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Summer House Horrors: On a Private Lake in Maine, No One Can Hear You Scream

By [JOYCE WADLER](#)

PAT STRASSBERG, a bus driver and photographer from Bayville, N.Y., is an experienced summer renter. When she saw an ad on [Craigslist](#) for a two-bedroom cabin on a lake in Maine for \$700 a week, with linens and maid service included, she checked it out thoroughly: she asked for photos of the property; she Googled the owner and found out he lived in the area and ran a local business, which suggested that he could be reached if there was a problem and that he was a respectable guy. Then, she called him and questioned him about the property.

"I said, 'Is the lake clean?' " she remembers. "He said, 'My kids love to go swimming in it.' "

The part about the linens proved to be, as so much advertising is, an exaggeration. When Ms. Strassberg, her husband and two children arrived, there were no linens, just some aromatic old comforters. The seats of the leather couch were encrusted with black mold. The two bedrooms were lofts without railings. And the cabin was littered with dead leaves and spider webs.

Still, as Ms. Strassberg said, trying to cheer up her dejected family, they did have that beautiful lake.

"We put on our bathing suits, we're standing in the water, and, like, 15 huge fat leeches come swimming up," Ms. Strassberg says.

"My daughter started screaming. Each one was like three or four inches long. That's a bad leech."

She continued: "All you had to do was sit on the dock and tap and they would come swimming. They're attracted to the vibrations. I asked a park ranger later, she said most lakes in Maine have leeches, but they're like a teeny little worm. These things were like bloodsuckers."

The family left the next morning, having lost the first day of their vacation and their \$100 deposit.

True, this might have been avoided if Ms. Strassberg had thought to ask the obvious questions when the landlord spoke of his children frolicking in the lake: "Are your children human?" Or, "When they leave the lake, have you ever had occasion to find disgusting, slimy things sticking to them that you have to remove, albeit incorrectly, with a lighted match or cigarette?"

But in the excitement of finding the perfect summer house, who thinks of everything?

Sure, the experts at [Realtor.com](#) offer some suggestions, which apply equally to renter and landlord: get a

contract in writing; check references; find out whether linens and housekeeping are included.

The readers of this section are far too sophisticated to fall victim to online scams in which the purported owner of a property claims to have taken a job out of town without leaving a spare set of keys behind and suggests you hire a locksmith, have your own set made and then mail a cashier's check to him at an out-of-town address, a scam which actually popped up in Hawaii.

But few experts will give you the lowdown so essential to save you from a real summer rental nightmare. So read, memorize, tremble. And at the very least, don't send a certified check to Nigeria.

Never Rent a House Without Inspecting It

True, this can be difficult when you are renting an out-of-town property. But Anne Foxley, a stylist and designer in Bronxville, N.Y., can attest to its importance.

Ten years ago, when she and her husband lived in Tokyo and their children were very young, they rented a house for a week on Martha's Vineyard from friends of friends. In photos, it looked charming in what Ms. Foxley describes as a fashionably shabby, slipcovered sort of way. The rent was \$2,500.

Ms. Foxley and her husband arrived at the house with their 9-month-old and 3-year-old daughters, and having stocked up on food at the farmers' market, went to the kitchen to make sandwiches.

"We opened the drawers," Ms. Foxley says, and found mouse droppings on the can opener. "We started looking around the bedrooms and there were more and more," she said, even on the pillowcases on the bed. "I'm like, 'Oh, my God. I have a 9-month-old girl who is going to be crawling around on the floor, putting things in her mouth. This isn't safe.'"

The infestation could not be considered old — within hours, peaches Ms. Foxley placed on the counter were marred with holes the size of a rodent's mouth. Calling first the broker, and then the owner, Ms. Foxley and her husband were told they were exaggerating the problem; this was the country, there were mice. The Foxleys left the next day, and the owners refused to return the rent.

Today, after several years of renting, they have found what they consider a foolproof solution: "We ended up buying a little house in Newport," Ms. Foxley says. "We didn't want to rely on anyone."

