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Consider renting an apartment for more in-depth stay

By John Hilferty | Senior Travel

PRINT MAIL STORY

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Maybe seeing Paris, London or Rome from a tour bus window is not your idea of a decent vacation. Or perhaps visiting a Caribbean island without the expense of a hotel and restaurants is your goal.

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Do what a lot of people do and go it alone. That means making your own itinerary and choosing your own accommodations and neighborhoods. It can save money and offer deeper immersion into a tourist town than will overnight jaunts from one hotel to another.

These days, finding decent apartments or condos in the location of your choice is relatively easy. Avoiding surprises, such as finding out too late that your reserved space competes with a rock band's rehearsal hall, is paramount.

The Internet provides the most complete and fastest source of information. Take Paris, for instance. A search on www.limaparis.com netted 132 available apartments, which can be narrowed down by neighborhood, size of the apartment, desired dates and rent.

A search for a two-room apartment near the Arc de Triomphe/Champs Elysees garnered five choices at a cost of \$1,172 to \$2,197 a week for up to three weeks. Other choices of four or more weeks set rates at from \$762 to \$1,414 a week.

You also can contact LimaParis at 39 Avenue des Ternes, 75017 Paris, France.

For London, search www.londonchoice.com. A search for a two-room apartment for four people in the Hyde Park neighborhood came up with 14 choices, starting at roughly \$156 a night. This particular site also has color photos and lists amenities such as Internet connection, a safe, dishwasher, fold-away bed, maid service, room service, satellite/cable TV, washer, oven, microwave, iron, cots, elevator service, porter or airport transfers. Also contact (866) 402-1904.

In Rome, www.rentalinrome.com, showed 28 apartments in the Trevi Fountain area. Listed by price, the locations and amenities are revealed in photos and maps. Also

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Visiting a place once makes it easy to scope out accommodations to try on return trips.

Walking the beach on Grand Cayman Island not long ago we came upon a coifed lawn and swimming pool, tall palms, a children's playground and thatched cabanas. The beauty of it stood out from the string of beach-front hotels and other condos. Just by nosing around, we learned that many guests of the Aqua Bay Club (www.aquabayclub.com, (800) 825-8703) make reservations after simply dropping in to look around.

The "Club" might imply a resort, but it's simply a three- story building of 21 large, classy apartments, 19 of which may be rented. The one we eventually stayed in cost \$377 a night, but held two large bedrooms with two full baths and became a perfect location for traveling with grandchildren. Just up the beach is the 23-acre Cayman Turtle Farm and Marine Adventure Park (www.boatswainbeach.ky), which in addition to having snorkeling lagoons is a kind of refugee center for 11,000 green sea turtles ranging in size from 6 ounces to 600 pounds. In addition there are loggerhead, hawksbill and the endangered Kemp's Ridley turtles. Of the latter, the turtle farm claims that 47 of the estimated 1,200 left in the world are there.

Grand Cayman Island is mostly famous for Stingray City, where you snorkel with inquisitive (and hungry) stingrays in relative safety. An easier place to experience the frolicking of these sea animals is the nearby Stingray Sand Bar, which is only waist deep and easier for smaller children to handle.

The Ballyvara House (www.ballyvarahouse.ie) in Doolin, County Clare, Ireland, was one that we stumbled upon while en route to the Cliffs of Moher. By itself, the hotel is a beautiful place to be, with exquisite views of the sea and shore. But its proximity to the cliffs; the Burren, a wild and unforgettably rocky place; inns with Irish music; and a ferry to the Aran Islands made it a joy to visit.

Though closed in winter, The Ballyvara House reopens May 1 and is also ideal for grandchildren, with its children's outdoor activity center, a multipurpose playing court lined for soccer, basketball and tennis. There are also resident donkeys and ponies roaming the grounds. Contact the Ballyvara House, Doolin, County Clare, Ireland; phone (011) 353 65 707 4467.

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