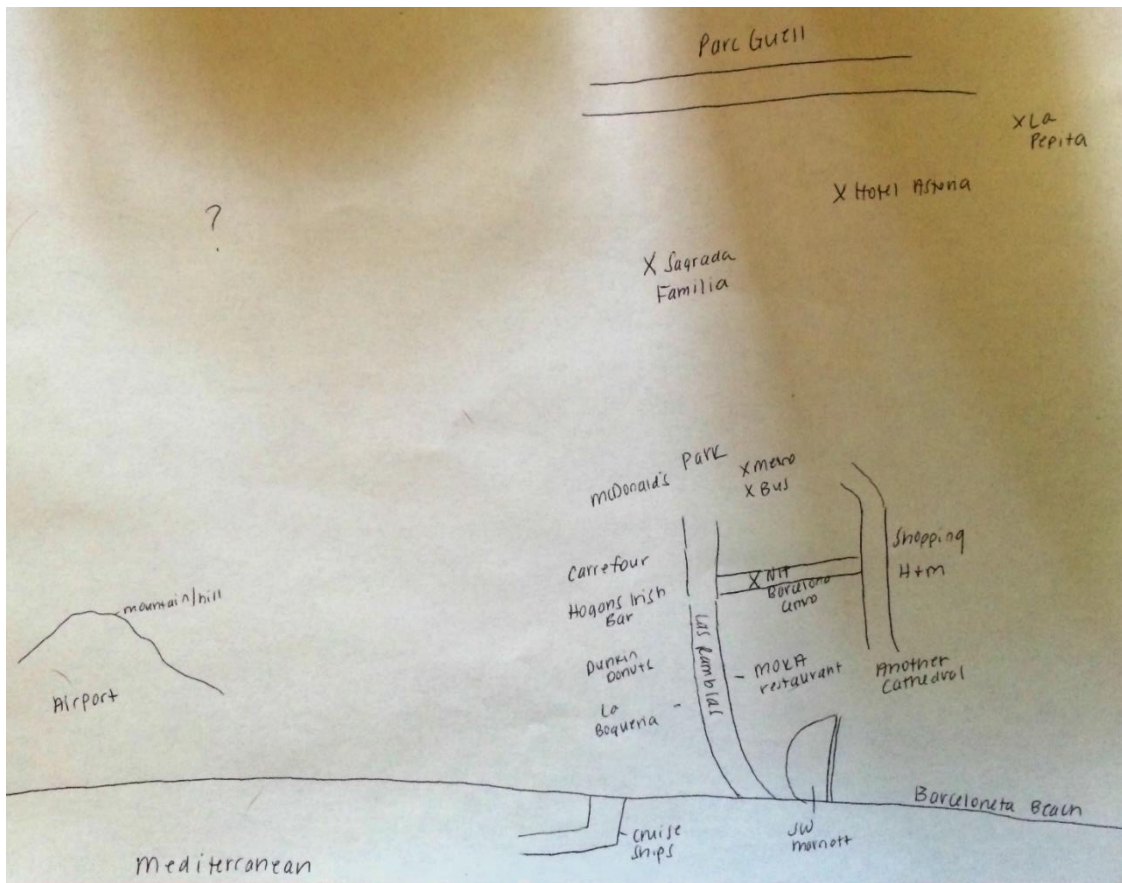
As discussed in Chapter 3, this study originally intended to compare mental maps by hotel and Airbnb lodgers to see if there were any notable differences. My hypothesis was that those who stayed at Airbnb lodgings would show greater familiarity with their destinations, illustrating not only a greater breadth of coverage and knowledge of more individual places on their mental maps, but specifically identifying places outside of tourist districts and beyond a destination's main attractions. This outcome was predicted precisely because of the great spatial dispersion of Airbnb lodgings into residential neighborhoods, as exemplified by the maps of Austin, Texas, above. This research strategy was abandoned both due to inability to restrict other variables enough to reach true comparability and also due to lack of participants from matching locations.

That said, I was able to elicit mental maps from three visitors to Barcelona: two from Airbnb lodgers and one from a hotel lodger (see Figures 5.14–5.16). All three travelers stayed in the popular Eixample District, more or less; the Airbnb lodgers stayed



**Figures 5.14 (above) and 5.15 (left)** Mental maps of Barcelona, CAT, Spain, drawn by Airbnb lodgers (provided by research participants).

for six and eight nights, while the hotel lodger stayed for only four (further confirming the finding that Airbnb lodgers in Barcelona visit the city for longer periods of time, see page 71). It should also be noted that the hotel lodger stayed for three of her four nights in Barcelona at NH Centro (see discussion of NH CEO against Airbnb, page 133). Their three mental maps (Figures 5.14–5.16) can be seen on the previous page and below.



**Figure 5.16** Mental map of Barcelona, CAT, Spain, drawn by a hotel lodger. Note the comparative emptiness of the hotel lodger's map, as well as prevalence of chain stores (provided by research participant).

Note how only the hotel lodger labels international chains: Dunkin' Donuts, H&M, McDonald's, and "hypermarket" Carrefour along Las Ramblas—a major tourist and shopping district in Barcelona. All three maps include major attraction and Barcelona landmark La Sagrada Família, but only the hotel lodger includes recognizable non-local businesses. All three chose to illustrate Las Ramblas itself, but one might conclude that only that hotel lodger spent enough time there to remember specific stores. (One could also conclude, of course, that the hotel lodgers simply enjoys shopping more than the Airbnb lodgers.) Another interesting point regarding Las Ramblas is that one of the Airbnb lodgers mentioned it as his *least* favorite thing about Barcelona, while the hotel lodger said it was the "most Barcelona" thing she did. All three mental maps include metro stops and the beach or waterfront, and the map by the longest visitor (the one in the middle) features numerous stops for "Mexican food" as well as a neighborhood square that doubles as a skate park.

A recent study of Airbnb visitors to Barcelona supports both the claim that Airbnb lodgers are interested in investigating particular parts of town and that they're looking for places to shop and eat outside of major tourist districts: eighty percent of guests said they chose Airbnb because they wanted to "explore a specific neighborhood"; in a logically linear fashion, the same study found that forty-five percent of visitor spending occurred in the neighborhood of the Airbnb lodging (Airbnb 2015, New Study). This dispersal into parts of destination cities beyond the usual tourist strips is one way in which Airbnb is

contributing to local livelihoods—both those of hosts and owners/employees of local small businesses that are found in neighborhoods and on streets less traveled.

Finally, another benefit to this dispersion of visitors into parts of cities that don't typically receive as much tourist traffic is that a greater number of people moving through an area means more of what Jane Jacobs called "eyes on the street": "Large numbers of people entertain themselves, off and on, by watching street activity," she says and that watching helps "to insure the safety of both residents and strangers" (1961, 35).

### ***Going in—and giving back***

Much like the study on Barcelona that found longer stays and more money spent by Airbnb lodgers, 100 percent of participants in *this* study claimed to have patronized local, small businesses during their visit, either due to the convenience or proximity of local small business to their lodging, host recommendations, or both. (Notably, a matching 100 percent of hosts agreed Airbnb supports local businesses more than chain hotels.) Ray, a 55-year-old forest business owner (and the older participant to respond) claims, "Hotel neighborhoods are different than [Airbnb] hosts' neighborhoods...Airbnb put us in places where there was less tourist traffic and allowed us to fit into neighborhoods that had their own tastes, ethnicities, cultural norms, language, food, etc." Glenn, a 38-year-old grant writer agrees, stating that "being able to reside, if only briefly, in a city's residential neighborhood is [his] favorite part of the Airbnb model."

According to geographer and urban tourism expert Christopher M. Law, many inner city areas become “deserted or largely avoided” by tourists and residents alike; he goes on to argue that tourism can act as a “means of regenerating” those seemingly less desirable neighborhoods (2002, 4). (See more on urban tourism in “undesirable” areas, such as Barcelona’s El Raval neighborhood, on page 102 and in Chapter 6).

The Airbnb traveler’s desire for a “marker”-less experience (also see page 31) is exactly what’s leading them to penetrate deeper into cities and other tourist destinations—regardless of what there is “to see” there. This, again, recalls Walter’s notion that there are “gems to be found everywhere” (1982, 302). Part of the fun of travel, to an Airbnb lodger, is making those discoveries themselves. After all, a Lonely Planet guide may boast “local secrets” on the cover, but when that guide sells millions of copies, I am not so sure you can consider anything within the pages a “secret.”

All of this leads us to what Lucy Lippard calls “the lure of the local”; hers is a longing for the character that history brings, and, in a way, that’s not so different than what Airbnb travelers are looking for themselves (1998). The idea is to find something “real,” less polished, and—yes—perhaps something that’s been around for a while (also see Chapter 6). While tourist districts are full of shiny new stores and the glossy surfaces of new development, the parts of cities that feel more authentic are often not the most prosperous; Lippard recalls a colleague’s wise observation that “poverty is a wonderful preservative of the past” (1998, 122). Airbnb helps to bring tourist dollars to residents and businesses in more impoverished neighborhoods. Dan L. said this of he and his

girlfriend's Airbnb experience in Italy: "The location of our lodgings played a large part in allowing us to visit more local businesses. Our Airbnbs were generally situated outside of major touristic regions which meant that we walked a lot to get to the sites in these more central areas, and thus passed by and patronized more local businesses that did not cater to predominantly tourist customers."

Similarly, Devan, a 29-year-old Los Angeles-based social media copywriter, said Airbnb made her feel "less like a tourist" particularly because she stayed "in a home that an actual resident of the area lives in, in a residential neighborhood as opposed to a commercial/highly touristy area." She went on to note, "I saw parts of the city that I may not have experienced without using Airbnb." Presumably, she spent money in these parts of the city, as well. Jenalene said the location of her Airbnb in Osaka was "a residential area and it was mostly small local shops instead of big chain stores." In fact, time after time, research participants cited being "outside of the tourist hub" as a positive part of using Airbnb: Take Greta, a 25-year-old graduate student, who said her Airbnb house in Columbia was "on a dirt road in the countryside surrounding the city, with local farms all around, so it had a very different feel from the city hotels, which were surrounded by cafes, souvenir shops, etc." (also see Figure 6.13).

Freddy and Sara agree, saying (respectively) that hotels usually aren't in such "great locations" and that Airbnb lodgings (in addition to being cheaper) are often in "more interesting neighborhoods." Besides their situation in less "usual" parts of

destination cities (and in more unique architectural structures, see Chapter 6), a major factor in the appeal of an “Airbnb neighborhood” is the people who live there.

