

ALFRED BORCOVER

What to do if your tourist apartment comes up lacking

When you travel to a major favorite city for more than just a couple of days—say Paris, London, New York—there's much to be said for renting an apartment rather than staying in a hotel. It's a great way get closer to the people, to gain a more intimate sense of the place.

But renting is not without its pitfalls. Unlike staying in a hotel, there's no front desk to call to replace a light bulb or request fresh towels. If there are loud noises coming from upstairs, there's no security available to check out the problem.

When Maribeth Joyce Zegler, a Chicago travel agent, checked into an apartment she rented in Paris on a Sunday in June for five days, she was distressed to find the place dirty and in need of repairs. She called the rental agency—Paris Sejour Reservation, with an office in Chicago—the following day to complain.

What ensued, according to Zegler, were assurances that things would be taken care of and her counterclaims that they were not. PSR, she said, offered to put her in another apartment, but it was higher priced.

Zegler said she received no satisfaction from PSR.

Virginie Menage, who manages the Chicago office, said PSR maintains a 24-hour emergency hotline in Paris that Zegler could have called. But Zegler said the apartment problems weren't of an emergency nature so she waited until the following day to complain.

Menage said it is the policy of PSR to fix the problems in the apartment or to offer the person another apartment. But June was high season, she said, and there wasn't much choice available.

Nothing was resolved to Zegler's satisfaction. Zegler's experience simply points out that renting an apartment isn't always peaches and cream. In her case, she found problems and insists they weren't addressed. PSR on the other hand insists the problems were resolved.

Whether you're renting in Paris or anywhere else, when things go wrong there's no arbi-

trary, no official body to mediate the complaint. Yes, you can complain to local tourist boards, but basically the dispute remains between the renter and the rentee.

"We always have somebody within the area that is responsible for answering complaints, because regardless of what anybody tells you, I don't care whether you have the best property in the world, things can go wrong," said Harry Barclay, president of New York-based Barclay International.

Barclay's 39-year-old company handles some 6,000 rental apartments in London, 4,000 in Paris and several thousand villas throughout Europe.

"We insist clients report problems while they are at the property, because if they don't give us an opportunity to fix it, we will not assume responsibility. If they complain when they get home, it's too late. We haven't had a chance to do anything about it."

If renters find an apartment dirty or in need of repair, Barclay said, they have an option. Since 99 percent of renters use a credit card, Barclay said most people would stop payment on the card. "It's their insurance that we're going to come through with the goods."

Barclay said apartments are inspected three or four times a year. In addition, he said, cleaning people check them out to ensure clients haven't caused any damage. "In this business you don't last very long unless you maintain properties well. If we find a property is getting tired, we drop it. We can't afford to ruin our reputation."

Shelli Leifer, who runs Abode Ltd. in New York City, has only about 30 apartments in her inventory. Leifer, too, suggested that if a place isn't up to snuff, "you can just not pay for it." Each agency has its own policy, she said. "If you're upset about something, call at the beginning of the stay when I can try to make a change," Leifer said. "Don't call at the end for money back after you've stayed the whole time. Give me a chance to right the situation."

At Gamut Realty Group in

New York, Greg Harden, the owner, said if a client arrives at an apartment and doesn't like it, they'll give them their deposit back.

Another firm, New York Habitat, handles thousands of short-term rental apartments not only in New York, but in Paris and London as well. Its director, Marie Jezequel, said that if an apartment needs cleaning or repairs, the renter shouldn't pay the owner. "We pressure the owner to repair, replace or fix the damage. Our policy is, if the people don't like the apartment, we, especially for short-term renters, give them two other alternatives similar or equivalent to what they had chosen. Usually that takes care of the problem."

Travelers who opt to stay in an apartment rather than a hotel need to determine what they want and what their budget is. Don't expect luxurious living for \$100 a night. And a one-room apartment in Paris may not have the same amenities as a similar unit in New York.

After you're chosen a rental agency—and there are scores of them that you can find through government and city tourist offices—ask pointed questions and make your concerns known before you commit to renting:

- Demand cleanliness, in a civil way, of course. Insist that the agency make sure the apartment is thoroughly cleaned before you step through the front door.

- Have the agency ensure that the apartment is stocked with towels, toilet paper and light bulbs, and that everything is in working order.

- Ask about lighting in the flat. There's nothing worse than reading by a 40-watt bulb.

- Inquire about noise and safety in the neighborhood and the building.

- Make sure you have the name of a person and an emergency phone number to call should something go wrong.

- And ask the firm what its policy is if the apartment doesn't live up to the description on its Internet site.

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