Or at Least Make Sure a Real Estate Agent Looks at the Property for You

An experienced real estate agent can be a renter's friend. He or she is familiar with the property, has a reputation to protect and is nearby in case of problems. This is particularly true with well-established agents, the sort Ed Lobrano, a New York City designer, sought out for a last-minute Fourth of July rental on Fire Island a few years ago. When the broker told Mr. Lobrano, who has an elegant Manhattan apartment, that he had found a cute little two-bedroom house, Mr. Lobrano did not object to spending \$3,000 for four days.

Unfortunately, the property was not a free-standing house — it was the third floor of a house belonging to what Mr. Lobrano describes as "a weird, noisy, straight family," who were right beneath him. The beds had

bare metal springs and thin, worn mattresses; the linens were balled up in the closet with dirty clothes. As night fell, he discovered there was only one lamp.

“The next morning, I went to the real estate agent’s house and said, ‘Have you seen this?’” Mr. Lobrano says. “He said, ‘I was told it was nice.’ I said, ‘Who told you?’ He said, ‘The owner.’”

Chris Kehoe, a Massachusetts real estate lawyer and the chairman of the Massachusetts Bar Association’s Property Law Section, recalls a similar situation a few years ago. A Chicago client rented a Nantucket waterfront cottage sight unseen, paying \$20,000 for two weeks. When he arrived with his family, he found that a large house was under construction next door. Mr. Kehoe got a panicked call.

What did he do?

“There’s usually a ‘quiet enjoyment’ clause in most rental property agreements — it’s certainly something you should look for,” he says. “I called the real estate broker, who found him another property. I think she actually paid to have him move.”

If there was a real estate agent involved, shouldn’t she have known a house was going up next door?

“Yeah, that question came up.”

Make a Video

We live in litigious times. This is why Allan Glass, the owner of ASG Real Estate in Los Angeles, who often handles \$20,000-a-month rentals, insists his clients videotape properties before taking possession and before leaving, preferably in the company of the owner. Mr. Glass suggests doing this in a “nonchalant” manner.

This turned out to be time well spent for a recording artist who rented a home in the Hollywood Hills three years ago. At the end of her stay, the owner tried to collect \$35,000 for items he claimed were missing, but which, the tapes showed, were either still in the house or had never existed.

“The owner was very fast and loose,” Mr. Glass said. “He owned a fairly notorious nightclub and showed up in a leather duster, alligator boots and had a chain with a big dollar sign. You kind of knew what you were getting in for when you walked in the door.”

Understood. But how does one nonchalantly ask an owner to appear in such a video?

“You don’t say, ‘I need you to stand here so I can track all the inventory and you don’t try to rip me off,’” Mr. Glass says. “You say, ‘I’m going to make a video of all the stuff that’s inside so that we have an inventory list, are you O.K. with that?’”

And yet even Mr. Glass has not been immune to scams. Two summers ago, he brokered what was supposed to be a luxury beachfront rental in Nice for a longtime client and friend through a French management company. All might have gone well, if not for the busy highway between the villa and the beach. The house was also thick with mold, and the client and her two children got sinus infections.

A few days into the vacation, the client was awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of a key in the front door. The new arrivals were the owners, flying in from London.

“It turned out that the company hired to manage the property was renting it out and keeping the profit,” says Mr. Glass, who quickly moved his clients into another house. “They had business licenses, but they didn’t have the authority to be renting out the place. The lesson for me going forward is to get a copy of the listing agreement.”

That Never Would Have Happened With an East Coast Broker

Three years ago, Geri Muhs, an owner of Village Real Estate in Hampton Bays, N.Y., rented a waterfront house to a couple for the summer, for \$20,000. Unfortunately, the owners had neglected to pass along one crucial piece of information.

“It was in foreclosure,” Ms. Muhs said. “The day the people who were renting moved in, the person called who held the private mortgage on the house.”

She continued: “The man who was foreclosing allowed them to stay the season, but there was considerable security involved, and the renters were afraid they were not going to get it back. There was a valuable grandfather clock in the house and they moved it and held it hostage.”

What became of the clock?

“In the long run, it was finally brought back and the security was returned, but it was very emotional on all sides.”

Then Again, You Can’t Always Blame the Pool Boy. Or Even the Pool.

Sometimes the owners are the ones to suffer at the hands of the tenants. Take the case of the “very well-known author and playwright” who rented a “very high-end summer house” several years ago through Mitch Rapoport, a real estate agent and office manager of FreeStyle Realty in Woodstock, N.Y.