## HOST INTERACTION

*SUMMER 2015: BARCELONA, CATALONIA, SPAIN*

*It's after midnight when we reach El Raval, the neighborhood our Lonely Planet described as “seedy,” a con being that it “feels unsafe to walk at night.” In the cab from the airport, I wondered if I was stupid to have booked such a late arrival to Angelo's “Cozy Loft in Center of Barcelona.”*

*The streets are incredibly narrow—more like generous bike lanes—and we make a racket dragging our rolling luggage over the patchwork of bricks, announcing “tourist” to anyone within earshot. Apartment buildings rise up on all sides, constructing a maze of tight urban ravines, thin arteries in which to travel. Laundry hangs from short clotheslines outside most windows, banners of domesticity. Where there isn't laundry, pink and red geraniums fill shallow balconies.*

*Young people are everywhere, hanging out of alley bars like dogs' heads out of car windows, emerging from cramped space into the air, happy and alive. They walk under streetlights, eat tapas at sidewalk tables, and are everywhere smoking. The street-sweepers come through daily, hosing cigarette butts into streams of soggy trash they collect at the intersections.*



*Angelo's door is nestled between the metal shutters of closed grocers and liquor stores. In a few days we'll meet him: Sitting outside Cafè de les Delicies, he rolls a cigarette as the waitress drops off three espressos. We were originally going to meet at La Informal, a place I've noticed each time we enter La Rambla del Raval because someone spray-painted "Burger is Sexy" on the wall. I mention this to Angelo, a Venezuelan who's lived in Barcelona for four years, and we all laugh. Apparently, the sensual allure of the hamburguesa breaks international humor boundaries. I mention how much we're enjoying the neighborhood, and he says, "Yes, it's cool...and cheap." These are two of the things that drew us to it, as well, but upon arrival Lonely Planet's descriptor of choice still occupied a place in the back of my mind.*

*I recognized the entry from my pre-trip Google street-view stalking. I press the button. "¡Hola!" a man's voice replies. "¿Nelson?" I say, knowing Angelo's boyfriend is to be our concierge. (Angelo explains later that he stays at Nelson's when they have an Airbnb guest in town, which is two to three weeks per month, so they've essentially moved in together.) "¡Estamos aquí!" I add, and the door buzzes.*

*Inside, the dark hallway lights with our motion. We pass a room with no door, barren except for a few cleaning supplies, a bag of trash, and some construction debris—a sketchy foyer if there ever was one, but the apartment looked incredibly cute in the listing photos: all thrift-store décor with hot pepper party lights over the bed and green-painted exposed rafters. Angelo's place is on the fourth floor—which means fifth in Spain—and we begin climbing, luggage in tow. The staircase is a red tile nautilus so*

*tightly spiraled we can't help but wonder how anyone has ever moved in a couch, or a bed. I don't know how we would have felt if we'd arrived alone to an empty apartment. But I don't have to wonder. Nelson meets us at the door. We are anything but scared.*

### **#OneLessStranger**

Airbnb posits that human connection makes the big, scary world more approachable, more welcoming, more ready to be explored—by you, in particular. The company's "Is ManKind?" ad begins with a small child taking its first steps down a hallway toward a sunlit door. This imagery celebrates the joy and curiosity of childhood exploration and suggests that the Airbnb community can serve as surrogate "world mother," ready to take your hand and explain the "Why is the sky blue?" of international travel (Airbnb 2015, Is ManKind?). This is one aspect of Airbnb that is so appealing to tourists; not only do guests interact with local hosts, facilitating a more immersive experience (Milne 2013, 2014), they actually feel safer and more at ease because they've *met* someone—someone who, presumably, knows more about their current place in the world than they do. Building on the idea of a nurturing global network, Airbnb claims to provide "a unique kind of hospitality—a sense of belonging and comfort and community no matter how far from home you may be" (Airbnb. 2015, "#OneLessStranger").

As Jacobs says, "Cities are, by definition, full of strangers" (1961, 238). With Airbnb, they don't have to be, a notion echoed by the company's "#OneLessStranger Act" (a push for interaction with strangers fueled by social media and connected via the

aforementioned hashtag). Peer-to-peer lodging networks such as Airbnb elevate the host-guest relation to one of friendship and mutual respect, rather than separating and

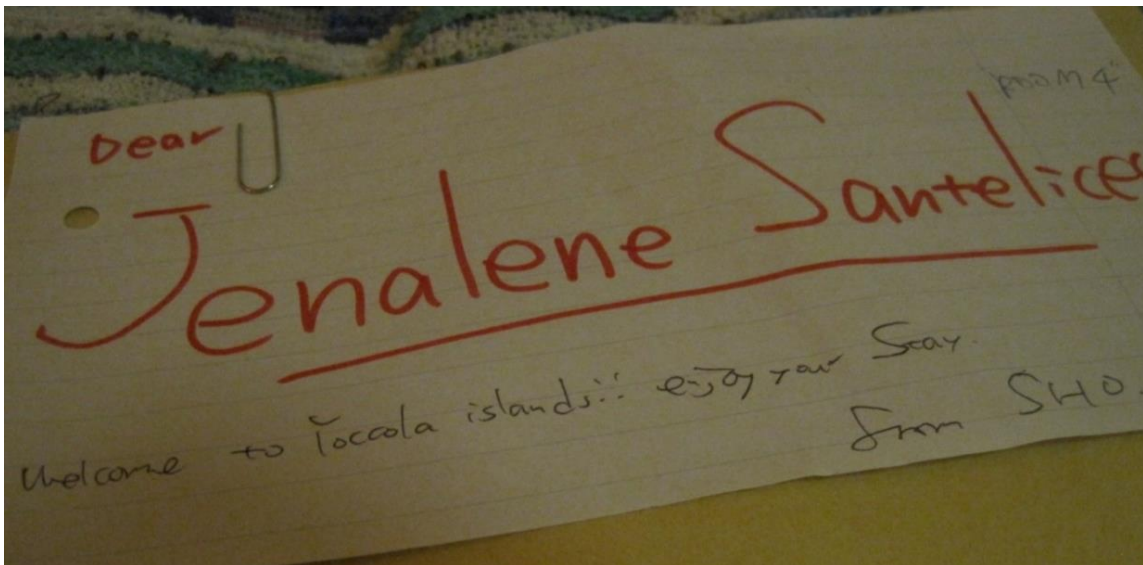


**Figure 5.17** “Welcome” chalkboard in my “eco-loft” in Barcelona, CAT, Spain, where guests communicate with the host and each other in various languages (photo by author)

stratifying the two (Smith 1989) into the gazer and the gazed upon (Urry 1990b). While one (the host) is assumed to be more of an expert on the area being visited, Airbnb aims to massage the “inside/outside” distinction often made between host and guests. In fact, oftentimes users are both—meaning those who list and rent their spaces as hosts on Airbnb choose to lodge as Airbnb guests when they travel. As such, hosts have had their own Airbnb experiences abroad and can relate to their guests in a personal way. In addition to its “#OneLessStranger” campaign, Airbnb further highlights the positive effect a host can have on travelers’ experiences with such catch phrases as “Belong Anywhere” and “Welcome Home” (Airbnb 2015, Homepage), all of which promote the idea

of kinship and rapport with people (and places) across the globe. In other words: It offers everyone in the world the potential for a new network of international “friends”; they’re only a click and a reservation away (see Figure 5.17).

Of course they are “friends” you are giving money to in exchange for a place to sleep, but the assertion is that hosts are in it for more than just the economic benefit: They are genuinely interested in meeting people from around the world and sharing their home—both literally and in the greater geographic sense of hometown, neighborhood, city, and/or country—with those who are unfamiliar but interested in cultural exchange. Jenalene concurs: “When it comes to hotels, I feel like it’s a really impersonal experience. Other guests usually mind their own business, and the only people you talk to



**Figure 5.18** A research participant’s photographic contribution to the study. From her survey: “Since both the host and the host’s friend who usually takes care of the house couldn’t meet me in person because I arrived at midnight, they had left a note with information about the house and nearby shops.”

in hotels are the receptionists, who interact with you in a professional way, but not warm or friendly. [Airbnb hosts] usually go out of their way to introduce the guests to the local culture of their area” (see Figure 5.18).

In fact, the most common response to the survey question, “What is your favorite thing about being an Airbnb host?” was *both* making money and meeting people—not exclusively one or other. While it is sometimes the case that guests gain entry to lodgings independently (via doors with combination locks or keys left in lock boxes, either of which guests are given passcodes for ahead of time), 85 percent of hosts surveyed in this study said they consistently meet their guests in person, with 77 percent of those hosts claiming to “hang out” with guests in some capacity.

Experts on tourism and sense of place claim this has no small effect on the guests experience: “Tourism has social uses and it benefits the economy,” claims Tuan, “but...the appreciation of landscape is more personal and longer lasting when it is mixed with the memory of human incidents” (1974, 95). Nelson, similarly, states that “encounters with local people...can have an extraordinarily positive impact on tourists’ experience” (Nelson 2013, 269). Tim, a 31-year-old electrician and Airbnb guest, says exactly that when asked about the effect of host interaction: “Meeting the host had a positive effect on the experience of the stay and the city,” he replied, adding that the “quality of advice was higher...meaning the places we went we didn’t feel as if we were with tourists.” And it doesn’t take much: In my experience meeting Nelson my first night in Barcelona, just getting the keys, going over house rules, and exchanging pleasantries

was enough to put me at ease; in fact, that small interaction with a local reinvigorated me after a long flight, prompting me to head back out into El Raval that evening to grab a drink at an outdoor bar and watch locals mingle. As Tuan says, “People need not know the details of one another’s lives to experience intimacy; they need only share a moment of “true awareness and exchange” (1977, 141).

### *The people’s travel guide*

Nelson also notes that locals often perform the duties of ad hoc tour guides, a role that can have a powerful influence on one’s take-away impression of a place (2013). Airbnb hosts are, in essence, a new form of travel guide—the people’s travel guide. Adding to in-person recommendations or the commonly employed tactic of leaving

business cards for favorite neighborhood shops and restaurants (see Figure 5.19), Airbnb listings now feature a host-created



**Figure 5.19** One of my Barcelona hosts gathered business cards for his favorite local places and left them in a bowl on the table (photo by author).

“Guidebook,” or list of local dining, nightlife, and recreation recommendations near the lodging complete with map, small reviews, and personal details (i.e., “The churros are made fresh hourly and are amazing”).

Because these recommendations are often *not* the same as those made in guide books or on Yelp and TripAdvisor, tourists are directed away from the objects of signposting (Walter 1982) and given new markers for previously unknown sights (MacCannell 1976). For instance, one of my Barcelona Airbnb hosts, Ana, included her favorite pizza place in her listing’s “Guidebook.” It was not featured in my National Geographic or Lonely Planet guides to Barcelona, but I ended up loving it so much I actually ate there two nights in a row (quite a rarity when on vacation!).

Hosts know this sort of involvement enhances a guest’s experience, and—in addition to allowing them to share a favorite thing about where they live—it helps add up to great online reviews which, in turn, bring them more guest bookings. It can also raise them to the status of Airbnb “Superhost,” a title earned by consistently receiving 5-star reviews, rarely canceling reservations, being highly communicative, and having a long history (at least 10 guests hosted per year) (Airbnb 2016, “Superhost”). Ana, who is not yet a “Superhost,” says she makes recommendations via the Airbnb “Guidebook” because, “I think I would appreciate [recommendations] as a guest.” Kalli, a graduate student who has used Airbnb as a guest but also rents out her spare bedroom for extra spending money, feels that with her “guiding and giving lots of recommendations...guests get a real sense of place.”





**Figure 5.20** A research participant’s photographic contribution to the study. From his survey: “Here is a picture of me soaking on a mountaintop volcanic hot spring in Iceland. It was an off-the-beaten-path adventure I never would have taken if it weren’t for my host’s suggestion. It was such a magical experience and has become my favorite memory of the trip.”

Mason and Glenn (see Figure 5.20) confirm this, noting, respectively: “The hosts normally give you a good local guide on things to see and do in the area,” and, “Having a local to give you ideas and ask questions of is the best part of the service. Hosts give you lots of ‘go here’ and ‘don’t go there’ advice. I love that.” Even a host’s style or image can affect a tourist’s impression of a place: Tanya, a 25-year-old law student, said, “Meeting the host...always has an impact on my impression of the place or the neighborhood. When I stayed in Charleston, I could have figured out the house was that of a group of



pothead college students even without meeting my host, but it was cool to meet her anyway because she was off to Austin the next day so we got to swap recommendations! Our host in NYC was very much a product of the city – he was always on the go, dressed to impress, and really made his small space work for him.”

Jodie, a travel blogger who has used Airbnb in Greece and Spain, tells a story of her host taking hospitality to the next level: “We were given recommendations of restaurants, attractions and how to get around. [Our host] even made a restaurant booking for us, and when I told him it was my boyfriend’s birthday he went above and beyond by providing cake and decorations.” Dan, furthermore, says: “I was fortunate to meet all of my hosts. As a result, I was recommended...to venture outside of the city to neighboring areas and came away with some rare and memorable experiences.” Another benefit to host interaction that Dan, Jodie, and Freddy mentioned was enjoying the opportunity, with “the help and patience” of their hosts, to practice foreign languages (hosts, in turn, can practice English with their American guests). Freddy throws in the added, “amazing” bonus of getting into clubs for free with his hosts “because they knew the bouncers.”

