



## Tourism Accommodations

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Rural communities often feature beautiful and natural environments that make them highly appealing to visitors, yet developing budget-friendly lodging can be more difficult compared to the dense urban centers that are home to large hotel chains and may have large advertising budgets. Creating desirable and affordable lodging can be tricky, but services exist to link tourists and travelers to local hosts and businesses, which can be beneficial to rural places diversifying their economies.

### Local Lodging Options

Websites that connect visitors to local lodging often serve different target markets, providing information on a range of potential options that include room rentals, public camping, and more. Many travelers select a website due to its focus on a specific type of travel or desired experience. Individuals or communities can use these sites to develop their own local accommodations, properties and listings.

Travelers seeking a camping experience might look for a listing on the popular website HipCamp (<https://www.hipcamp.com/en-US>) to search for privately owned tent, RV, cabin, treehouse, glamping, or other options. Hosts can create a listing for free for a range of properties, from open lots, cabins, or formal campgrounds or RV park businesses with amenities. HipCamp charges a commission and credit card processing fee once reservations are booked.

Warmshowers.org (<https://www.warmshowers.org>) is a membership site that assists cyclists interested in staying with fellow cycling enthusiasts and hosting other bike travelers in return. Members pay a one-time fee to join the Warm Showers network, host travelers, or find potential hosts for their trips. Hosts and guests communicate in advance to arrange details of stays. For communities that have some cyclists who might have an interest in hosting, this network could be a way to house visitors without developing new infrastructure.

Couchsurfing\_ (<https://www.couchsurfing.com>) and similar services offer an alternative for low-budget wanderlust or hosting.

Harvest Hosts\_ (<https://harvesthosts.com>) specifically serves RV camping locations at sites such as farms, wineries, museums, or other attractions. It is cost-free to list a property that can host a self-contained RV for one night at a time; no infrastructure or services are required other than having a level place to park one or more RVs. Travelers must purchase a website membership to view host properties. There is no other fee for travelers to stay, but visitors are expected to purchase products or services from the host entity or business. As a result, the hosts are expected to have products or services of some sort available for purchase.

Those looking for more informal fee-free camping experiences might search on iOverlander (<https://www.ioverlander.com>), a volunteer-run nonprofit app and website that lists places to stay or places of interest for any kind of "overlander," such as bicycle or motorcycle traveler, car travelers, or

travelers working remotely. iOverlander is not a reservation-based site, and places to stay are expected to be generally available. FreeCampsites (<https://freecampsites.net>) provides another option for finding campsites, with a focus on those that are free or inexpensive. Many of these campsites are on public lands.

Glamping Hub (<https://glampinghub.com>) offers lodgings to those less interested in traditional camping. Glamping refers to luxury camping, but it could include cabins, yurts, caravans, shipping containers, or even a converted grain silo. This website was founded in 2013 as a resource for sustainable tourism.

## Challenges Surrounding Short-Term Rentals

Property rental services like Airbnb, Booking.com, and Vrbo have transformed short-term vacations and travel for both travelers and property owners. There are undeniable advantages to these services, the most obvious being the greater availability of rooms or properties to rent when a hotel might not be located conveniently or is financially out of reach. However, there can be disadvantages to these services, both for those hosting or renting and the communities where the properties are located.

For communities, a pressing concern may be housing supply. Property owners pursuing short-term vacation rental opportunities over long-term residential availability can have significant impacts on housing supply. Communities interested in encouraging tourism through this model should be mindful of affordability of housing as it impacts their residents. Communities with pre-existing challenges related to housing availability and affordability should carefully consider the impacts of permitting or expanding short term rental development activities. Related, hosts and communities alike should be aware of tax implications for these short-term rentals, and the ability of local officials to impose municipal fees or restrictions. Rentals can be taxed or made to require permitting, licensing, registration, or other accommodations as desired by local legislative authorities.

Short-term rentals can be a complicated topic for local leaders. They present no shortage of challenges, affecting housing availability and affordability while impacting neighborhood health, safety and wellbeing. Short term rentals can also blur the lines in local zoning regulations regarding land use considerations for commercial and residential locations. Concerns including parking, occupancy limitations, noise regulations, trash pickup, and similar topics can be sensitive matters for neighbors and visitors alike. It is important to understand these limitations before pursuing short term rental development in any community.

On the other hand, short-term rentals can help cities enhance tourism, stimulate economic growth and provide residents with ways to supplement their income. Regardless of the specific challenges they pose, passing simple, effective and enforceable regulations for short-term rentals is crucial for city leaders. While city responses to short-term rentals have ranged from complete prohibition to no regulations at all, the best solution for each community likely lies somewhere in between. The National League of Cities (NLC) developed a guide (<https://www.nlc.org/resource/short-term-rental-regulations-a-guide-for-local-governments/>) that helps local leaders understand what should be under consideration when it comes to this challenging topic. In this resource, NLC analyzes 60 short-term rental ordinances from cities across the country against 30 indicators and four categories (legal definition, regulation, enforcement and permit).

Communities and would-be hosts should also be aware of the specific insurance needs of a short-term rental. These properties are often unprotected by home insurance. The risk profile of a rental property is

far different from that of a residential property, and a community may be inclined to require certain forms of insurance that are more in line with requirements for a hotel.

While reviews serve to build a brand for renter and host alike, these rental services also represent a somewhat less predictable approach to travel. Visitors should be made aware of the potential for accessibility delays, cleaning requirements or hidden fees, and surveillance.

All of these services differ in fees, customer service, cancellation policy, and more, with some differences between Airbnb and Vrbo, the two largest short-term rental businesses. Notably, Airbnb allows users to rent specific rooms or less conventional lodging, while Vrbo lists wholly available properties.

## More Informational Resources

There are underutilized spaces in communities which may benefit from conversion into lodging for travelers, whether in a traditional hotel format or one of the alternatives. Large-scale conversions have occurred in the past, pandemic-induced rise of remote work has lowered office demand and occupancy rates. These conversions fall on each community or private property owners to assess whether the benefits of such a conversion will outweigh the costs, and how to ensure those seeking lodging will be aware of new facilities. There has been national legislation proposed- S.2511 — 117th Congress (2021-2022), but not passed, that would give tax credits to support this conversion process. This policy would draw from HUD's Historic Tax Credit (<https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/environmental-review/historic-preservation/tax-credit/>) Program, which supports rehabilitating the historic income-producing buildings of a community for income-producing uses—like hotels.

It may also be of interest to community hoteliers to learn more about FedRooms (<https://www.fedrooms.com/home.html>). FedRooms is a federal program conducted through the General Services Administration and it provides Federal Travel Regulation (FTR) compliant hotel accommodations at or below per diem with standardized amenities. This program is available to all U.S. government and military personnel. Hoteliers interested in learning more and reviewing requirements can visit <https://www.fedrooms.com/hoteliers.html>.

## About this Resource Sheet

*This resource does not provide an exhaustive list of potential accommodations. Any mention of a specific company, product, service, or website in this publication does not constitute or imply an endorsement by the research team. Lodging hosts and visitors are encouraged to do their due diligence before creating a listing or booking a stay.*

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