

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER



GABBY JONES/BLOOMBERG

Vacationer unable to enter his own rental through Booking.com

By Christopher Elliott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. I recently used Booking.com to reserve an apartment in Menaggio, Italy, for two nights. I decided to use Booking.com because of its reputation and the property's positive reviews. Before I left, I noticed the ratings for this place had tanked, so I nervously reached out to Booking.com, letting them know my concern to make sure that they would stand behind the booking. They said that they would.

My concern was that many people were arriving and weren't able to get into the place, which forced them to book elsewhere — basically, a fraud. A Booking.com representative assured me that they had been in contact with the host, and everything would be fine.

As expected, I arrived and could not get access to the place, although I tried for a number of hours by using all the phone numbers given to me. I immediately contacted Booking.com but did not receive a response until days later.

I had to find another place in the middle of peak season, which was no easy feat. But the listing stayed online, even as the negative reviews piled up. Booking.com ultimately responded that if I had contacted them during the stay, they would have been able to help me. But I was proactive and reached out before my stay and at the beginning of my stay, so I was met with silence.

I want all of my money back, and I want Booking.com to cover my extra costs. Can you help?

TOM MASON, *Long Grove, Ill.*

A. Booking.com should have found you a new apartment while it investigated the property. Instead, it appears a representative gave you assurances that you would be able to access the rental, despite strong evidence to the contrary.

Your question exposes a practice that I've long suspected but have never been able to prove: Call center representatives rarely read their own website. (If they had, they would have at least looked into your concerns.)

You had a pretty good sense that you were getting blown off from Booking.com. I looked at your chat thread and noticed that you were getting canned responses from the "Booking Assistant," which was most likely either AI or an AI-assisted representative.

You might have escalated your concern to a higher level. I publish the names, numbers, and email addresses of the Booking.com customer service managers on my consumer advocacy website, Elliott.org. A brief, polite email to one of them might have fixed this.

Unfortunately, my advocacy team and I have been seeing too many of these kinds of cases recently. It feels like online agencies are no longer staffed by humans but by AIs that can't understand even the most basic customer service problem. (I hope I'm wrong about this.)

I contacted the company on your behalf. A Booking.com representative apologized for your experience and said it usually investigates any potentially suspicious listings "swiftly."

"In this instance, we recognize that we did not support as quickly as we normally would and have been in touch to apologize to the customer directly," the representative added. "We can confirm the property has been suspended from our platform while a proper investigation is carried out."

In addition to refunding the total amount of the original booking, Booking.com also covered the difference in cost for the alternate accommodation.

Christopher Elliott is the founder of Elliott Advocacy (elliottadvocacy.org), a nonprofit organization that helps consumers solve their problems. Email him at chris@elliott.org or get help by contacting him at elliottadvocacy.org/help.

THE VIP LOUNGE

Glenn Awong

Lead singer of Maoli on unplugging, overthinking, and being grateful



VICKY JUAREZ PHOTOGRAPHY

Glenn Awong with his fiancée, Mercedes Sosa, and his four children. This picture was taken in 2024, and Sosa has since given birth to a baby boy who is now 6 months old.

Mauī native Glenn Awong, lead singer and songwriter of the popular Hawaii-based band Maoli, is a big fan of Japanese cuisine and said that is one of the main reasons he is hankering to visit Japan. But in the meantime, he is enjoying touring across the United States and Canada on the band's "Boots on the Ground Tour," which stops in Boston, at Royale, on April 11. Maoli's unique sound — described as "feel good" music that fuses elements of country, R&B, soul, acoustics, rock 'n' roll, and reggae — has earned the band (formed in 2007) international recognition and appearances at major music festivals, and sold-out concerts at Hawaii's largest venues. In a recent phone call from Austin, Texas, where Maoli was performing, Awong said his band's sound has a "real island feel to it" — a nod to Hawaii ("Maoli" means "native" in Hawaiian). When asked what fans can expect at the Boston show, the Filipino-Hawaiian musician, 35, said "a great experience" with "a lot of singing, dancing, drinking ... and people wearing cowboy hats." We caught up with the father of five (ages 6 months to 13), who with his fiancée Mercedes Sosa, a personal trainer, lives in Maui, to talk about all things travel.

If you could travel anywhere right now, where would you go?

I would go to Japan. I love Japanese food so that

is a big reason for the choice.

Do you prefer booking trips through a travel agent or on your own?

Absolutely through a travel agent. They take the stress out of everything.

Thoughts on an "unplugged" vacation?

I love unplugged vacations — if I can ever actually unplug. That's the hardest part of my job. When I do get a vacation where I can completely cut off from technology, I am in heaven.

What has been your worst vacation experience?

A really bad hangover in Tahiti when I was there about seven or eight years ago.

Ouch. Hurts thinking about it.

What is your favorite childhood travel memory?

When I was 16 and my grandmother took me to the mainland — to California — for the first time. We went to Six Flags Magic Mountain. I had such a great time.