Anthony and Keller, both of whom expressed having some amount of anxiety while traveling abroad, also felt more at home thanks to host interaction and suggestions: “While some of the meetings were relatively short, they usually included excellent suggestions for pubs, restaurants, transportation, and hidden treasures,” says Anthony, adding, “They were always abundantly kind and welcoming, which gave you a sense of safety when you arrived to a new city.” Keller notes that her hosts not only “offered great

suggestions of where to go” but also explained “how to get there. They were very warm people and didn’t make us feel like American escapees in need of shelter but more like guests.” This brings us full circle to the at-ease welcome-to-Barcelona I experienced thanks to my host’s boyfriend, Nelson, with whom the host stays when he has a booking.



**Figure 5.21** A research participant’s photographic contribution. From his survey: “The local pub, owned by Sir Ian McKellan who lives next door to the left” (taken in London, England).

### *Person to person*

Besides great recommendations and an increased feeling of security, some Airbnb guests report having had deep, meaningful experiences with their hosts, and even forming lasting bonds. Oz, our Canadian host, says there is a “greater chance Airbnb stays will be more of an ‘experience,’ adding, “I can remember a few activities or [conversations] I’ve

had with guests which were very meaningful and I'll remember them for a while. Not much chance of that happening if you're in a hotel room." Adriana elaborates from the guest perspective: "Most of the time I have stayed at the place at the same time the owner is also at home. The neighborhoods are much more local and I've gotten the opportunity to converse with the owners and their neighbors. I even became very close with one of my hosts and her daughters. We still message each other frequently and give each other advice. She commented on my Airbnb reviews saying I became like a daughter to her, and I believe she was one of the most inspiring and interesting people I've ever met. We shared a lot of similar views and had many long conversations over dinner and canoeing down a canal."

But not everyone finds the host exchange necessary to a good Airbnb experience. Jen, a 37-year-old business manager, mentioned that she feels Airbnb is more culturally immersive if she rents a room *in* a place and interacts with host, but she tends not to because she prefers the privacy and independence of an "entire place" rental. I am quite similar and, like Devan, appreciate "the independence of transactions where...they simply leave the key and give you complete privacy." Becky agrees, noting that "walking into a place without interacting with the owner just allows [her] to indulge a fantasy of living in that house and in that new city."

Even in these instances, online recommendations via "Guidebook"—or pamphlets or printed guides left in the lodgings themselves—can give a head start to self-sufficient travelers, and the personal touches of staying in someone's unique lodging in an *in situ*

building (see Chapters 4 and 6) are not lost when the host interaction is lessened. While meeting and interaction with a local host can clearly add much to a travel experience, I would have to agree with Dan L. that “not meeting hosts doesn’t necessarily negatively affect experience.” The architectural and spatial dispersion elements are still part of the experience, as is the feeling that you are living more like a local in an Airbnb dwelling. And the flexibility to choose when and if you want a more interactive experience is part of the appeal, as well. As Greta says, “Airbnb generally...[allows] you to mix with the locals, whether it’s figuring out the keys to the apartment or sharing a home-cooked meal with your host,” but it also “has so many options that it allows you to cater your experience.”

It should also be noted that, in some cases, the local “host” is actually a local “caretaker”—i.e. not the owner him or herself. This was my experience in my both of my Yucatán lodgings (in Mérida and Progreso). In the former, a Canadian couple owned “Casa Favorita” and left it under the management of a local host (who was actually a Mérida native) when they weren’t using it; in the latter, an American woman owned our “charming beach house,” but a local woman and her family (the mostly Spanish-speaking next-door neighbors) greeted us and gave us the keys. In Burbank, California, as well, the woman who rented the coach house behind my Airbnb rental was the on-site caretaker, and I never actually met Niki, the host listed on Airbnb and who I had communicated with prior to my stay. In each of these cases, however, I still got a touch of local flavor from interacting with my hosts (more so in Mexico than I would have from the actual

owners) and, in the case of “Casa Favorita,” the Canadian owners sent me plenty of beneficial information and recommendations (from their experience living half-time in Mérida over the winters) online before I arrived.

***Buyer beware***

Of course, as with most anything that is for sale, what you see isn’t always what you get. Jason, a 31-one-year old public relations worker who uses Airbnb as a guest, champions Airbnb as preserving regional architecture (see Chapter 6) but admits to having had an experience with a “strange” host who made his visit to Boston “less fun”: “Our ‘private room’ was just the living room blocked off with curtains. There were a couple of weird dogs who were allowed to pee in side in a closet,” he says, “This person had no business hosting people in an Airbnb.”

John (our stay-at-home dad) ended up in a situation where his hosts were either absent—i.e. nowhere to be found when he, his, wife and their baby daughter arrived in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina (though the door was unlocked)—or “seemingly drugged up,” which was the case when they later encountered their hosts in person. He said, “Neither of these later-middle-aged women struck [him] as particularly threatening,” but one host’s “aimless pattering” around kitchen and “odd grunts/moans all very loudly at approximately 10-15 second intervals” were “both maddening and kind of hilarious.” (Clearly, John has a great sense of humor.) He also noted that there were others lodging in the same home: A couple on a “romantic getaway” had booked the other bedroom.

John suspects they were not thrilled to have a baby across the hall, and neither set of guests had been forewarned about the other.

However, of all 27 guests in this study (myself included), those are the only two complaints shared about a poor host experience. Other guests had preferences regarding their interaction with hosts, however, and some general concerns about the implications of staying in someone else's space, which will be discussed presently.

### ***The downside of ordinary***

As Tuan points out, "The familiar can be suffocating," and it is not uncommon for people to "seek liberation from the common routines of life" (1986, 12). Becky, who says she likes the Airbnb experience in general, admits that there is a sense of responsibility to staying in Airbnb lodgings that is less liberating than staying in hotels: "Meeting the host reminds me that I'm just crashing in someone else's space, and adds a weight of responsibility for taking care of someone else's things. I don't like the accountability to a stranger. When I go on vacation, I like to leave all of my responsibilities behind. Spending a night in a hotel and not making the bed in the morning feels a little luxurious, doesn't it? Renting someone's home and needing to strip the bed and take out the trash in the morning just takes away some of the fun. It's still worth it to get a bigger/more unique/better located place to stay, but I have to admit that there is also an appeal to staying in hotels."

Adriana and a few other guests mentioned that the everyday responsibilities of the hosts themselves can cause some logistical problems, noting “The meeting [to acquire access or keys] is very time sensitive because hosts have schedules they need to keep, so if you miss your flight, and they happen to be at work, you need to find a way to contact them and plan a second place/time to meet.” Some hosts have circumvented this problem by adding the aforementioned combination locks to doors or keeping keys in lock boxes with combination locks and providing guests with the passcodes beforehand.

Anthony, for his part, prefers when a lodging is *not* the actual living space of the host: “The places where the owner actually left to stay with friends when guests arrived were sometimes awkward. The curtains were *their curtains*, not *the curtains*. The food in the fridge was what was left of their groceries, and you simultaneously wanted to not eat the food (it wasn't yours) and eat the food (so it didn't go bad).”

### ***On the review process***

Having a not-so-great Airbnb experience raises another issue: how to review the lodging and hosts online. John, who had the strange absentee/drugged hosts in South Carolina, said, “I really wrestled with what kind of review to leave, if any, on the website. [My wife] was in favor of fully disclosing how weird it was. I felt like, hey, the room and house were both exactly as advertised. It was clean, comfortable, and well-located. In the end, I didn't feel honest leaving a positive review, but I didn't want to be a “bad guy” and leave a full disclosure review. I took the easy way out and didn't leave a

review at all.” He goes on to acknowledge that, in keeping quiet, he may have done a disservice to fellow Airbnb users and even admits that he himself tends “to seek out and give a lot of weight to negative reviews.” Other guests have expressed concern that leaving an unfavorable review could reflect poorly on them as a guests—or make other hosts hesitant to book with them. Clearly, this presents a problem when it comes to the trustworthiness of the Airbnb community and the online reviews of lodging and hosts: Are they full-disclosure, or are they a little guarded in the interest of saving face? Lesser argues that it is “the positive interactions that occur between individuals in the network that lead to the formation of social capital” and that “issues such as trust and reciprocity” become the foci for forming such capital (2000, 6). If this is true, Airbnb guests and hosts must feel some pressure to preserve social capital and leave (at least generally) favorable reviews in an effort to preserve the network and their place and relationships in it.

Becky relays a related situation that arose after her stay at a guest cabin in Tofino on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada: “The host lived on the property, which I found somewhat awkward, although she was a very lovely person. I received a request from Airbnb to rate my experience after the trip. I raved about the wonderful location and the kind host, but I also mentioned that the shower was unreasonably tiny. (It was seriously so small that a person who was even somewhat overweight would have a difficult time fitting inside.) After I posted the review, the host posted a response, in which I could tell she was a bit miffed that I had anything negative to say. I felt bad, because she was a real person I had met, and I felt like I had hurt her feelings. But I also



felt a little pissed that she didn't want me to give an honest review. It wasn't a bit deal, but it made me feel like I would rather not involve additional people in my travels."

### ***Local livelihoods***

It should be no mystery why hosts are concerned about reviews: Airbnb makes them money. In addition to preserving regional character and offering hosts the opportunity to meet and interact with people from around the world, Airbnb also supports their livelihoods; in fact, many Airbnb hosts claim they couldn't get by without their additional Airbnb income. One of the main tenets of geotourism is that it "benefits residents economically" (National Geographic 2015). This can add a degree of satisfaction for guests, as well; as Dan put it, "It was a great feeling knowing that my [travel] experiences aided the residents monetarily."

It may have aided them more than he even knew. Two hosts surveyed said Airbnb funds make up one-third of their income, while Betty, a host in West Texas, said it makes up half of hers. Cormac in Turkey and Krissy in Chicago said it covers their rent and mortgage, respectively, and Ana in Barcelona estimated Airbnb rentals make up 40 percent of her income. Kalli, whose husband was "very hesitant" to open up their spare bedroom to strangers, came around when the couple realized Airbnb could provide them with greater supplemental income than a second job Kalli was offered as a tutor. After doing a side-by-side monthly comparison between the two options, "I turned down the tutoring job and made our listing live in the same day," she says.

When asked if Airbnb supports residents, Ana in Barcelona said, “Of course!! Yes. Hotels are ruled by rich people. Airbnb gives money directly to the locals. It’s important. The money goes directly to the locals, to the people who own their apartments. Big corporations are against that, because they live in the money hotels give [sic],” adding that in Barcelona, where 75 percent of all Airbnb hosts earn at or below Catalonia’s average household income (Airbnb 2015, New Study), “many families can’t live without the income generated by [Airbnb].”

And, as explored above, Airbnb is good for the local businesses in the vicinity of lodgings, as well. Alexander Neumann, an economist with Dwif Consulting—which, in partnership with IESE and ESADE-Creafutur Business School, conducted the Barcelona study referred to earlier—said, “There’s no question that Airbnb significantly supports neighborhood businesses and makes the city stronger (Airbnb 2015, New Study). Per Guillermo Ricarte, General Manager at ESADE-Creafutur, “Airbnb generated an impressive \$175 million for the city by supporting families, local stores, restaurants as well as other services,” and “It’s worth pointing out that [Airbnb] hosts are a perfect sample of Barcelona’s local population: engineers and artists, entrepreneurs and freelancers, unemployed” (Airbnb 2015, New Study).

