

AT YOUR LEISURE Travel, food, and other distractions

The Company of Strangers

A nice place to visit, tho' someone else lives there.

BY MARY ELLEN MENGUCCI

IT'S 7 A.M. AT COBBLE House Inn, in Gaysville, Vermont, and the mouth-watering aroma of freshly baked pumpkin-spice muffins and apple fritters wafts through the air. A light snow falls outside the 124-year-old New England home, blanketing the surrounding pasture and frozen river.

There are six guests at Cobble House this weekend. They sleep under flannel sheets and cozy quilts. In one room, a couple dozes comfortably on a queen-size brass bed. In another, guests sleep on an antique bed with an eight-foot-tall headboard. Soon, they'll all be up and about, preparing for a day on the slopes. Killington and Pico mountains are only 15 miles away.

Two of the guests, honeymooners, ask for breakfast in bed. The others find steaming hot coffee waiting for them outside their bedroom doors. As they make their way to the kitchen for breakfast, the guests greet each other—and their hosts, Beau and Phil Benson—as if they were old friends. They met only last night.

The guests enjoy a hearty breakfast—pancakes, grapefruit and Chambord, eggs, apple and corn fritters, and muffins—as they talk about the best slopes to ski this time of year. Sam, the Benson's four-year old son, chatters about making a snowman. National Public

Radio plays softly in the background.

Cobble House, like hundreds of bed-and-breakfasts popping up around the country, was not built to accommodate travelers originally. In fact, the old farmhouse, used as a summer residence for its first hundred years, wasn't converted into a bed-and-breakfast until 1985. While there is no other place exactly like Cobble House, its inherent charm is typical of many bed-and-breakfast inns emerging nationwide.

According to Bernice Goldberg Chesler, B&Bs, as they are called, are becoming an immensely popular form of lodging in this

country. Chesler is the author of several bed-and-breakfast guidebooks in the United States. B&Bs, she says, have long been established as a form of lodging throughout Europe, but they are a relatively new phenomena in this country. She calls bed-and-breakfasts the "hottest trend in domestic travel."

"They will never compete with large hotels," she explains, "but they're not meant to. They offer an alternative form of lodging, and in some areas the only form of lodging."

Chesler's latest guidebooks, *Bed & Breakfast in New England* and *Bed & Breakfast in the Mid-Atlantic*

States, are proof that the popularity of B&Bs is on the rise. The books, published by the Globe Pequot Press, were originally released as a single volume in 1983. But as the number of B&Bs began to increase nationwide, Chesler split her book into two volumes to accommodate new entries.

ALTHOUGH B & B s range dramatically in size, setting, and options, there are a few common characteristics that distinguish them from other forms of lodging. First, says Chesler, B&Bs offer a package arrangement that includes lodging and breakfast in a private home or a very small, owner-occupied inn. In general, she says, the host is on the premises and there is no restaurant or bar.

"Now this doesn't mean that 1,000 different variations won't call themselves bed-and-breakfasts," she says. "Even hotels are offering B&B packages. But in order to be in my books, the hosts must live there as well."

Chesler, whose publisher kiddingly refers to her as the ambassador of bed-and-breakfast, has interviewed over a thousand B&B hosts for her books. "Whenever you travel," she says, "you always talk about the people. You remember the people at least as much as the color of the wallpaper."

Many hosts depend upon their bed-and-breakfast business for supplementary income only, and hold full-time jobs in other fields. "For every host I interview," says Chesler, "I have wonderful people to talk about—professional re-



Bernice Chesler is the country's leading expert on bed-and-breakfast lodging.

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storers or antiquers, or fifth-generation farmers, or chefs, or social workers, or interior decorators. A lot of professional people. It's a full gamut."

B&Bs, Chesler says, can bring in "a few dollars to several thousand dollars a year, depending on location. If you're located in a high-demand place—downtown Boston or Nantucket Island—you can probably make a little money. Outside of that, you can probably make enough to maintain the house to begin with, to upgrade it, buy a new bedspread, or put in a new bath."

