

The Impulsive Traveler



ADRIAN GAUT

Chill space: The patio at the Freehand Miami hostel, housed in a former 1930s Art Deco hotel, offers a great place to read and relax.



ADRIAN GAUT

Bunker mentality: The beds at the Freehand Miami come with privacy screens and reading lights.



CLEVELAND HOSTEL

Eat up: The Cleveland Hostel, which is representative of a new breed of hostels opening across the country, features a communal kitchen.

Wow. Are you sure this is a hostel?

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

On my first night in Cleveland last year, I fell asleep spooning my backpack. I maneuvered my laptop beneath my pillow and leaned my favorite red boots against the wall by my feet. For the first time in more than a decade, I was overnighting in a hostel, and I didn't know what to expect.

But I needn't have worried. Forget all those images of dimly lit youth hostels filled with grungy backpackers — I was staying at a new, squeaky-clean property that barely belongs in the same lodging category. The 18-month-old **Cleveland Hostel** (starting at \$25 per bed per night) in the hip Ohio City neighborhood is representative of a new breed of hostels opening across the country, attracting guests of all ages.

As new hostels open, they offer an increasing number of amenities to remain competitive.

But the joy of staying in a hostel — the communal experience that makes fast friends out of travelers from opposite ends of the globe — isn't lost in this modern era of hosting. There I was, before daybreak, bonding over travel tales with an Eastern European nanny in the opposite bunk. She rushed off to catch an early bus to Detroit, and I untangled my limbs from my backpack straps before going back to sleep.

Hostels, with their dormitory-style rooms and bohemian souls, offer a happy medium between budget hotels and couch-surfing. For travelers who bop around on shoestring budgets, or those for whom meeting kindred spirits trumps having the remote and a pillow-top mattress all to themselves, the news about U.S. hostels is welcome. The well-traveled owners of these new properties want to bring the appealing aspects of hosting stateside, while leaving its reputation behind.

"The hostels going up are almost like

boutique hotels — very high-end, clean, design-focused," said Paul Kletter, who's opening a hostel with his wife on Pittsburgh's South Side in June. "That reputation of hostels — stinky feet and teens — has prevented them from growing in the States. Now that's changing."

To underscore the difference, Kletter won't even call his property a hostel; it's the **South Side Traveler's Rest**. It's in a historic building near the trailhead of the Great Allegheny Passage, and Kletter expects to host cyclists riding the trail between Pittsburgh and Washington.

As new hostels open, they offer an increasing number of amenities to remain competitive. It's common for these properties to supply towels and sheets (BYO was standard not too long ago), free WiFi, 24/7 staff, female-only or private room options, bike storage and a communal kitchen with all the tools you'd need to whip up dinner for your new friends.

In Austin, the **Firehouse Hostel** (starting at \$29) opened last spring in a historic firehouse and offers free breakfast and an adjacent lounge, accessible via a hidden bookshelf in the lobby. The new **Bivvi** in Breckenridge, Colo. (starting at \$45), opened in December and has a 10-person outdoor hot tub, free hot breakfast, the Bivvi Bar for après-ski warming-up with Colorado microbrews, and custom-made Norwegian pine bunk beds.

Freehand Miami (starting at \$19-\$41, depending on the season) opened in 2012 in a former 1930s Art Deco hotel, a block from the beach. Beds have privacy screens and reading lights, and rooms feature work from local artists. Even the 20-year-old **Green Tortoise** in San Francisco, one of the pioneer U.S. hostels, has a myriad of free amenities, including computer and massage-chair use, breakfast, dinner, sauna and sangria.

David Orr, founder of Hostelz.com, a booking and review site that lists 678 U.S. hostels, said that hostels were once largely the domain of 20-something foreign travelers. But that too has changed.

"You might see business travelers, families or elderly travelers staying in a [pricier] private room in a hostel," he said. "It may not be cheaper than a hotel, but people choose it because of the experience."



KIMBERLY GAVIN

Lofty ideas: A communal area of the lodge at the Bivvi in Breckenridge, Colo., which opened in December.

Flash and friendliness

Of course, hotels have common areas too, but they don't have the special sauce that makes memories at hostels. "At hostels, you have people starting conversations, looking at maps, figuring out

what they're doing for the day and deciding to explore together," Orr said. "Or it's evening, a random group of people is sitting on the front porch, someone starts playing a guitar, and you're having this shared experience.

There's almost nothing else like that."

Perhaps the flashiest entrant to the market is London-based **Generator Hostels** — the Virgin America of lodging — with its playful colors and quirky, whimsical design. The company has eight locations across Europe and expects to have deals signed for Washington, New York and Miami later this year.

The company's hostels have bars and chill-out areas, and they're big on parties, art and technology. "The name speaks for itself," said Josh Wyatt, a partner at Patron Capital, the London private equity firm that owns Generator. "It's about massive energy." He said that large properties — an average of 650 beds — allow the company to keep the price under \$30 a night.

Hostelling International (HI), the more institutional and less funky hostel option, has more than 4,000 locations around the world and 50 in the United States. One of HI-USA's largest properties is the 500-bed **HI Chicago** (starting at \$31). Next year, a 60-bed hostel will open in an old Otis Elevator building in Richmond.

During my stay in Cleveland, the hostel felt like home in no time. The Eastern European nanny missed her bus and spent the day in our room; I went out for drinks with a friendly Australian; and my pilot friend arrived from New York and roomed down the hall with a Canadian. A group of civic-minded college students from across the state had taken on Ohio City as a school project, and they held meetings in the common area, discussing issues in the neighborhood, such as safety and development.

On the morning of my departure, I crossed the street to find one of my car windows smashed. My GPS was missing, but I was comforted to find that my fold-up bicycle and favorite red boots, which I'd stashed in the car after the first night, were not. Also comforting: My key card still worked. So I returned to the shelter of the hostel, made myself some oatmeal in the communal kitchen, called my insurance company and eavesdropped on the group of young do-gooders planning their day.

travel@washpost.com

Kaplan is a freelance writer in Washington. Her Web site is www.melaniegkaplan.com.