Mason and Charles, hosts in Finland and California, respectively, bring up a few additional reasons—besides the popularity, recognition, and trust that comes with “user-generated brands” (Yannopoulou et al. 2013)—that Airbnb is the chosen site on which to list short-term rentals. Mason says importing and exporting availability calendars is

accurate and user-friendly with Airbnb, noting that double-bookings are “a big issue [affecting] hosts around the globe”; he says Airbnb (unlike Booking.com) helps prevent double-bookings, a major pro considering sites can be “very harsh” on hosts who cancel reservations. Charles claims that “none [of the other home-sharing sites] offer the level of protection and service that Airbnb does.”

And, according to this study, the money, recognizable brand, and superior features all make the small percentage that Airbnb takes as a “service fee” a non-issue. Airbnb charges hosts a three percent service fee “to help cover the costs of processing guest payments (it also charges guests a guest service fee to “cover the cost of running Airbnb”) (Airbnb 2016, “Service Fees”). The hosts I surveyed offered all manner of “couldn’t care less” responses when asked about the service fee: Cormac wasn’t even sure how much they took and said he didn’t care; Mason claimed that Booking.com would take far more (10-15 percent); Hector, one of my hosts in Cancún, said he had “no idea” what amount Airbnb took: “I just worry about the money coming in,” he said, “Without Airbnb that wouldn’t be there, so their fees are not an issue.”

Kalli brings up an important point in addition to her similar claim that the fee is “small enough not to worry or even make a mental note”; she realizes that she’s not surrendering three percent of her possible Airbnb income, she is actually purchasing something very worthwhile with it: “I am happy to pay for the service of hosting my photos and allowing me to screen and communicate with guests easily,” she says. After all, without Airbnb, she—and every other Airbnb host—would not have such an easy-to-

use, trusted, and functional platform for making their lodgings known and available to the world. Considering how creepy listing your extra room or coach house on Craigslist would seem—and how much less successful an endeavor that would be—three percent seems pretty reasonable, especially for something that can earn up to half a host’s total income. As they say, there’s no such thing as a free lunch. But, with the Airbnb brand behind hosts and their rental spaces, there’s a pretty substantial dinner to be had for the price of an appetizer.

## **CHAPTER 6 – KEEPING IT REAL: PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION**

Airbnb isn't just good for humans. We've established that guests and hosts engage in more immersive cultural exchange thanks to Airbnb, that Airbnb saves travelers money and contributes to locals' livelihoods—both as income for hosts and by spreading tourism dollars throughout destinations. We've learned that lodging in the actual homes of residents makes travelers feel more like they've experienced a place as an “insider” or lived more like a local. But the side-effects of travel via Airbnb add up to preservation and appreciation of not only of the humanistic aspects of culture, it also does its part to preserve cities' architectural character and support environmentally sustainable practices—all of which further supports the claim that Airbnb facilitates geotourism.

### **ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION**

*SUMMER 2015: BARCELONA, CATALONIA, SPAIN*

*Airbnb's latest campaign asks, “Is man kind? Are we good?” (Airbnb 2015, Is ManKind?) And it answers with a directive: “Go see.” You'll likely find that man is kind, it claims; we are good. Despite the fact that it's championing the human touch Airbnb affords, the ad calls to attention a number of inanimate, structural elements that communicate things, as well: windows, dining tables, beds. Yes, “man” is kind, but places themselves can nurture, as well—buildings, apartments, cottages, and boats;*

*hideaways, adobe ruins, and treehouses, even. They give us shelter via walls and ceilings and make us comfortable with linens and knickknacks, toiletries and bottled water and places to rest, but they also inform us about where we are, every detail a story. Like going to a pumpkin patch as a disgruntled twenty-something rekindled something youthful in my heart, Barcelona's brush worked through the high balconies of Angelo and Ana's apartments, the cultural image painting itself on my impressionable brain through the reality of rooms within buildings within neighborhoods; these within cities, countries, places.*

*La Sagrada Família blew my mind—brought tears to my unreligious eyes; there is a reason some things are “attractions.” But the agents of expression were even more so the propped up window-unit air conditioners and clotheslines of El Raval; the incessant meowing of the black-and-white cat two floors down, and his owner always on the phone (perhaps explaining the meowing); the wonderful smells of garlic and seafood coming nightly across the hall and in through the grated bathroom window. The little evidences of “man”: what they've built, what they're making, who they're with.*

*And Ana's grandmother's old apartment in Gràcia, with the cranes still building Gaudí's temple poking up beyond the complex—a tall, rectangular fortress of residentiality—and the shimmering blue and red phallus of Torre Agbar beyond; Ana's favorite pizza place down the street, where they actually use Bolognese as pizza sauce; angelic voices, rising up to the ático floor from the elementary school below, singing Catholic songs in Spanish, making us feel a little guilty for making love with the doors*

*open; hearing the hoarse, escalating timbre of the screaming older woman every time FC Barcelona did something good—preceding an explosion from the whole of the rectangular fortress.*

*These are the neighborhoods and apartment buildings and rooms of Barcelonans—places that were here before you or me and places that will persist. These are the elevators and stairs real people take to real kitchens where meals are prepared and to real bedrooms where bodies sleep after days of work or weekends of play.*

*This is humanity at its kindest—sharing its everyday life with us.*

### ***Building character***

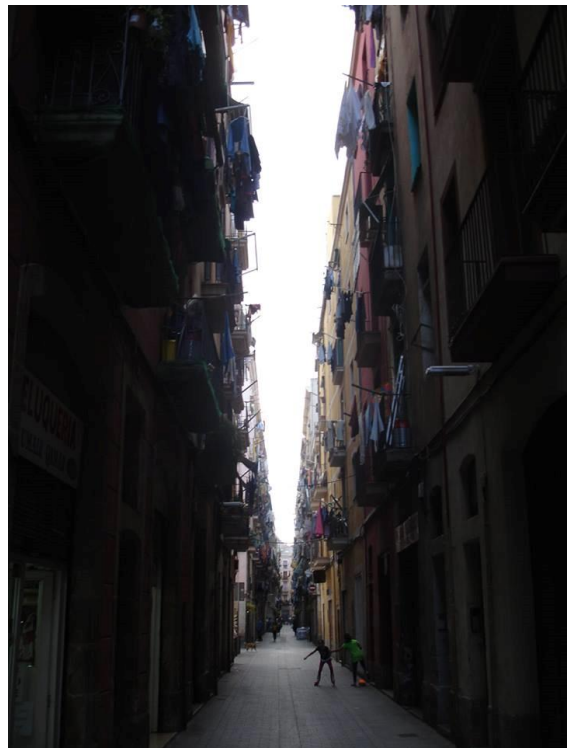
As discussed in previous chapters, Airbnb lodgings tend to integrate tourists and residents, bringing travelers (and their money) further into and dispersed more widely throughout cities. But Airbnb is distinctive, as well, in that it places travelers in what I term “pre-existing” or “in situ” buildings or lodgings—the apartments, homes, and sometimes trailers, boats, teepees, yurts, etc. of local residents (Airbnb 2015, About). Of course, hotels exist and are part of a city’s built environment; these may be historic buildings and often are. However, they are constructed or renovated for the purpose of tourism, for housing visitors. Rather than being built or designed explicitly for tourists—those just “passing through”—Airbnb structures were originally meant to (and often still do) house actual residents.

As such, Airbnb lodgings are likely to be more distinct, featuring personal details that reflect the host-residents' tastes; what's more, Airbnb lodgings are often found within older buildings with interesting architectural and historical details rather than newer built-for-tourists developments, what Kunstler calls "Lego-block hotel complexes"—calling attention to the stacked-and-replicated homogeneity of chain hotels and their rooms (1994, 2). Mason (whose home/Airbnb listing is in Helsinki) said his 1939 building "survived the war," while Krissy, who hosts in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, said she and her husband's three-flat "was built in the 1880s." She goes on to give some historical context: "Pilsen was originally inhabited by eastern European tradesmen, mostly Czech immigrants. The units (there are four total) used to be more subdivided with really small bedrooms to accommodate as many laborers as possible." A bit more storied than, say, the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place, which opened 2.6 miles away near the eponymous convention center in 1998 (see Figure 6.9).

According to Relph (also see Chapter 2), the essence of place lies "in the experience of an 'inside' that is distinct from an 'outside'"; this, he says, more than anything else, "sets places apart" (1976, 49). That "inside" can be communicated through architecture and décor even while the host is away: Take, for instance, the locally obtained thrift-store furniture, hipster styling, and gay-pride artwork of my Barcelona Airbnb, listed as a "Cozy Loft in Center of Barcelona" (see Figures 6.1–6.4 as well as Figures 2.8 and 2.9). This was our host's actual apartment in El Raval (a once-unsavory neighborhood, also see Chapter 5); as mentioned, he stayed with his boyfriend when he



got an Airbnb booking. El Raval is described by one tourism website as “Barcelona’s most controversial and yet interesting neighbourhood” (Barcelona Tourist Guide 2016). It is a historic neighborhood where young artsy types mix with other lower-income residents (including a diverse immigrant population), and this particular Airbnb reflected the history and character of its neighborhood and its neighborhood’s residents. (Echoing the claims made in Chapter 4, the same tourism guide claims El Raval is “where you find the small privately owned shops selling clothes you can't find anywhere else...unlike the Eixample with its large brand name designer labels” (Barcelona Tourist Guide 2016).



**Figures 6.1 and 6.2** Arrival in El Raval (left), the “seedy” (St. Louis 2013, 183) neighborhood of Angelo’s “Cozy Loft in center of Barcelona” (also see Chapter 5), and El Raval in daylight (right), Barcelona, CAT, Spain (photos by author)



**Figures 6.3 and 6.4** An artistic symbol of neighborhood pride in El Raval (left) and the stairs up to Angelo’s loft (right), Barcelona, CAT, Spain (photos by author)

My lodging in Terlingua Ghost Town in West Texas is another example of the character of the host—and the neighborhood—showing through the actual structure housing an Airbnb lodging. My host there, Betty, has two cob-and-limestone structures



**Figure 6.5** One of Betty’s “Ghost Town Ruin” Airbnb lodgings, Terlingua Ghost Town, TX, USA

behind her own house that she rents on Airbnb: “Both houses are about 100 years old,” she says, “and were built by workers in the cinnabar mine in the early 1900s” (see Figure 6.5). Not only is that interesting on a historic level, the DIY

aesthetic of Betty’s lodgings is indicative of the type of person who lives in this desolate desert community near Big Bend National Park. Terlingua is a place for hippies, renegades, and other self-sufficient counter-culture types, and Betty’s lodging communicates this: The yard surrounding her properties is full of “art-junk” (see Figure 6.6); the one local café is surrounded in the morning by dreadlocked youngsters still in pajamas, sipping coffee and smelling of marijuana, their off-leash dogs circling the patio area, everyone on a first-name basis with the barista. Staying at Betty’s not only helps preserve the existing structures of the area by making them economically viable, it allows visitors to immerse themselves in the local culture by literally entering a culturally representative structure. Other guests agree: In fact, 96 percent of guests surveyed in this study said, yes, their Airbnb lodging was more culturally representative of the place they visited than a chain hotel.

While MacCannell claims that even some “back region” elements of tourism are “staged,” designed exactly to make tourists believe they’re seeing something authentic (1976, 105), Airbnb takes tourists into what Nelson calls the



**Figure 6.6** Local character outside Betty’s Airbnb, Terlingua Ghost Town, TX, USA

“true back region,” a “space that is not intended for, or expected to receive outsiders” (2013, 225)—or, at least it wasn’t originally intended to. An accommodation that comes to be advertised and rented via Airbnb is obviously *now* intended to receive outsiders, but that is not why the structure exists in the first place. With Airbnb, a guest can rent a private room, a shared room, or an “entire place.” Entire places can be a host’s own home, rented while they are out of town themselves; another isolated private space on the host’s property; or, in some cases, a vacation or second home rented via Airbnb while the host is in their other, more permanent dwelling. Anything from a coach house or that RV parked in the backyard to a converted garage, basement, or mother-in-law’s apartment could suddenly become a lucrative space thanks to Airbnb (see Chapter 5 for more on host livelihoods). Private rooms, on the other hand, usually bedrooms *in* the host’s dwelling that double as guest rooms when family visits, and a shared room is an even more economical version of this, where two lodgers might stay in a guest room furnished with bunk beds.