Oh, c’mon, tell us who, Mitch.

“We can’t reveal the name.”

How about the price?

It was, he said, “\$22,000 or \$23,000 for three months. One of the criteria, she was looking for a house with a heated pool. At the end of the rental when she left, she demanded her money back because she said the pool was too hot to swim in. The owner refused.”

Mr. Rapoport starts laughing. “After she leaves, the owner received a bill for \$5,700 for propane. The husband, trying to make it a little warmer, had turned the thing on full tilt and the pool was almost 160 degrees,” he says. “When I got to the house there was steam rising over the lawn.”

The lesson for the homeowner?

“Get a big deposit up front and wait till all the bills are in to return the deposit.”

We're Actually Not Sure Who Is to Blame on This One

But what of the fiscally challenged young person who cannot afford a pricey real estate agent or attorney, you may ask? Case in point: Daniel Arnold, a 29-year-old writer at MTV.com. This spring, he and three friends spotted an ad on Craigslist for an artist's cabin in upstate New York, which sounded to them like a hippie paradise. They negotiated the price from \$500 to \$400 for a weekend and when they arrived were charmed by idiosyncratic touches like the green tarp awning and the slide on the porch that served as an alternate means of egress.

The friends had brought a little Pomeranian, which Mr. Arnold refers to as “the cutest, most obedient little dog.”

“He would disappear for stretches and we didn't know where he was going,” Mr. Arnold says. “Eventually, we realized he was using the little kid's bed as a toilet.”

Wait! Stop! You let the dog urinate on the bed?

“We felt horrible,” he says. “We found a big puddle of pee in the kid's room, this cute little room. We stripped off the kid's sheet and the mattress was just saturated brown with kid's pee. And there was the same situation all over the place, once we stripped the sheets off.”

Old human urine stains on all the beds. Yikes. “The beds weren't so comfortable in the first place,” Mr. Arnold adds. “And there were noises in the woods, when the apples hit the ground, the usual things that freak you out, shadows in the night.”

Can we get back to the sheets? Did you at least get them laundered?

“We rinsed them out in the sink. We were so disgusted by the state of the bed, we figured that was enough.”

Culpability in summer rentals is such a gray area. Or in this case, brown. What is Mr. Arnold doing for the rest of the summer?

“We have plans to go to this place that doesn't have beds or running water. Apparently there is a hot and cold shower and a sink a short walk away. It's \$75 a night; it's basically a wooden tent. The toilet is a pit, but apparently it has a stained glass outhouse, so what more can I ask?”

Will the Horrors Never End?

And then there is Christina Juarez, a Manhattan design publicist, who two summers ago rents a small cottage in Bridgehampton that has such a terrible mold problem, she can smell it from the car when she arrives. Fortunately, Ms. Juarez travels everywhere with her Jo Malone lime basil mandarin candles, which help reduce the smell. (No, Malone is not a client of hers; you readers are so cynical.) She's not the sort of girl to wait for the cleaning lady to show up, so although she is already late for a dinner party, she gets down on her hands and knees and scrubs the place with Fantastik.

The next day, when she sees the owner, Ms. Juarez throws such a fit that he gives her his house and moves into the cottage.

There are two summer rental lessons to be learned from Ms. Juarez:

1) If your car has the space, bring cleaning supplies, and 2) do not be embarrassed to throw a fit.

We hesitate to suggest scented candles, as so many vacation community firefighters are volunteers.

It's Summer. You're in the Country. Go Fix Yourself a Drink.

Ten years ago, a food writer named Julie Mautner, having fallen in love with the south of France, quit her job and rented a traditional stone house in the little town of St.-Rémy-de-Provence, sight unseen. A French friend had sent her a blurry photo and told her the house was unfurnished, but did not explain that this meant it had no refrigerator, no oven, not a stick of furniture.

As Ms. Mautner was taking six months off, this troubled her less than it might have otherwise. But it was a charming house, with a tile roof, wooden shutters, terra-cotta floors. She spent a few nights with friends, bought an old mattress at the market, made a trip to a nearby [Ikea](#).

Today, she owns the house. And in the summer, the neighbors bring her bowls of fresh olives and figs. Summer is grand.

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