

## Travel travails before we go

This is about the dumbest thing I have ever done, and the best advice I can give anyone.

The advice first: never try to book an extensive trip through Britain using the internet and your own imagined skills. Employ a travel agent.

The dumbest thing? Well, trying to arrange such a trip.

For the last fortnight, Lin and I have been glued to our computers - sometimes 12 hours a day – trying to organise a tour next year to the graveyards, churches and villages of Ireland, England and Scotland to find our roots.

It's been a nightmare, and a revelation. It's led to the discovery that nothing is as it seems on travel-related websites and once they know your first name you're in for a barrage of "this is the last chance you have to book our fabulous (insert word)" notifications.

Accommodation depicted in palatial glory by 48 photos, including a dozen of the same double bed, may in reality be the proverbial broom cupboard with double-decker bunks and a shared loo.

Rental cars priced to make it look like you can afford a Merc or an Audi turn out to be as unattainable as they are in real life.

And the British rail system appears to lack confidence it will even exist beyond a few months' time, so you can't book in advance to match your travel timetable.

Let's look at AirBnB. We first heard details of this rapidly grown accommodation alternative to hotels and motels from English friends who came to stay in New Plymouth.

They swore by it, so that's where our mouse pointers headed when we looked for places to stay in UK.

The first lesson you learn concerns the confusion generated by AirBnB maps. They have little boxes containing the price hovering over each location...except it's not the actual price.

After you've done the photo tour – in some cases showing all kinds of irrelevancies like ornaments and cute farm animals, and often minus anything about the location of the second double bed (we will be two couples travelling together) or that there are two single beds in the same room as the double – you arrive at the details page.

After pointing out they don't want young party-goers who smoke, and in some cases want a bond when you arrive (one place in London demanded £800) they add extras for cleaning and something called "service" and you get to a price that can be much higher than the one on the map.

After a while you figure they're all doing it, so you can at least compare those in your budget range, although it seems to be much more expensive to get cleaners and "service" in some cities than others.

JT col for Feb 22, 2020 – travel travails

We tried another way by using an online reservations company with global reach. That proved the best option in big cities, but led to a major drama when I accidentally cancelled a stay in Aberdeen.

Even though I'd booked it less than 24 hours before, my refund from nearly \$1000 was just \$50. I asked them to simply reinstate the booking, but got a AI message from the building managers to say it would take 48 hours for them to respond.

Long story short, after searching online news stories, I found a phone number for a travel company the agency bought in New Zealand last year and finally reached a helpful guy, who rang Aberdeen (where it was about 10pm) and got a message to the property manager (who was driving home).

The manager cheerfully accommodated my stupidity and granted a full refund on the condition I rebooked.

The rental car booking industry is an even bigger trial because it's difficult to establish their rules concerning old age.

At 73 I'm getting close to my driving use-by date apparently, so this became an issue. In the end, we went with Hertz, whose upper age limit was clearly stated at 75.

Another global company had more attractive prices, but when I accepted a constant invitation to join its loyalty scheme the rates on vehicles I'd shown interest in suddenly rose by about \$50.

Their comms manager explained: "Our prices vary to reflect a number of factors, including availability, the make and size of the vehicle and location. Prices change to reflect these factors therefore a customer may see different prices depending on when they visit our website."

Travel agents reading these anecdotes will be sighing...or chuckling, Rightly so.