In all of these situations, the room is likely to be unique, as opposed to a carbon-copy hotel room, and it is furnished and decorated by a local resident. The popularity of Airbnb also means less demand for new developments that could mean the destruction of other *in situ* buildings. Jason said he believes Airbnb facilitates geotourism “because you have people staying in a place that didn’t require tearing anything beautiful down or building anything ugly (such as a Motel 6).” Oz agrees, saying: “People staying in homes get a more authentic local cultural experience than staying in chain hotels which look

fairly similar regardless of what country you're in.” To visually represent this claim—which I would generally agree with based on my own Airbnb experiences—I have included the following side-by-side comparisons of my own Airbnb lodgings and the nearest chain hotel to them in three cities: Chicago, IL, and Burbank, CA, USA; and Mérida, YUC, Mexico (see Figures 6.7–6.9).



**Figure 6.7** Comparison of my Airbnb lodging and its nearest chain hotel, Mérida, YUC, Mexico (photos by author and from Airbnb.com and Google Images; slide from “You Have Arrived” presentation, American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting, 2016)





**Figures 6.8 and 6.9** Comparisons of my Airbnb lodgings and the chain hotel locations nearest them in Burbank, CA, USA (top), and Chicago, IL, USA (bottom), (photos by author and from Airbnb.com and Google Images; slides from “You Have Arrived” presentation, American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting, 2016)

### ***Barcelona backlash***

Despite the fact that Marriott CEO Arne Sorensen dismissed Airbnb as an “interesting experiment,” others claim it has thoroughly “shaken the global hospitality industry, forcing longstanding incumbents to adapt or suffer” (Borison 2015). Because Barcelona is consistently ranked as one of Airbnb’s largest markets (Kassam 2014), hoteliers there are particularly concerned about what Airbnb is subtracting from their possible income. One CEO, Federico Gonzales of NH Hotel Group—a Spain-based company with 23 locations in the Barcelona area—has attacked Airbnb, citing lack of safety regulations, and has gone so far as to recruit other hotel corporation leaders to help him “clip Airbnb’s wings,” appealing to Starwood and Hilton, in particular (Newcombe 2014, “Large Hotel Chains” 2014).

He makes the point that Airbnb has an unfair advantage because it doesn’t have to comply with the same safety regulations that hotels do (discussed further in Chapter 7). But he has also likely had the unfortunate-for-his-industry realization that the demand for an “authentic, unique travel experience” isn’t going away and is, in fact, “such fertile ground that even global corporate hotel chains [must take] great pains to appear as anything but global corporate hotel chains” (Beer 2015). A comforting home-away-from-home experience via chains like Hilton might have been a smart move to “encourage American tourists” in the ‘60s (MacCannell 1976, 127; also see Chapter 2), but a new breed of tourist has emerged: one seeking unique, culturally immersive experiences, which Airbnb is often much better at providing than chain hotels.

Perhaps this is because there is a sense that hotel developments actually erode a sense of place (creating placelessness, see Chapter 2). As MacCannell points out via a London-based example, “the biggest threat” to preserving what tourists come to experience—the sense of a place—could very well be hotels being “rapidly built to cater to...tourists” and, in the process, “destroying the very character and scale of the city their customers are coming to see” (1976, 126, quoting Molyneux 1971, 16). With the case, for instance, of the W Hotel in Barcelona—which is an unignorable part of the waterfront view along the Mediterranean Sea—one must ask whether this new development has added or subtracted from the “sense” of Barcelona. As a subjective matter of taste, the answer is likely different depending on who you ask, but for those who would prefer to see less of this sort of construction, Airbnb offers an appealing alternative that concurrently benefits resident hosts (see Chapter 5).

This isn’t just a concern for hoteliers in Barcelona, either. Airbnb’s number of global lodgings went from over one million to over two million during the course of this thesis (Airbnb 2015, About). Jason, who has used Airbnb as a guest twice in the United States, says he thinks “the culture absorption of a trip usually takes place outside of the lodging,” but he still plans to use Airbnb again and agrees Airbnb lodgings are generally more culturally representative of their area because “hotel chains are pretty cultureless.”



### ***Architecture in action***

The draw of unique listings begins before the trip even takes place. As Ray says, “It’s more fun to play ‘Where shall we go?’ with Airbnb descriptions than with hotel booking sites.” That is in large part because Airbnb listings look different from one another, so a lodger has more to decide between than number and size of beds or whether or not to book a suite versus a simpler room. Airbnb gives prospective vacationers the feeling of “shopping” for a lodging that offers more than just a place to sleep.

Anthony goes so far as to claim he “could not return to standardized housing/hotels,” explaining that hotels “are usually in locations well outside of convenience” and he “really [does] not like the way that hotels or hotel rooms look.” He includes the familiar Airbnb guest attributes of preferring to walk (see Chapter 6) and patronize small neighborhood businesses in his reason, as well: “We enjoy waking up and walking down to a local coffee shop instead of drinking generic coffee somewhere near the airport,” he says. Much as I found myself shocked by the size and beauty of “Casa Favorita,” my very first Airbnb lodging, Anthony says he was “stunned” upon arriving at his Airbnb in Marrakech and discovering he’d rented an entire building: “There were three of us, and we kept changing rooms just to use them all. It was unnecessarily large, but the cost was as cheap as the hotels way outside the local walls.” And it wasn’t just any building, it was a traditional Moroccan *riad*, a multi-story home built around an Andalusian-style courtyard containing a fountain (Wikipedia 2016). The following photos submitted by guest participants similarly show how Airbnb lodgings can be very indicative of an area’s architectural character abroad (see Figures 6.10–6.13).



**Figure 6.10** A research participant’s photographic contribution to the study. From his survey: “I have included a picture of the living room view in Granada [Spain], where we stayed in the historic Albayzín district. The building in the distance is part of the Alhambra.”



**Figure 6.11** A research participant's photographic contribution depicting his Airbnb lodging in Milan, Italy.



**Figure 6.12** A research participant's photographic contribution. From his survey: "We were right on the Thames" (taken in London, England).

Jenalene said her Osaka Airbnb was advertised as a “traditional Japanese home,” and “the décor and style was traditionally Japanese,” a correlation that made perfect sense to her considering “usually Airbnb lodgings *are* locals’ homes” (emphasis added). Devan feels that “bringing tourists into preexisting residences in an area allows it to maintain more of its natural environment and aesthetics,” while Dan L. said his Airbnb felt more “private/exclusive/comfortable than a hotel”: “We had the feeling that we had the whole place to ourselves. It is a better way to experience local culture.” That greater amount of space has other advantages, as well: Becky, a recent mother of twins, notes Airbnb could be better for traveling with kids “rather than cramming everyone into a hotel room.” Numerous guest respondents mentioned the advantages of having access to a full kitchen (see Chapter 4), and Mason and John both felt they simply got more for their money with Airbnb; as a host himself, Mason goes on to say, “I can see how others run their places to get ideas, but I also like having a whole apartment to use rather than just a hotel which normally doesn’t come with a whole kitchen and living room.” Giving credit specifically to the interior of in situ lodgings, Greta says, “Airbnb creates a connection with a local even if you don’t meet the host. Staying in someone’s house adds a personal touch, and a private residence...usually [has] more quirks and tends to stick in your mind more than an anonymous could-be-anywhere-in-the-world standard hotel room set-up” (see her photograph, Figure 6.13).



**Figure 6.13** One participant’s photographic contribution depicting her Airbnb lodging in Villa de Leyva, Colombia. From her survey: “Part of the house, also showing a portion of the extensive cacti garden in back. In addition to the impressive garden, the spacious backyard also had a homemade soccer field and a treehouse. Not something you find in the average hotel.”

### *Hotels on Airbnb and “IKEA hotels”*

Though only one guest responded mentioned staying in an Airbnb lodging that was “basically a hotel...using Airbnb to advertise,” I witnessed similar bookings when browsing Airbnb options in Cancún. Small, “boutique-ish” hotels in “tourist-friendly area” (description per Chloe, reflecting on her Airbnb in Hanoi) have caught on to the Airbnb craze and are taking advantage of it as a means of reaching new customers. As Dan L. observers, “A lot depends on the Airbnb situation, as there a wide range of



settings and housing arrangements offered.” He’s right: If you wanted to book a hotel through Airbnb, you could. It would take some looking around, be more likely in a heavily visited destination (like Cancún), and have to be a small, independent hoteliers (or perhaps a regional chain), but it must be acknowledged that Airbnb is not *entirely* single-owner lodgings—though regional hotels may be more architecturally representative than a chain hotel that uses the same blueprint everywhere it builds (see Figures 6.14 and 6.15).



**Figures 6.14 and 6.15** Exterior (left) and interior (above) of the “Sak Nah Guest House” in Cancún, YUC, Mexico. An example of an Airbnb hotel, this home has listings for various room numbers. Per the description, “Sak Nah” means “white house” in Mayan, and the lodging does include a traditional thatched *palapa* roof, as well as tile floors and white stucco walls (photos from Airbnb.com).

Another type of lodging that can be found on Airbnb is what I have termed “IKEA hotels.” These types of Airbnb lodgings don’t offer much in the way of personalized details, historic architecture, or unique furnishings. They are what they sound like: a simple room outfitted with cheap furnishings, featuring little-to-no decoration, and existing merely as a way for hosts to make money (and often taking rental space away from local residents, see Chapter 7). IKEA hotels are simple rooms that



**Figure 6.16** Interior of “1 Block from DTLA - Studio Apt 221,” an Airbnb listing in Los Angeles, CA, USA. An example of an “IKEA hotel,” or an Airbnb that is lacking in local character, not a local residence, and often outfitted in cheap furnishings in recognizable designs from chain stores like IKEA (photos from Airbnb.com)

are not *that* different than a homogenous chain hotel room: They feature a bed, a table, one or two pieces of art, clean towels, a shower, a window, an empty closet with available hangers, and a mini-fridge (see Figure 6.16).

The only culturally redeeming aspect of this particular Airbnb listing, named “1 Block from DTLA - Studio Apt 221” in Los Angeles, California, is the exterior (see Figure 6.17), which exhibits some aspects of typical Californian architecture.



