

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

# Does B&B stand for blah and bummer? One man's stand against breakfast with strangers.

By **Christopher Muther** Globe Staff, August 30, 2017, 1:13 p.m.




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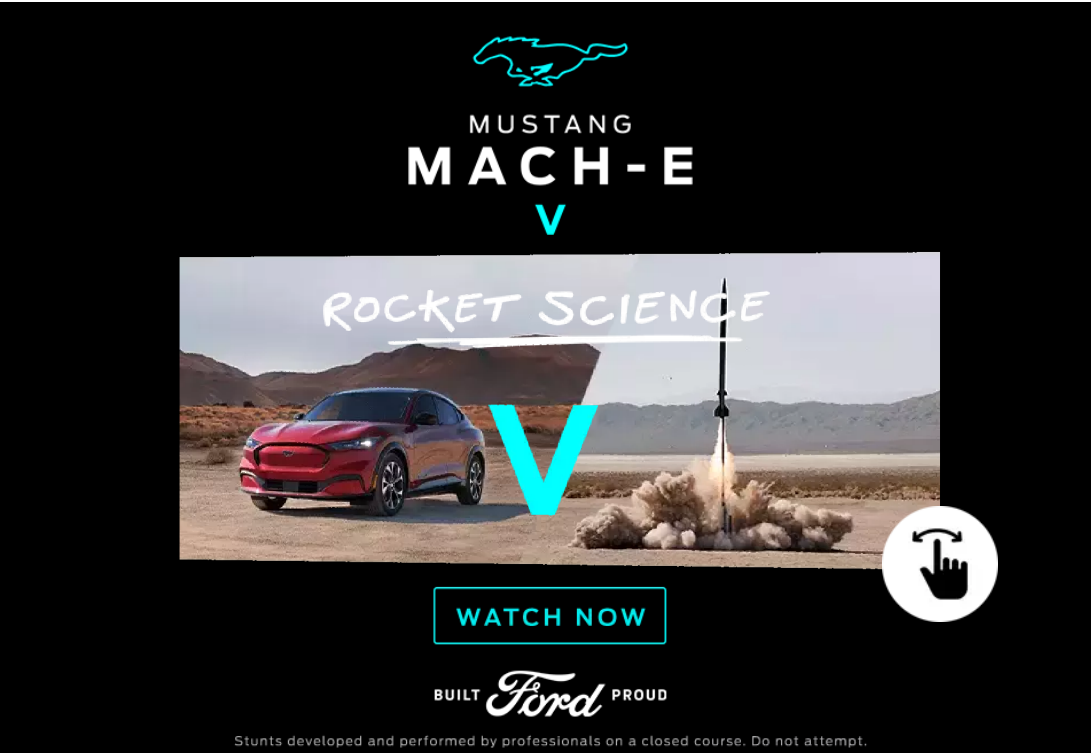
I stood behind the door, afraid, and waiting for a chance to make a break for it.

I was staying at a bed and breakfast in Maine last year, and I wanted to escape without the owner seeing me. I'm not a communal breakfast person, so I was hoping to get the H-E-double-toothpicks into my car, drive away, and sit in a nice cafe without the dreaded obligation of making small talk with strangers.

I held my breath and opened the door.

“Finally!” boomed the owner's voice, as if she had been keeping close watch. “I was wondering when you were going to wake up. You're late for breakfast, but I'm going to make you something.”

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Meanwhile, her giant and far-too-affectionate dog jumped upon me and began drooling with the intensity of a garden sprinkler, using my pants as a bib. As the owner served up a stack of pale pancakes with a side of authentic [Mrs. Butterworth's](#) syrup, I remembered why I avoided bed and breakfasts.

“Do you like them?” she asked, fishing for pancake compliments and small talk. “What are you up to today?”

Egad!

Against my better judgment I had booked a room at Mrs. Butterworth's Bed and Breakfast (name changed to protect the dog's identity) because it was the only place in town. When I have options, I always choose a hotel over a bed and breakfast. Dissenters, start your engines, but nearly every time I've stayed in a B&B, I've felt as if I was trapped in a strict, stuffy grandmother's house that was busting with doilies and Franklin Mint commemorative kitten plates.

There are plenty of B&Bs that don't fit that description, but I've never had the pleasure of staying in one. I'm not alone. Ask nearly anyone, and I guarantee they have at least one unpleasant bed-and-breakfast story.

"We checked in to discover the bed was startlingly unfit for human use and there was a shared bathroom that was locked for a curiously long time by another guest," Jill Keenan, a teacher from Westfield told me of her honeymoon B&B experience. "We spread a blanket on top of the bed and slept on that. We used the bathroom as one would use a rundown gas station bathroom and left at dawn."

I still have nightmares about the time I stayed at a B&B, let's call it the Dusty Duvet, where a crudely painted plaque on my door read "Mama's Room." Terrifying antique dolls stared at me from the corner. All that was missing was a clown with a knife hiding under the bed, or perhaps a parrot in a Victorian cage repeating the word "Die."

