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Private Houses, A Home Away From Home Vacation

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After hearing the pros and cons about booking holidays in someone else's home, we decided to try it out with our extended family for a vacation in Hilton Head, SC. For our family, 'extended' meant three adults and two dogs.

Having two 'four-legged friends' meant we decided to drive instead of fly from Toronto, ON.

Speedy drivers may do it faster, but we found we were going to spend 18 hours on the road so we broke the drive up by stopping twice for the night each way. Coming and going, we stayed in Pittsburgh, PA; and Charlotte, NC; where we found pet-friendly hotels. Audio books helped pass the time.

Since our destination was going to be a privately owned vacation rental home, our first task was finding a property for the dates we wanted. There are a number of firms that rent homes for owners all over the world. The one we selected is 'Vacation Rentals by Owner' ... VRBO for short.

'Paw' Symbol

To find the homes listed on www.vrbo.com that accept pets, we looked for a 'paw' symbol on the listings. We found a very wide range of home quality, usually priced accordingly, from condos to multi-bedroom upscale gated community residences with private pools and more.

However, be prepared to spend hours going through the listings as, unfortunately, the online VRBO sorting program needs a lot of work. We found it very frustrating and painfully slow to use. It should be easy to





do multiple sorts to your specifications – number of bedrooms, private pool or not, waterfront or not, golf course, pets or not, rental prices, dates available, and more. However, the VRBO people have not done that.

In the end, we found a three bedroom, three bathroom bungalow with a private pool that accepted pets (extra cleaning fee) in the Sea Pines gated community on Hilton Head island.

Our rental rate for seven nights in this home was \$2,287 which included the amenities fee, taxes, administration fee, security deposit, etc. Considering it was a home with three bedrooms and a private pool, \$327 a night is reasonable as it is what you would pay for just a single room in a hotel in Hilton Head.

The photos describe the place better than words, but everything was provided. We had a two car garage, washer/dryer, BBQ, full kitchen with everything you'll need, bikes, the heated pool (which we didn't need as the temperature was 105°F degrees during the day all week), and gardening services. We found the VRBO online pictures showing the unit to be quite accurate.

Welcome Change

Arrival at the private home in a very woodsy, residential neighbourhood was easy with the GPS. The gate-house package gave us a key and we just walked in through the enclosed pool area and into the house.

Entering the house, everyone – including the dogs – ran around deciding which bedroom would be 'theirs.' However, it was hard to make a wrong choice as there was a TV and DVD player in every bedroom and the Great Room, along with a nice selection of DVDs such as Mad Men, Series 1 and 2.

We toured the pool area and one of the dogs fell in, which she enjoyed given the high temperatures.

Maid service comes before you arrive and after you leave, but I understand daily maid and private chef services are available for an extra fee. Everything was spotless with a bright decor and furnishings. It felt like home, not a hotel. I could have moved in permanently.

During our stay, we didn't see or hear from anyone at VRBO, a somewhat welcome change from some time share companies which view your stays at their properties as a marketing opportunity. Other than the daily visit from the pool guy, we were on our own and not bothered.

As for Hilton Head, there's plenty to do. It has golf courses everywhere, shopping (including a number of large outlets mall just off the island), boating, deep-sea fishing, swimming, and sight-seeing. Savannah, GA; is about a half hour away and worth a day trip. You definitely need a car to see everything in the area and a visit to CAA or AAA to get area maps and books can help you plan your trip ahead of time to ensure you see everything you want to see.

As well, a GPS is wonderful time saver. Not only did it take us right to the door of our vacation home when we arrived, but if you are walking around a strange city it is great tool to help you find what you want to see.

You can't visit Hilton Head without sampling some of the fine restaurants for which it is known. The Old Fort is our favourite, but CQ's, Crane's Tavern, and Michael Anthony's rank high on the list. I came to the conclusion that everyone in Hilton Head eats out every night as the restaurants were very busy.

One word of caution, it can be difficult for first timers to find their way around Hilton Head, especially at night as there are no streets lamps. Again the GPS is a big help, but take a flashlight as well.

Arduous Selection Process

We would go again in a heartbeat as we were very impressed with our vacation home.

The issue is whether we can face the arduous selection process again. Not only is there a huge number of homes available, but as mentioned earlier, the poorly designed online database sorting system makes finding the right home a challenge.

Another area which could be improved is the renter reviews section of the website. The property we selected lacked any reviews which concerned us and made us wonder if the pictures were accurate (they were). Other properties had reviews which were suspiciously glowing. Despite this, the home reviews on the VRBO listings may help greatly in your selection, so look for them.

However, in the end, the combination of a wonderful vacation home and Hilton Head gave us a terrific vacation for not only the adults in our family, but for our 'four-legged friends'. ■

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