**Figure 6.17** The exterior of “1 Block from DTLA - Studio Apt 221,” an Airbnb listing in Los Angeles, CA, USA (photos from Airbnb.com)

## ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

*WINTER 2014: TERLINGUA GHOST TOWN, TEXAS, UNITED STATES*

*Betty tells us to pee outside, adding. “It’s better for the compost, if you don’t mind.” The compost she’s referring to is not in a tumbler or backyard bin; it’s part of a*



*composting toilet—one of the eco-friendly aspects of Betty’s Terlingua Ghost Town “Ruin.” The outhouse itself is a wooden shed about 20 feet from the lodging proper; a sign nailed to the door euphemistically says “telephone” (see Figure 6.18). It features a sort of bench with a cutout hole to “go” through and a bucket of peat moss with a little scooper commode-side. That’s the whole process: go, cover it with peat moss; go again, cover it with peat moss; repeat indefinitely. No plumbing needed. But, as she said, urine doesn’t compost as well, so she kindly requests that you go outside.*

*It’s unusually cold in Big Bend country, even for January. But we don’t mind—in fact, we like her suggestion. It adds to the charm of an already desolate desert landscape, a community of self-sufficient west Texas hippies. And it matches the lodging itself, a miner’s casita named “Boystown” by Oregonian river guides and built 100 years ago (further supporting the Airbnb-architectural preservation link). Betty’s listing describes it as “basic and organic,” just like peeing outside.*

*There are solar panels attached to the roof and rainwater-gathering pipes and barrels alongside our lodging, as well as along Betty’s house. Hers is a larger establishment just up the road, far enough to feel private but close enough that her dog, Harry, takes the occasional jaunt up to Boystown and stares at us, curiously, from a distance; he, presumably, pees outside like the rest of us.*

*When the forecast comes in calling for lows in the twenties, Betty informs us she’ll be cutting off the water for fear of bursting pipes. She’s rather apologetic, but we’re fine with this, as well. She provides us with jugs of fresh water and extra propane*

*canisters for the portable heaters spread throughout her three-room cob-and-limestone lodging. We are comfortable and have everything we need, including flannel pajamas, canned chili and hot cocoa (these latter items of our own provisioning).*

*Betty's place is not unusual—okay, the composting toilet is the first I've seen—but the solar power and rain gathering fit right in with many Airbnb hosts. More often than not, you'll find a variety of containers under the sink clearly labeled for each type of recyclable and one for compostable kitchen scraps, as well—even in big cities like Chicago and Seattle. Our "Ravenna Hideaway" in Seattle also featured an expansive garden that translated into help-yourself produce. Even the little things like bulk toiletries and laundry done after an entire stay (rather than every night) add to the motif: Airbnb hosts care about the world we live in. In a very immediate sense, it's their home, too. Taking care of your lodging means taking care of their home means taking care of our planet. It's both extremely personal and globally important.*

*Which is why I am happy to drag myself from under a cozy down comforter, grab the flashlight on the table by the door, and head out into the dark with the intent to pee. (The neighbors' homes are far enough away that it wouldn't be a stretch during the daytime, either.) Several hours after meeting Betty, I find myself squatting in the middle of nowhere that is her yard, surrounded by the crisply cold and silent air of night, my only audience a prickly pear and ocotillo, the stark baby blue moon peering through a veil of ice, and perhaps a coyote holding its breath.*

***Want not, waste not***

Per National Geographic, geotourism is “committed to conserving resources and maintaining biodiversity” (2015). By taking tourism down to a small scale and appealing to environmentally minded users, Airbnb satisfies a main goal of geotourism: It encourages those involved in the tourism industry to “minimize water pollution, solid waste, energy consumption, water usage, landscaping chemicals, and overly bright night-time lighting” (National Geographic 2015). In fact, the principles of geotourism directly say to market to the “environmentally sympathetic tourist market” (National Geographic 2015). This is, in large part, Airbnb’s target audience: young, hip travelers who want less in the way of luxury and more in the way of valuable, cultural experience.



**Figure 6.18** The “telephone” (composting toilet) at Betty’s “Boystown” ruin, Terlingua Ghost Town Airbnb, TX, USA (photo by author)

A study by Cleantech

Group—whose mission is to “accelerate sustainable innovation”—found that there are

numerous environmental benefits to Airbnb. The study focused on North American and European Airbnb lodgings, in particular, and drew the following conclusions: Airbnb hosts tend to “engage in sustainable practices,” with 95 percent of North American hosts recycling at least one type of material at their property and 83 percent reporting that they own “at least one energy efficient appliance at their property” (Cleantech Group 2014). The study also found that Airbnb guests are 10 to 15 percent more likely to “use public transportation, walk, or bicycle as their primary mode of transportation than if they had stayed at a hotel” (Cleantech Group 2014) and that, in one year alone, North American Airbnb guests saved an astounding “equivalent of 270 Olympic-sized pools of water while avoiding the greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to 33,000 cars on North American roads” (Cleantech Group 2014).

Such determinations led Jonathan Tourtellot, Founding Director of the National Geographic Center for Sustainable Destinations, to claim that Airbnb, “by the very nature of its business, has raised the bar in sustainable tourism to a level that the conventional travel industry will find hard to beat” (Cleantech Group 2014). The same study found that Airbnb properties consume less energy and water and produce lower greenhouse gas emissions and waste than average hotel guests per night—not hard to believe if you imagine the laundry alone that most hotels engage in washing, not to mention the waste generated by single-use toiletries (per the study, “less than half of Airbnb hosts in both North America and Europe provide single-use toiletry products for their guests,” Cleantech Group 2014). Most of the Airbnb lodgings I’ve booked have had regular—or

even family size—shampoo and soap in their showers, rather than individual-sized toiletries that produce far more waste. And Krissy, one of my Chicago hosts, said she and her husband buy “toilet paper, paper towels, soap, laundry detergent, dishwasher detergent, and cleaning supplies in bulk to supply ourselves and the Airbnb unit.”

### *The benefits of walking*

While just over half—only 52 percent—of guests in this study said they did not rent a car on their Airbnb travels, many did comment on their preference for walking when visiting a new place. Keller, who visited Milan, Rome, and Sicily, Italy, using Airbnb, said, “Being in residential parts of [cities] gave us more access to public transportation or the option to just walk.” Freddy, Jodie, and Anthony all listed “feet and public transportation” as their main modes of transit while traveling with Airbnb. Anthony elaborates on the benefits of using transit in a foreign place: “We find that proper utilization of public transportation can save time and money, as well as giving you a sense of the everyday.”

Scholars tend to agree: In addition to reducing use of fossil fuels and the resultant harmful emissions, Nelson argues that walking through a place (or using public transportation) can enhance and deepen one’s experience and sense of that place, providing “opportunities for interaction with local people, access to back regions, and insight into the lived experience of a place” (2013, 273). Adams agrees, likening walking to establishing “a kind of dialogue with the earth,” adding that “to walk through a place is

to become involved in that place with sight, hearing, touch, smell, the kinetic sense called proprioception, and even taste” (2001, 188). Slowing down not only facilitates this “multisensory intake” (Adams 2001, 188), it also allows travelers to pass by and patronize more neighborhood businesses, again adding to the livelihoods of residents and dispersing their spending dollars through various parts of destination cities.

For my own part, I have never rented a car when using Airbnb, which now includes 14 lodgings in 11 locations. I, too, prefer to walk or take public transportation,

and I find that exploring new places by foot gives me a greater sense of connection to the place I am in (see Figure 6.19). When piloting one’s own vehicle, the ability to just



**Figure 6.19** Outfitted in comfortable walking shoes for the walk from my Gràcia Airbnb in Barcelona, CAT, Spain, to Parc Güell, a trek that was roughly three miles (mostly uphill) and which both my Lonely Planet and *National Geographic Walking Barcelona* (!) suggested taking a bus ride to cover (photo provided by author)

observe is taken away, because concentration must be paid to directions, other vehicles, and traffic signs and lights. And you are simply moving faster, reducing sensory intake to a “scanning gaze” (Adams 2001, 188). I wouldn’t say that I walk or take public transit because I am trying to be more environmentally friendly; it is a positive side effect of my placement within cities and my desire to explore on foot and really *see* the area I’m in.

## CHAPTER 7 – A FEW CONSIDERATIONS

According to journalist Zak Stone (whose own experience with Airbnb will be discussed shortly), Airbnb operates with an address-problems-as-the-arise approach—or just after they arise, to be more specific. He accuses the company of dealing with problems via reactive apologies and solutions, rather than proactive policy change and preventative measures. Part of the reason for this—a strategy common to sharing economy businesses and startups in general—is that the rules by which to regulate brand new concepts aren't in place because these types of business only recently didn't exist. In Stone's words, "Startups that redefine social and economic relations pop up in an instant. Lawsuits and regulations lag behind" (2015). Issues arise in matters pertaining to safety, legality, and the effect on the housing markets of cities where Airbnb is taking hold.

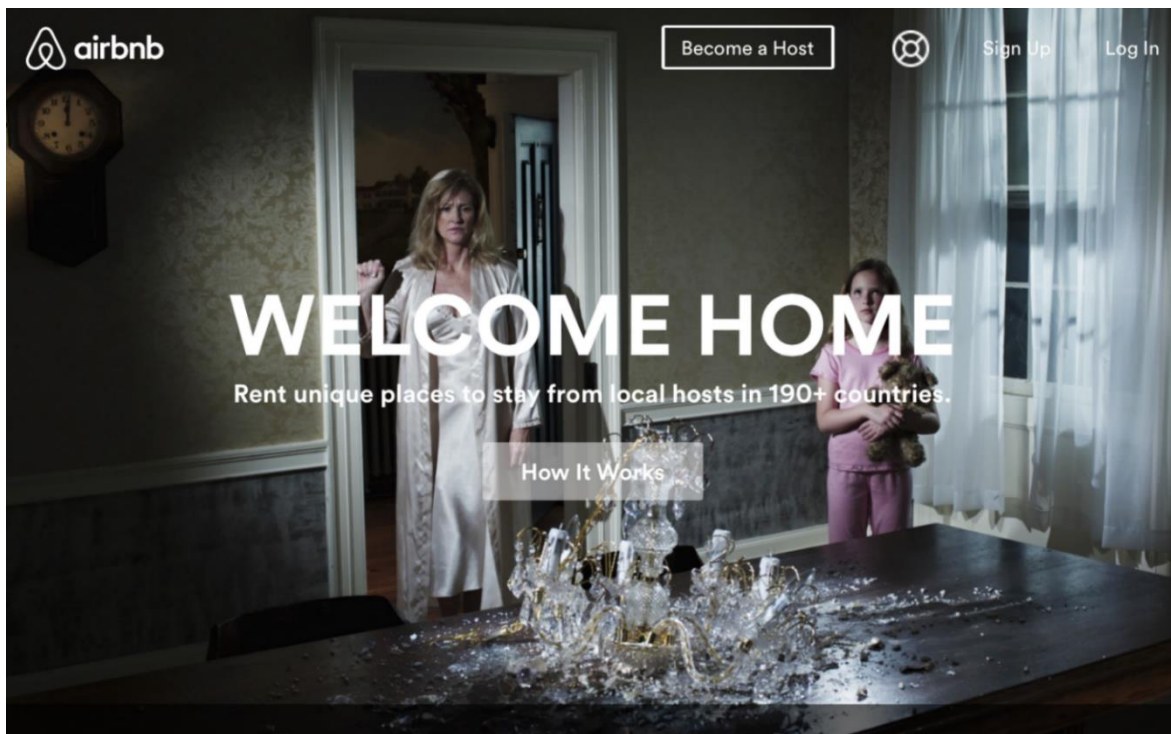
### *Lodge at your own risk?*

As NH Hotel Group's CEO Federico Gonzales pointed out, Airbnb lodgings do not have to comply with the same safety regulations as hotels (also see page 133). Stone agrees: "Staying with a stranger or inviting one into your home is an inherently dicey proposition" he says. "Hotel rooms are standardized for safety, monitored by staff, and often quite expensive. Airbnb rentals, on the other hand, are unregulated, eclectic, and affordable, and the safety standards are only slowly materializing" (2015). Sometimes the results of this lack of regulation can be disastrous. In one case, a female Canadian traveler who lodged at an illegal "hostel-style" Airbnb in Taiwan died from unchecked



carbon monoxide exposure; the five friends she was lodging with were exposed, as well, but were hospitalized and survived (Stone 2015). Airbnb responded, in its typical retroactive manner, by starting a program “to give out free smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors to American hosts who asked for them” (Stone 2015).