Do you vacation to relax, to learn, or for the adventure of it all?

I vacation for all of the above.

What book do you plan on bringing with you to read on your next vacation?

"How Not to Overthink" by Daniel Alay. I should probably read that before my next vacation so I can relax and enjoy it better.

If you could travel with one famous person/celebrity, who would it be?

Stevie Wonder. He's so talented and so chilled out. I think he would be the perfect vacation companion.

What is the best gift to give a traveler?

A book. It could be for them to enjoy while they are on vacation or a book that is about a place they are going. I love to read up on places before I go, so I think that would be something a traveler would enjoy.

What is your go-to snack for a flight or a road trip?

Go-to snack would have to be chocolate macadamia nuts ... taking a little bit of home with me wherever I go.

What is the coolest souvenir you've picked up on a vacation?

A Tahitian pearl. They really are beautiful.

What is your favorite app/website for travel?

I'm a Google Maps guy. Can't leave home without it.

What has travel taught you?

It has taught me to be grateful of where I come from. I love going places and seeing new things, but I also love returning to home. There is no place like it.

What is your best travel tip?

Always go to the bathroom before you get on the plane.

JULIET PENNINGTON

HERE

BOUTIQUE HOTEL BLOSSOMS IN BAR HARBOR

Open since November, The Pathmaker Hotel in Bar Harbor is shaking off its winter coat and preparing for spring and summer guests. Located in a prime location, a block from the water and steps from the shops and restaurants on lively Cottage Street, the hotel blends modern elegance and luxury with classic coastal charm inspired by the dramatic cliffs, beaches, and evergreen forests of Mount Desert Island. Each of the 46 rooms and suites offer American-made custom furnishings, comfy pillow-topped beds, smart TV, microwave, and mini-fridge that's useful for stashing picnic provisions for a day exploring nearby Acadia National Park. An onsite restaurant is scheduled to open for both hotel guests and the public in May, serving ample bed-and-breakfast style meals, and also a dinner

menu with something-for-everyone offerings. If you're driving to Bar Harbor, there's no need to worry about what to do with your car. You can park in the convenient underground garage and take the elevator up to your room. The Pathmaker is the latest addition to the locally owned Stay Bar Harbor brand, which now includes 13 locations in town with approximately 400 rooms. Sign up for the online newsletter to receive exclusive offers, promotions and customized packages. Seasonal rates from \$119 (winter) and \$385 (summer), includes on-site breakfast. 207-801-8480, www.staybarharbor.com/pathmaker.htm

THERE

SEASIDE SANCTUARY IN BERMUDA

Those looking for an easy getaway to a serene oceanside retreat may want to consider Azura, a newly developed property perched high above Bermu-

da's South Shore. Located just 10 minutes from the bustle of Hamilton, this luxury resort boasts unobstructed views of the Atlantic, offering elegant rooms and suites with modern amenities and contemporary décor inspired by the vibrant colors of the sea. Guests can enjoy four distinct pools, including the saltwater ocean pool located at beach level — alongside the property's private pink sand beach — and a rooftop sky pool with panoramic ocean views and a tranquil sauna.

Culinary experiences include the newly launched oceanfront restaurant, SURF, open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, serving Mediterranean-inspired dishes with an emphasis on seafood (charred octopus with lemon aioli, anyone?), and the outdoor seasonal Azura Restaurant & Bar for poolside dining. Amenities include four bars, private beach with four elevated beach terraces, fitness and wellness center, infrared sauna, and direct access to the Blackburn Smith Nature Reserve and the renowned Railway Trail. Looking ahead, Azura plans to debut 20 new oceanfront rooms and suites in 2026. Rates for an ocean view room start at \$629 per night. 441-232-9000, www.azura.bermuda.com

EVERYWHERE

EFFORTLESS ROAD TRIP PLANNING

Dreaming about a road trip this year but worried about the logistics involved in mapping routes and securing decent campgrounds? Smart travelers looking to ditch their spreadsheets and endless internet searches are turning to AdventureGenie, an AI-based road trip planner custom-tailored for RVs, camper vans, and other road warriors. The pro-



gram will craft personalized itineraries in synch with your passions and preferences — from national park scenic vistas to culinary tours and whiskey trails, as well as golf, sports, music festivals, you name it — and will also plan routes, book stays, and secure RV rentals. Simply enter your departure and destination city to see the preferred itinerary along the route. GenieMagic will then suggest the best places to stay from their extensive database of more than 25,000 campgrounds, including rustic to more luxury options. (Hello, glamping!) Once your accommodations are secured, pick the kinds of things you'd like to do and a full itinerary will appear in seconds. Not sure where to go? Check out the site's "trending" and "themed" road trip sections to spark your wanderlust. AdventureGenie offers a free plan to get you started, and a Pro plan to unlock premium planning features and even more adventures. (\$39.99/year) adventuregenie.com

NECEE REGIS

