

Amid coronavirus restrictions, can small inns and B&Bs retain their warm and cozy vibe?

By **Elizabeth Heath**

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A stack of muffins on a tiered serving tray. A living room with pillow-strewn couches that invite you to curl up with a good book. A common dining table where strangers chat over breakfast. Attentive host-owners eager to suggest an itinerary, bring up extra firewood or linger in conversation.

What small inns and bed-and-breakfasts lack in big amenities, they make up for with personalized service and homey ambiance. That's why many travelers prefer these small, owner-run accommodations to big, impersonal hotels.

But sanitation and social distancing guidelines amid the coronavirus pandemic have innkeepers and guests alike rethinking "warm and cozy." From how breakfast is served to in-room accoutrements to how guests and hosts mingle, smaller properties are facing a cultural revolution of sorts, and things are going to look a little different when the dust finally settles.

Across the hospitality industry, the pandemic has forced changes in virtually every aspect of customer service and property amenities, from instituting contactless check-in to making fewer rooms available. These practices have trickled down to inns and B&Bs, where they present additional challenges related to already low room inventory and small staff — it's a lot more viable for Hilton to develop a touchless check-in app and close off half the rooms in a thousand-room hotel than it is for, say, a four-room B&B where the owners, usually a couple, are the only staff.

Yet Heather Turner, marketing director for the Association of Lodging Professionals, says member inns are finding creative ways to meet the moment. The ALP adopted the American Hotel and Lodging Association's Safe Stay protocols and tailored them to small accommodations with just a few staff members and sometimes minimal resources.

Touchless check-in, for example, means that guests are handed a sealed container with their room key, single-use bath amenities and any other essentials that might otherwise be left in the room. Gone are in-room nonessentials, such as pillows and shams, bed throws and decorative figurines. "They've basically stripped the rooms of all that stuff," says Turner. "If it's not easy to clean, it's gone."

Gone, too, are stacks of magazines and brochures in living rooms. Turner recalls a Hudson Valley innkeeper who spent two days sanitizing board games in her parlor — including wiping down every playing card, backgammon stone and

Fewer frills

For many inns and B&Bs, the coronavirus has meant big changes to the ambiance that is so often part of the identity of the lodging — picture an old Victorian mansion with guest rooms awash in antiques, lace and brocade, with canopy beds draped with diaphanous fabrics. That’s a curated look that took a long time to achieve. But for now, at least, much of those baroque frills have given way to more restrained, easy-to-clean minimalism. Turner is hopeful things will go back to the way they were before the coronavirus, but that will depend on the evolving understanding of how the virus is spread and how long it lives on surfaces. In the meantime, she says, “the fact that owners are sacrificing some of their inns’ much-loved character to keep people safe says a lot about the industry.”

Monica Edwards, who with her husband, Daniel, runs Morehead Manor Bed & Breakfast in Durham, N.C., thinks many of the coronavirus-wrought changes may be permanent. “One of things it’s doing is making us realize what was necessary versus what wasn’t necessary,” she says. “With a lot of tchotchkes and doilies, you can’t really clean the way you need to clean.” In the future, she says, “I think frilly Victorian inns will be few and far between.”

At their five-room, 1900s colonial-revival inn, the Edwardses let rooms sit empty for 24 hours before they go in and clean. They strip, wash and switch out all textiles, then fog the rooms. The result is a two-day lag between guests, which the couple feels is necessary, even if it results in lower revenue.

Still, faced with the uncertainty of the times, some inns have chosen to forgo their 2020 season. At the Maples Inn Bed & Breakfast in Bar Harbor, Maine, owners Leigh and Matthew Lauck have opted not to reopen their seven-room inn until spring 2021. “We’re wholly supportive of our colleagues who have decided to open,” says Leigh Lauck. “But we needed to take time to reflect, have more information available about the virus, and deliberate what a reopening plan will look like next spring.” It’s a financial blow, she says, but so would have been reopening now with fewer rooms in their inventory.

No hands in the cookie jar

Nothing says cozy like a warm cookie — and fresh, homemade ones are the hallmark of many a B&B. “We’re used to letting guests help themselves,” says Edwards. “We’d just have a cake plate where someone could take what they wanted.” But now, she says, they have to ensure that “a person can’t touch another person’s cookie.” Treats are now individually packaged, and Edwards finds that most guests are content to grab a single cookie or slice of cake and take it back to their rooms to eat. In the butler’s pantry, where snacks and drinks are always available, there’s hand sanitizer by the fridge door, which the Edwardses wipe down several times a day.

And it’s not just the snacks that are under attack. Turner says that throughout their 800-plus membership, breakfast has been the biggest point of consternation. Many places were used to serving breakfast family style, with guests all seated around a single table and serving themselves from communal platters and bowls. Solutions now include separate small tables, plated meals and staggered seatings, so that the dining room never gets too crowded and six feet

of space can be maintained between guests. In addition to the dining room, which now seats fewer guests, Edwards has started serving breakfast in the B&B's garden.

Warm, cozy and six feet apart

Guests and innkeepers alike can adjust to safety protocols, sparser guest rooms and sanitized board games. But what will be lost in terms of the culture of small properties when guests and hosts can no longer mingle at close range? Not surprisingly, those interviewed all feel like traditional small-inn hospitality will find a way, even if the precautions become permanent.

“It’s not in most innkeepers’ personalities to not want to connect with guests,” says Turner, citing a colleague who told her, “‘If I can’t talk to my guests I might as well just close up forever.’” The chitchat that’s so often part and parcel of a B&B stay just looks a little different now. Turner recently stayed at a lodging where guests and hosts chatted out in the garden, with masks and from a safe distance. “People are still finding a way to connect,” she says.

Edwards, too, says fewer informal chats are happening over breakfast, since she and her husband are serving guests from behind masks and then making a swift exit. Instead, those conversations are moving to the garden, where guests seem happy to observe safety guidelines. She’s averse to a lot of rules and signage, partly, she says, because “we want people to get away from their regular routine of dealing with the virus all the time.” Still, she’s had to relent and post gentle reminders to guests about social distancing, mandatory mask policies, and using hand sanitizer before and after they touch surfaces in the butler’s pantry.

“If you set the tone for what you expect of your guests, they know what they’re in for,” Edwards says. Many recent visitors, she says, “have been cooped up at home for four months — this is their first outing into the world. They’ve chosen a smaller, individually owned property because it makes them feel safer.”

When their Bar Harbor B&B reopens in the spring, Lauck predicts that even if there’s no trace left of the coronavirus, its mark on hospitality will linger. “We’re in the midst of a worldwide human experience that will have lasting effects,” she says, “just like 9/11 had lasting effects on how we travel.” She maintains that with some planning and creativity, they’ll be able to offer the same personalized service that makes B&B stays so special — though she says, “We may not be hugging guests goodbye anymore.”

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