Stone’s own tragic story culminates in his father’s death. Stone and his family had rented an Airbnb cottage in Texas as a Thanksgiving retreat. When his father took to the lodging’s outdoor rope swing, the branch the swing was tied to “broke in half and fell on his head, immediately ending most of his brain activity” (Stone 2015). Had the lodging



**Figure 7.1** A mock Airbnb ad featured with Zak Stone’s story (Image from Medium.com/matter)

been run as a traditional bed and breakfast, it would have undergone a mandatory safety inspection by the Texas Bed and Breakfast Association, which includes landscaping (Stone 2015). Had the Stone family chosen such a lodging—a more “legitimate” vacation cottage—this horrible accident wouldn’t have occurred. Zak’s father would still be alive.

But they didn’t chose a more regulated, traditional type of lodging. Why? The Airbnb looked unique, appealing. The photos were lovely and the listing described a peaceful country retreat. It was affordable. And the Stone family probably wasn’t worried about this sort of thing. The journalist himself—who lives in Los Angeles and whose parents first used Airbnb on a visit to see him—even said they were “both quickly sold on the rental apartment” and that his father “seemed particularly grateful to get an insider’s perspective of the city that corporate hotels couldn’t offer” (Stone 2015). Though we all know there is some risk involved in travel—not to mention the risks involved with using the transportation required to travel (car, train, airplane, boat)—we don’t typically imagine tragic conclusions to our vacations. These are isolated incidences, unlikely happenings we hear about in the news.

We *do* travel at our own risk, but we count on airline and cruise ship and hotel administrators to make sure the basic safety standards are met. We trust them to make sure we don’t have to worry about smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, fire extinguishers and evacuation routes. Airbnb listings do include a “Safety Features” section where hosts can list items such as the aforementioned detectors and first aid kits. In my personal experience using Airbnb, hosts also often supply guests with pertinent

information like the nearest hospital and emergency room locations as well as those establishments' phone numbers and addresses (and even maps and directions to them). It's not as if Airbnb guests have no idea what they're getting into. For instance, I saw that my "Cozy Loft in Center of Barcelona" only had "first aid kit" listed as a safety feature, and I chose to book there anyway. I may be more intrepid than most travelers, but I tend not to worry about emergencies. Those who do, however—especially travelers who read horror stories like Zak Stone's—are beginning to wonder if Airbnb's motto should be "lodge at your own risk."

Yes, terrible things have happened to Airbnb guests: People have been hospitalized; people have died. Terrible things happen to hosts, too: People's homes have been ruined, used as locations for orgies or destructive parties and left in shambles (see Figure 7.2). In 2011, a San Francisco host "returned home to find her apartment destroyed, her possessions burned, and her family heirlooms stolen" (Stone 2015). Even if horror stories are the exception to the norm, an exception that takes over our social consciousness, breeding fear and distrust in regard to sharing economy services, some horror stories are true. Interestingly, 100 percent of hosts surveyed in this study answered, "no" to the question: "Have you had any safety issues or had to increase your safety standards due to legal regulations, city ordinances, etc. since becoming a host?" While this is encouraging in that it means they haven't had any issues with safety, it also means they haven't *had* to do any upgrades due to pressure from Airbnb or elsewhere.

### *Noise violations*

Though less serious than safety, another Airbnb-related concern that comes up in particular regard to hosts and their neighbors is noise (and inconvenience). The hosts I spoke with in Barcelona (in addition to several news stories: Frayer 2014, Kassam 2014, Kokalitcheva 2014, O’Sullivan 2015) explained that Airbnb started to come under fire in Barcelona due to short-term rentals in the waterfront Barceloneta neighborhood; these rentals were often booked to coincide with waterfront concerts and festivals and were ultimately used as locations for epic parties (and crashed in by more than the allowed number of lodgers) (also see Figure 7.2). Parties generate noise, trash, and feelings of unease among neighbors who don’t want strangers hanging around their apartment



**Figure 7.2** Another mock Airbnb ad from Zak Stone’s story (Image from Medium.com/matter)

complexes, drinking and making noise into the wee hours. Per *Citylab* journalist Feargus O’Sullivan, “Long-simmering local resentment has boiled over at times. Last summer the waterfront Barceloneta neighborhood saw nightly demonstrations against party tourists with up to 1,000 sleep-starved protestors, a phenomenon that came to be called the Barceloneta Crisis” (2015). Ana, one of my Barcelona hosts who tends to rent to “lower key” guests like families and couples, said, “I am not against [regulating] the Airbnb business, controlling the noise tourists might generate, and other things like that. I am just against the total prohibition....”

I asked every host I surveyed if their neighbors knew they were using space in their building for short-term rentals. They all said their neighbors either didn’t know or didn’t care. Mark in Chicago went so far as to say, “It’s not really their business in my view. I am the only one at any substantial risk.” While guests and neighbors might disagree with that, he calls attention to the fact that his living space and belongings are at the mercy of guests. Hosts do have a choice who they grant bookings to, and my other Barcelona host, Angelo, said he specifically shuts down booking during major festivals to avoid bookings by “partiers.” He said he tries to book mainly with couples who just want to explore the city. Perhaps it’s because of the care such hosts take in confirming their guests and bookings, but every single host surveyed or interviewed for this study said they have *not* received complaints from neighbors. Ever.

### ***Breaking (and making) the law***

While issues of safety and noise complaints haven't really come up for the hosts included here, matters of legality were slightly more pressing. Even though a relatively high 83 percent of hosts have *not* encountered legal issues due their involvement with home-sharing and short-term rentals, it definitely seems to be on their minds as an impending possibility. This is due to the fact that major urban destinations such as Barcelona, San Francisco, Portland, and New York City are constantly in the news as case after case demands that city governments reconsider existing rules and laws pertaining to travel lodgings (Borison 2015, Clampet 2014, Coldwell 2014, Edwards 2013, Frayer 2014, Kassam 2014, Kokalitcheva 2014, Peltier 2015, Soper 2014).

One of the first determinations to be made is whether short-term rentals are allowed in a particular city (and in particular types of buildings). Another frequently addressed concern is whether Airbnb (and other home-sharing) hosts must pay hotel occupancy taxes. Krissy, who hosts with her husband in Chicago, said, "We get our money tax free and pay taxes in April on it. It has its own tax form and is considered a business." She also notes that, while it's perfectly legal for them to rent units in the three-flat they own, they came into conflict when short-term renting a spare bedroom in the condominium unit they previously lived in: "The condo board changed the by-laws to make Airbnb 'illegal,'" she explains. "We had to cancel some reservations, but we...weren't too upset." Another, California-based host mentioned that his local government was trying to ban Airbnb, and one of my Barcelona hosts was wary of being

“found out,” probably because he knows he is renting his apartment illegally (as a renter himself, he does not have the authority to re-rent the space to tourist lodgers).

In Barcelona—due to pressure from such hospitality giants as NH Hotel Group, as well as the Catalan Tourism Board’s frustration with Airbnb hosts not acquiring proper licenses for their lodgings—Airbnb caused quite an uproar (Frayner 2014, Kassam 2014, Kokalitcheva 2014, O’Sullivan 2015). In fact, the City of Barcelona has fined Airbnb twice, once in 2014 for \$40,000 and again in 2015 for nearly \$70,000 (Frayner 2014, Kassam 2014, Kokalitcheva 2014, O’Sullivan 2015). The main infraction is hosts failing to list their Airbnb rentals with tourism board, a process that requires the purchase of a license and paying some tourism-related taxes. Ana, my host in Barcelona who did things by the book, said: “We only had to present the apartment’s papers to the administration, show legal [ownership], and pay the formal touristic taxes. It was kind of easy!”

She went on, however, to say that two months after she’d made her Airbnb lodging official, Barcelona put a stop on issuing any more licenses. Ana considers herself “very lucky,” noting, “Once you have the license, you are inside automatically.” For those Barcelonan hosts wanting to make their listings legitimate, the six-month hold the city of Barcelona placed on licenses (beginning in May 2014) essentially meant they had to stop hosting or go on illegally (O’Sullivan 2015). Barcelona mayor Ada Colau isn’t just halting short-term rentals, though. In addition to “announcing her intention to rein in Airbnb, she “declared a one-year ban on new hotel licenses,” as well, recognizing that Barcelona’s extreme tourism is “hurting citizens” in general (Faris 2015). In many such

cases, Airbnb has “rallied to its hosts’ defense, offering legal support”; it even helped start an association called “Peers,” which helps “turn out opposition to legislation to curb companies operating in this on-demand economy” (Stone 2015).

### ***Usurping the locals***

Besides operating unsafely and/or illegally, another complaint that has been brought against Airbnb (and other home-sharing companies) is that short-term rentals don’t leave any place for locals to live—a situation that is all the more dire in cities with housing shortages. These cities tend to be the same ones that are already suffering from lack of affordable housing and major population booms, such as San Francisco and Austin, Texas (Ciolko 2015, Said 2015). “Affordable housing advocates have called Airbnb the gasoline lighting up scorching rental markets in gentrifying areas, arguing that it pushes up prices by transferring housing inventory from locals to tourists” (Stone 2015). This is a major problem when it comes to the type of Airbnb rentals that are empty unless booked; in other words, rentals that don’t normally house *anyone*. Entrepreneurs have not failed to realize that buying up property and renting it with Airbnb is a much larger cash cow than traditional rentals. This takes regular rentals that could be full-time living spaces for locals off the market. One of the hosts surveyed in this study mentioned that “approximately 50 percent of the apartments” in his building [in Helsinki, Finland] are being rented out as short-term vacation lodgings. That’s half of an entire building no longer available to locals.



When used the “right way,” Airbnb provides locals an opportunity to make money by booking extra space on their own property (or by renting their own living space when out of town). Those who have an “always empty” space for rent on Airbnb consistently say they choose to rent to Airbnb guests over a long-term tenant because it’s simply much better money. When I asked Betty (my Airbnb host in Terlingua) if she’d had any problems with legality, said no, but was quick to add that “folks in town are aware that nightly rentals minimize the availability of long term rentals for locals.” She feels a little guilty about that, but she also makes *half* of her income through Airbnb.

Glenn, one of this study’s most enthusiastic Airbnb guests, said, “Living here in Portland, Oregon, and also just up [US Interstate 5] from San Francisco, there are plenty of stories going around about how hundreds of Airbnb rentals are hogging up all the apartments that ten years ago were the homes of local residents. In that sense,” he says, “Airbnb is the opposite of geotourism—it’s *changing* [rather than preserving] the ‘environment, culture, and heritage’ of locals. Boo to that” (emphasis added). Another guest brought up the possible reduction in local hotel jobs due to Airbnb. Zervas et al. (2015) did find that low-end hotels are beginning to be affected by Airbnb, since Airbnb guests are usually looking for a deal (also see page 15 and Chapter 4). So workers in the high-end hotels frequented by business travelers are likely to have more job security than employees of less expensive local motels; in this way, Airbnb is, again, at odds with residents’ livelihoods.

***Ambiguity equals absoluton?***

In all of these issues for more consideration, “Communities are trying to process the deep impacts of Airbnb on domestic space, real estate, travel, hospitality, and the risks and benefits we ascribe to such things” (Stone 2015). Interestingly (or perhaps suspiciously), Airbnb doesn’t seem to identify as a lodging service. Rather, it calls itself “a trusted community marketplace” and “online platform that connects hosts who have accommodations to rent with guests seeking to rent such accommodations” (Stone 2015). By inhabiting the role of “middle-man” and acting, essentially, as “bulletin board or an old-fashioned matchmaking service,” Airbnb remains “as passive as possible,” which is apparently the safest role for the company to play (Stone 2015). But Stone argues that “platforms are not neutral pieces of technology,” and “companies that take advantage of such ambiguity pose risks to consumers, particularly when they’re trafficking in human experience” (2015). As any new entity on earth does, Airbnb will continue to adapt, evolving with both critics and fans. Only time will tell if it survives.