Chesler, therefore, does her best to promote the B&B business. She has created a unique marketing program called Meet the Hosts, whereby B&B owners demonstrate and show off their breakfast specialties (Bloomingdale's in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, was the location of the first event). Chesler, meanwhile, provides a slide presentation about B&Bs around the country.

The program, she says, gives hosts "the chance to shine away from their B&Bs." Shoppers have the opportunity to ask hosts questions about bed-and-breakfasts. Meet the Hosts has become so popular that department stores throughout the northeast have invited Chesler to arrange one in their stores.

CHESLER, WHO MAJORED in broadcasting and business communications at SU in the early 1950s, is certainly no newcomer to research or writing. She is a former documentary film researcher for the children's television program *Zoom*, and is the author of *In and Out of Boston, With (or Without) Children*, the only ongoing, comprehensive guidebook to the Boston area. Now in its fourth edition, the book has been used as a model for guidebooks in at least six other major metropolitan areas.

Chesler decided to write a guidebook about B&Bs because she needed the information herself and couldn't find it. She and her husband enjoyed bed-and-breakfasts while vacationing in Europe, but were unable to find an appropriate source of information about them in the United States. Any information that was available, she says, was sketchy at best.



Beau and Phil Benson are the lady and lord of Cobble House Inn, one of the hundreds of bed-and-breakfasts described in Bernice Chesler's books.

In response, Chesler has created books that provide a great deal more than just the basics. Readers find out what size beds and baths are available in a B&B; the typical breakfast menu (anything from elaborate caloric treats to natural, vegetarian health foods) and the hours it is served; restrictions, if any (such as smoking, pets, and children); rates for each room and season; details about extras—flowers, fireplaces, house tours, pools, bicycles, cribs, wine, afternoon tea, and mints; and comments from B&B guests. The books even tell travelers whether hosts share recipes or advice.

Furthermore, in the back of each guidebook, Chesler includes a list of 300 B&B reservation services throughout North America. These services are small businesses (often cottage industries themselves) that help match up guests with B&B hosts who wish to remain anonymous—meaning they do not usually advertise or hang out signs.

So, says Chesler, if you want to travel to a certain area and stay at a B&B, you can call the appropriate reservation service for assistance.

The service may list anywhere from 12 to hundreds of private homeowners in that particular area who rent out their extra rooms. These homes, she says, are in rural, urban, and suburban areas. "You can even find B&Bs in Manhattan penthouses through reservations services," says Chesler.

Bed-and-breakfasts are a lifestyle, says Chesler. "It's not just filling beds. B&Bs offer personalization in an age of computerization. . . . There is nothing standard about bed-and-breakfasts. That's part of the adventure," she says. "If you've been to one, you haven't been to them all. If you've met one host you haven't met them all."

IT'S 2 P.M. AT COBBLE House and the Benson's eight guests are outside enjoying the warm July sunshine. One couple is hiking the trails that surround the inn. They set out in the morning, after packing a picnic lunch for themselves. Two college students, bicycling throughout New England during their summer break, are also at Cobble House for a few days.

They gave their bodies and their bikes a rest today and are enjoying a four-wheel-drive tour of the area with Phil Benson.

A family of four, who return to Cobble House each year for vacation, are out by the river that borders the property. The mother and daughter are floating on inner tubes provided by the Bensons, while the little boy and his father are fishing just downstream. If they catch any, their hosts will store and cook their fish. It's part of the Cobble House package.

Maybe the Bensons are onto a new trend: Bed and breakfast, and dinner if you can catch it.

Bed & Breakfast in New England (495pp.; \$12.95 softcover) and Bed & Breakfast in the Mid-Atlantic States (348 pp.; \$10.95 softcover) are both published by the Globe Pequot Press, Old Chester Road, Chester, Connecticut 06412.