Let's get the biggest B&B annoyance out the way first: Breakfast with strangers. Is there anyone who likes this? Some of the nicest individuals I know abhor the ritual. People often say they don't want to deal with the world until they've had their morning coffee. Others say they're uncomfortable with the owner/chef hovering above them while they eat. As a misanthropic morning person (I'm also a misanthropic afternoon and evening person), I couldn't agree more.

Now, can I get a quick show of hands of folks who love racing out of bed at 7:30 a.m. while on vacation to get breakfast, because it ends at 8?

There must be people who enjoy dragging themselves out of bed early and talking about the weather with strangers, but I've only come across a few brave souls.

"It depends on the B&B, but I like the homey, comfy feel," said William McAdoo, a sales associate at Massachusetts General Hospital. "The conversation with experienced travelers is always fun."

But McAdoo seemed to be the exception. I have a friend who is the general manager of a B&B, and even he doesn't like B&Bs.

"People are too close in a B&B," he said. Naturally, he didn't want his name in this story. "I dislike having to sit across from people and observe their poor table manners, or listen to them talk about their health issues, medications, children, and grandchildren."

B&Bs are often located in historic homes. That's what gives them their charm. It also gives them their paper-thin walls, creaky floors, and squeaky bed frames. So much for that romantic getaway. Cries of passion carry a bit too easily through horse hair insulation. I've found that the best option is to sit still and whisper.

You always remember you're staying in someone else's home when you're sternly told that the front door is locked at 9 p.m., or earlier. That's great, because it means you can go back to your room and have plenty of time to sit still and whisper even more.

Decor tends to be another big B&B turn-off. In many cases it looks as if Laura Ashley herself came for a visit and vomited floral patterns on everything. Chintz and cutesy, homey bric-a-brac abound. Even my grandmother's apartment looks more modern, and she's 94.

"I stayed at one in the Berkshires that smelled like an antique store, so many antique pieces had been stuffed in it," Lester Tome, a professor at Smith College told me.

I tend to focus on the champagne glass as being half empty, particularly when I've experienced a series of unfortunate events. But as I scan the attic of my brain, I can't think of a positive B&B memory. A friend's credit card was stolen on my first B&B adventure in a quaint seaside town. He later determined it was stolen by a member of the staff because he traced the fraudulent purchase back to the inn.

But I don't want to be the solitary storm cloud that rains on the parade of happy B&B guests. There are thousands of B&Bs in the United States, so my experiences must be some kind of anomaly. I wanted to track down a few people who love bed and breakfasts, and I found some.

"When I'm going to a city for a few days, I go out of my way to find a B&B," said Jim Botticelli, founder of the [website](#) and author of the book "Dirty Old Boston." "I feel more special there. There are fewer people, and you have a personal relationship with the inn keepers."

Botticelli had clearly never stayed at the Dusty Duvet or Mrs. Butterworth's Bed and Breakfast because he said most of his accommodations have been in beautifully restored historic buildings. He also dropped a bombshell on me: He likes the feeling of camaraderie when chatting up his fellow lodgers in the morning.

"I'm surprised that you're finding so much negativity. What's you're feeling about B&Bs?" he asked me.

"I believe I'm the one asking the questions here," I replied.

I thought it was only fair that I give the B&B folks a chance to respond to the complaints they must constantly field from malcontents such as myself.

"Well, we don't really hear that," said Heather Turner marketing director of the [Professional Association of Innkeepers International](#). "I think there are people with preconceived notions of what bed and breakfasts used to be years ago. But they've changed dramatically. It's not really about doilies anymore."

There was a time when the majority of B&B owners were older, she said. They were couples on the second or third careers that thought owning an inn would be like [“Newhart.”](#)

“They were quick to find out that it’s not ‘Newhart’ at all,” she said. “It’s a tremendous amount of work. I’m starting to see the age demographic of people getting into B&Bs getting younger. Now a lot more people in their 30s and 40s getting into it.”

Given my limited experience with B&Bs I assumed that the shared breakfast situation was universal. But Turner patiently explained that the group table is the exception, not the rule.

“I’ve stayed at hundreds of B&Bs, and I’d say that maybe one in 15 have a table like that,” she said. “My husband has no interest in chatting with strangers at breakfast. He was under the impression all B&Bs were like that. But I explained that no one holds a gun to your head and says ‘You must talk to other people.’ ”

She also said that the decor and the vibe of B&Bs is wide-ranging. She’s stayed in modern inns with rooms that do not resemble Mary Todd Lincoln’s boudoir.

Turner’s advice to me was to stop being such a baby and just check websites to find a decent B&B. Well, she didn’t say anything about being a baby. She was actually incredibly patient and did not hang up on me when I told her what I was writing about. She offered a lot of helpful advice.

The conversation was almost — that’s *almost* — enough to help me reconsider my B&B-fearing ways. But give me time. It’s not easy to forget the blank stares of a klatch of Victorian dolls in the corner or your room, or even the beady gaze of Mrs. Butterworth from the kitchen table.

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