

Tips for Two

Tales of a Globetrotting Couple

by John and JoAnn Girard

Where to Stay? Ask a Stranger

The travel-related question we are asked the most is, how do you decide where to stay? Our rather facetious answer is we ask absolute strangers. To be a little more specific, we explain that we seek the advice of hundreds or even thousands of strangers by logging onto TripAdvisor.com. TripAdvisor has fundamentally changed the way we travel.

We became TripAdvisor *believers* while preparing for our first trip to South Africa, back in 2007. We were very excited to be visiting Cape Town but if we are honest, we were also a little apprehensive. The more we learned about this amazing country, the more intrigued we were, but also the more concerned we became. The transformation of South Africa in the post apartheid era brought rights and freedoms to many people. Unfortunately, there were also some unintended consequences as thousands of people migrated from the rural areas to large cities in hope of a new life. For many of these people their dreams were crushed as unemployment rose to unprecedented levels. A disastrous consequence, common in many rapidly expanding cities, was a high crime rate.

Traveling half way around the world to what some observers claimed was one of the most dangerous cities in the world created stress for us. There was not enough stress that we considered cancelling the trip but enough stress that we felt the need to think about every detail. We think this kind of anxiety is healthy as it reminds us of the need to plan our trips to maximize our safety.

The main purpose of the trip was to attend a conference that was literally inside a walled compound on the outskirts of Cape Town. The safest solution was to arrive just in time for the event, stay in the walled compound, and then escape as soon as possible afterwards. Although this course of action would significantly reduce the risk, it really seemed a shame to visit a great city like Cape Town and not really see it. As a minimum we simply could not imagine being in Cape Town and not seeing Robben Island, the island where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for nearly 20 years.

After a little soul searching we decided we would spend a few days in Cape Town before the conference. Then the challenge became, where to stay? Many of the recognizable brands that we were used to in the US or Canada were either not available or were out of our price range. We turned to TripAdvisor to see what *they* suggested. By "they" we mean the millions of people who visit the site every month. In 2007 TripAdvisor had 24 million unique users per month, by 2013 the number jumped to 200 million per month.

We found a boutique hotel named [An African Villa](#) with ratings that were off the scale they were so high. We read some of the reviews and we both agreed that it sounded perfect. As it turns out their rating is still very high and they were awarded the 2013 TripAdvisor Travelers' Choice® Winner Small Hotels. At the time, *An African Villa* stood out from the crowd, so much so that we based our decision to stay there solely on the reviews of strangers. We did not regret choosing *An African Villa* nor have we regretted the many other hotel choices we have since made based on TripAdvisor.

There are few things in the world we trust as much as TripAdvisor; however, make sure that you (that's both of you) actually read the reviews. Do not select a hotel simply on the numerical rating. For example, *An African Villa* is a small boutique hotel that does not have a bar, fitness room, or restaurant. If those features were important to one of you, then despite its great rating, you would not be happy.

Tip for Two 32: Become a TripAdvisor guru

Even if you think that many of our tips are not for you, make sure to look at TripAdvisor before making a hotel booking. Do it as a couple and make sure both of you are happy with the property.

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