## CHAPTER 8 – CONCLUSION

One of the most basic concepts in economics is that of supply and demand. For a business or company to succeed, there must be demand for what it supplies. It is indubitable that Airbnb is a success. Its growth is impressive, and it's giving hospitality empires like Hilton, Starwood, and NH Hotel Group—corporations that formerly dominated the tourism market—reason to be nervous (Beer 2015). This must be attributed to the fact Airbnb is supplying something that is in demand: a unique, immersive travel experience. Sixty million guests can't be wrong—or at least their desire for the commodity being offered cannot be denied. Tourism is one of the world's largest industries (MacCannell 2002, Urry (1990a), and a big piece of that pie is now being eaten by Airbnb.

We've established that Airbnb offers something consumers—in this case, travelers—want, and that is a less homogenous, more culturally representative, authentic, and “inside” (Relph 1976) experience of place when traveling. It wouldn't be experiencing the wild success that it is if that weren't true. Of course, saving money is always an incentive, and Airbnb lodgings have been shown to be generally cheaper than traditional hotel lodgings, but that isn't the primary reason people prefer them to chain hotels. The characteristic that Airbnb guests return to over and over again is the fact that Airbnb lets them feel *less* like tourists and *more* like locals. It enables them to experience new, foreign places as if they lived there—or something closer to that than they would achieve in a tourist district. Even if MacCannell's Iranian student was right when he

claimed, disgustedly: “Let’s face it, we are all tourists!” (1976, 9), the disgust is more important than the claim. Airbnb travelers know they are tourists, but they want to make that reality a more positive one. They want to fit in, to feel as if they belong in a place—or at least as if they’re benefiting the place they’ve chosen to visit rather than detracting from it. Guest respondents shared story after story of how Airbnb allowed them to experience foreign places as if they were locals, helped them to feel they “fit in” and were not typical (read: inconsiderate, superficial) tourists. In other words, Airbnb made them feel *good* about being tourists; it took the shame and disgust of that stigma and turned it on its head.

At the outset of this study, I aimed to answer two basic questions: Is Airbnb providing travelers with more “inside” experiences of place (Relph 1976)? And does Airbnb facilitate geotourism? As discussed in the Chapter 7, Airbnb has plenty of challenges to overcome, but the responses from actual Airbnb hosts and guests—coupled with my own experience using Airbnb as a guest—lead me to conclude that Airbnb *is* changing travelers’ experiences of place. Airbnb guests feel that they *are* traveling in a better way, that their experiences are more valuable and real. What’s more, they feel as if they’re participating in a community that involves local residents—hosts and businesses—in a beneficial exchange. Rather than be the ill-regarded tourist, they are everyday ambassadors for their own home countries, representing a different type of tourist—one who cares to experience place from the inside and contribute something, too.

For these reasons, it can also be concluded that Airbnb *does* facilitate geotourism, which, once more, is “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents” (National Geographic 2015). It encourages positive cultural exchange between visitors and residents, preserves geographical (including architectural) character, takes impact off of more heavily trafficked tourist districts (and shares revenue from tourism more broadly among local businesses), benefits both hosts and guests (socially and monetarily), and is generally more environmentally sustainable than energy- and water-expending hotels. One exception is the potential Airbnb has to take long-term rentals away from locals and drive up rents in popular areas already in the midst of housing crises. From the traveler’s perspective, however, Airbnb is entirely geotouristic.

Of the Airbnb guests surveyed, 89 percent answered yes to the question, “Do you feel it’s fair to say that Airbnb facilitates geotourism?” While only 67 percent of hosts surveyed said they feel Airbnb facilitates geotourism, none answered “no” (the remaining hosts either didn’t respond or said they weren’t sure how to answer the question). In both cases, the majority agreed that Airbnb is a geotouristic way to travel. But the stories told by members of the Airbnb community are more indicative of this opinion than the quantitative outcome of a survey question. In addition to “living like a local,” guests who have used Airbnb for lodging all over the world highlighted aspects of spatial dispersion, host interaction, and affordability as major pros to experiencing place via Airbnb. And, as noted in Chapter 4, in-person cultural exchange and experiencing new places firsthand

cannot occur at all unless people travel in the first place, making affordability not as shallow an attribute as it might initially seem.

There is the argument that deep, meaningful experiences of place cannot occur over short periods of time, or vacations. Airbnb helps ramp up the potential for a deep, authentic experience, however, by placing travelers in the homes of actual residents—residents who they often interact with in some context, even if it’s just meeting and exchanging a few words of introduction when handing off keys. In-person interaction is supplemented, as well, by host recommendations for entertainment, food, and preferred attractions. These aspects of the Airbnb experience give places visited a personal touch, an identity shaded by actual residents rather than guidebooks and hotel concierges armed with binders of paid advertisements. In the case of my host Ana’s favorite pizza place (see pages 109 and 124), for instance, the Airbnb “Guidebook” feature added an individualized element to my experience of Barcelona’s Gràcia neighborhood without an in-person interaction. A local establishment that is indicative of place to my host has now further translated that place to me, the guest. As Tuan notes, “People...need only share a moment of true awareness and exchange” to “experience intimacy” (1977, 141). As silly as it might sound, I felt that awareness and exchange—that intimacy—via an excellent Bolognese sauce, a dining room full of locals, and a casual, neighborhood atmosphere.

Ultimately, how immersive a travel experience one has—and whether that travel is geotouristic—comes down to the traveler’s individual goals; after all, the type of experience one is seeking inevitably impacts the end result. The guests and hosts

surveyed and interviewed in this study would likely agree that “there are gems to be found everywhere and in everything,” that there truly is “no limit to what you will find” (Walter 1982, 302). It is the desire to look—to “have new eyes,” as Proust would say—that sets the Airbnb traveler apart. The subjects of this study delight in taking public transit or walking through their Airbnb neighborhoods; staying in culturally representative buildings like Moroccan *riads*, English canal boats, and compact lofts in highly dense residential areas like Barcelona’s El Raval. They cherish the opportunity to patronize small, local businesses and interact with their hosts, even using the opportunity to practice foreign languages. They are the “Airbnb” type, by definition: They have chosen to be part of the Airbnb community—sought what it has to offer. They are Nelson’s “explorers and drifters” (2013, 270), travelers who wish to—and actively do—avoid the homogeneity and “placelessness” (Relph 1976) of mass tourism.

Jason, one of the guests surveyed, said Airbnb “doesn’t hurt” when it comes to having a more “inside” travel experience, but suggested that “it more comes down to the type of person you are than where you’re staying.” MacCannell believes that “all tourists desire...deeper involvement with society and culture to some degree,” that it is “a basic component of their motivation to travel” (1976, 10). But Jason is right: some tourists—or “travelers,” as we Airbnb types like to be called—are looking for an even deeper involvement, a truly authentic experience of the places they visit. Airbnb helps achieve that, makes you feel that you have, indeed, arrived. Airbnb hosts and lodgings can and do facilitate “inside” experiences of place, and they support geotourism at the same time.

But perhaps these results *are* due more to the lodger than the lodging. Certain travelers are searching for a more immersive travel experience from the outset. This type of traveler has always existed. The demand is as old as travel itself—as old as the “temporary movements of people across space and interactions with place” (Nelson 2013, 8). It’s the supply that is new. Airbnb is fulfilling that demand. It’s providing far easier and greater access to what we’ve been looking for all along: an in.



## Appendix A

### AIRBNB GUEST QUESTIONNAIRE

**Please answer the following to the best of your ability. If you have used Airbnb multiple times, please list all locations under the first question. For the remaining questions, you may focus on one particular Airbnb experience or generalize based on your Airbnb experiences as a whole. *Send completed questionnaire to [agmccullough@utexas.edu](mailto:agmccullough@utexas.edu).***

Where have you used Airbnb?

Was Airbnb a cheaper option for you than a more traditional hotel lodging?  
Furthermore, was your trip more financially feasible because of Airbnb?

Was the purpose of your travel: tourism/sightseeing, business, or visiting friends and relatives? (Please circle or bold your choice)

Why type of lodging did you stay in (e.g. apartment building, sailboat, yurt, single-family home, castle, etc.)?

In your opinion, was your Airbnb lodging more culturally representative of the area you stayed in than a traditional chain hotel? (Y or N)

Do you believe Airbnb allows a traveler to “live like a local”? (Y or N)

Did you meet your Airbnb host in person? If so, how did this affect your experience/your impression of the place you visited?

Did you rent a car? (Y or N)

If not, what was your main mode of transportation while traveling?

Did you patronize local small businesses on your visit? (Y or N)

In your estimation, was this due at all to the location of your lodging and/or recommendations from your host (in person or via the Airbnb “Guidebook” feature)?

In your opinion, does Airbnb facilitate a more immersive travel experience? (Y or N)

*National Geographic* defines “**geotourism**” as “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.” Do you feel it’s fair to say that Airbnb facilitates **geotourism**? (Y or N but feel free to elaborate...)

Will you use Airbnb again? (Y or N)

Why or why not?

What is your age/occupation?

(OPTIONAL) Briefly describe your Airbnb experience(s). Do you like the service? Why or why not?

(OPTIONAL) Attach one photo from your trip(s) that demonstrates something particularly “Airbnb” about your travel experience. This could be as straightforward as a photo of your accommodation, for example, or something along the lines of a neighborhood park you visited that was near your lodging or a photo of you with the bartender of a local watering hole you visited due to a host recommendation.

May I use your real name(s) in my thesis? If not, I will use a random pseudonym.

*Please send completed questionnaire to [agmccullough@utexas.edu](mailto:agmccullough@utexas.edu).*

**THANKS SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND EFFORT IN PARTICIPATING! ☺**

## Appendix B

### AIRBNB HOST QUESTIONNAIRE

**Please answer the following to the best of your ability. *Send completed questionnaire to [agmccullough@utexas.edu](mailto:agmccullough@utexas.edu).***

How long have you been an Airbnb host?

What type of space do you rent on Airbnb?

What do you charge per night?

How did you first come to know about Airbnb?

Were you a guest before you were a host?

Do you use the service as a guest now? Why or why not?

Do you list your rental space on any other sites (VRBO, Couchsurfing, Flipkey, HomeAway, etc.)? Why or why not?

What is your age and occupation?

Do you own the space you're renting on Airbnb?

Have you considered renting it traditionally (i.e. to a regular tenant)? If so, why is Airbnb a better choice for you?

What portion, if any, does Airbnb take of your rental income in service fees?

How much do you depend on your Airbnb income? What % (roughly) is it of your total earnings?

Can you estimate the monthly cost of your electricity/water/other resources spent on your Airbnb rental?

How old is your building? Any interesting historical facts regarding the structure?

How often is your rental occupied?

Have you had any issues with government/city regulations, e.g. needing a license to rent or some other permission such as registering with a tourism board? If so, please elaborate.

Have you had any safety issues or had to increase your safety standards due to legal regulations, city ordinances, etc. since becoming a host? If so, please explain?

Are your neighbors aware of the fact that you use a space in the building for short-term vacation rentals?

Do you ever receive complaints from your neighbors about the rental or guests?

Do you think Airbnb supports local/neighborhood businesses more than traditional hotels?

How often do you meet your guests in person?

Do you ever "hang out" with guests? If so, how often and what is a typical scenario?

Do you write for Airbnb's "Guidebook" and/or make personal recommendations about where to eat/drink/go in your neighborhood?

What's your favorite part about being an Airbnb host?

*National Geographic* defines “**geotourism**” as “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.” Do you feel it’s fair to say that Airbnb facilitates **geotourism**? (Y or N but feel free to elaborate...)

Finally, for the purposes of my research, you are considered a "key informant," or a person talking to me in their professional capacity. As such, do you mind if I use your real name(s) in my thesis? If not, I will use a random pseudonym.

*Please send completed questionnaire to [agmcullough@utexas.edu](mailto:agmcullough@utexas.edu).*

**THANKS SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND EFFORT IN PARTICIPATING! ☺**

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