

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

Seeing the Northern Lights and heading back to Hawaii would make Michelle Wax happy



Somerville resident Michelle Wax wants to know what makes people happy. In pursuit of the answer to this question, the 30-year-old Dover native spent three months last year driving cross-country and interviewing more than 500 people in all 50 states for a documentary called “American Happiness,” which will be released in 2021 (to see a trailer and get happiness tips, visit American-happiness.com). One of the themes she found in talking with people from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds is that people need to “choose happiness each and every day [and that] it arrives internally and is projected out. It doesn’t come from external things or people or circumstances.” Wax is also founder of the American Happiness Project, a company that works with schools and businesses around the world to create “positive mind-sets” through workshops and what she refers to as “accountability programs” to help build community and connection. We caught up with Wax to talk about all things travel.

Favorite vacation destination? Definitely Hawaii. Along with how beautiful and peaceful it is there, the locals are incredible and appreciate their home so much. I was staying on [the] Big Island and had the most beautiful experience a few years ago. While sitting on a black sand beach, out of the corner of my eye I noticed there was a young boy — probably 8 years old — who was about to go surfing. I was amazed to see him sit on a rock near the ocean, touch the water, and take a minute to say “Thank you” to the ocean before he dove in with his board. The appreciation of their home is apparent in every conversation and interaction I had with the people there.

Favorite food or drink while vacationing? I absolutely love trying out locally made baked goods — muffins, croissants, and cupcakes — from wherever I’m traveling. There’s just something about a fresh cup of coffee paired with a scrumptious pastry in a local shop that brings me so much joy.

Where would you like to travel to but haven’t? My dream has always been to see the Northern Lights. When I was traveling in Alaska during our “American Happiness” documentary filming, I was there in June, so I wasn’t able to see them — because the sky stays light until 11 p.m. — but my plan is to travel to see them, ideally, this winter in Alaska.

One item you can’t leave home without when traveling? A notebook and pen. When I’m traveling, I take time to journal and track my experiences, as I feel it’s easy to let these fade over time. Though it takes a few minutes to do each day, I can revisit these memories any time and they bring so much joy into my life.

Aisle or window? Window. I absolutely love seeing the views as the plane takes off, and I even go as far as to *always* have a specific song — “Freedom” by Akon — playing when the wheels come off the pavement. Try it out; it’s magical.

Favorite childhood travel memory? My family and I would go to Maine pretty much every summer growing up, and walk along the Marginal Way in Ogunquit. Along with my dad and brothers, we would climb on the giant rocks near the ocean for hours. I loved it and it made me feel so alive. To this day, I’ll always take my shoes off and climb on rocks whenever I’m near the ocean, and it brings me back to those summers in Maine with my family.

Guilty pleasure when traveling? Allowing myself to indulge in once-in-a-lifetime experiences that I may never get to do again. Whenever I have had an opportunity to do something unique in the region or area, I [said] “Yes,” whether that be big or small. From taking a seaplane through the glaciers in Alaska, to skydiving in Hawaii, to sailing on a catamaran in Santorini, to eating cheese curds in Wisconsin, to exploring the redwoods in California ... I always make experiences a priority.

Best travel tip? Be present in the moment. While I was traveling, filming our documentary, I found myself eating at restaurants and bars by myself pretty much every night. I had a rule that I wouldn’t take out my phone while I was eating so I could be present in the experience — even if I felt uncomfortable at first. Sometimes I brought my notebook; other times I just started talking to the bartender or other people around me. A simple phrase such as “How’s your night going?” led me to meeting some of the best people and hearing the most incredible stories. At the end of life, you won’t remember the e-mail you read on your phone or the post you commented on; you’ll remember the people and experiences you had. Make that a priority.

JULIET PENNINGTON

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

My Vrbo rental is canceled — but where’s my refund?

By Christopher Elliott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. I booked a vacation rental in Paris through Vrbo. Vrbo charged \$863 to my credit card. A day later, the owner contacted me, saying the house was not available. He said that we should have contacted him before booking. A day later, he canceled the reservation through Vrbo. We ended up staying somewhere else.

After many emails and text messages, I received a \$665 refund almost two months later. I asked the owner to pay the \$198 difference. He refused, because we did not contact him before booking. He said the \$665 refund was all the money he received from Vrbo.

In my view, it is very unfair that I didn’t receive a full refund. I did not cancel the reservation — the owner did. Can you help me get the rest of my refund, please?

GERARD FRANK
SOLLMAN,
Driebergen, Netherlands

A. Well, you’re entitled to a full and fast refund, of course. But before I get to that, let me note a big change in this column. I’ve seen so many new international cases lately, thanks to the Travel Troublesooter’s expanding online reach. It’s a privilege to help a reader from the Netherlands. (It’s a first!)

First, the part of you having to contact the owner beforehand — that’s nonsense. Vrbo lists available vacation rental inventory. If the system says it’s available, and if you can make the booking, you should have a booking.

I can’t stand it when people make up their own rules. It’s people like that who give the travel industry a bad name — and people like you a bad vacation.

If an owner cancels, don’t just accept it. Contact Vrbo and let them know that the owner canceled. The company will either find a way of getting the owner to honor the reserva-

tion or book you in a comparable property at the same rate. Vrbo’s “Book With Confidence” guarantee applies if your reservation has been canceled less than 30 days from your stay and you are unable to locate a similar property available during the same period.

You decided to take the refund, assuming that you would get all of your money back. But then the property owner decided to remove his home from Vrbo. That means Vrbo is essentially out of the picture. The owner sent a refund directly to your bank, minus the booking fee Vrbo charged you. Do you see the problem? The owner would lose money if he sent you \$198. The money you want is with Vrbo, but the property no longer exists, according to the vacation rental site. Very confusing.

Someone at Vrbo should have been able to review your case and figure out how to process a refund. I know because I’ve invoked Vrbo’s “Book With Confidence” guarantee twice in the past. In one case, the owner decided to sell a condo in Oahu before my scheduled stay. In another, an electrical problem with an apartment in Lisbon left my family without heat in January. When you run into complicated issues like this, Vrbo has a team of experienced agents who can help.

I think a brief, polite email sent to one of the Vrbo executives I list on my site at www.elliott.org/company-contacts/homeaway-com/ might have done the trick. I contacted Vrbo and asked it to take another look at your case. “We’ve looked into Mr. Sollman’s case and confirmed that he will be refunded,” a representative told me.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.

HERE

WHITE MOUNTAIN REGION OFFERS PRIZES FOR PICTURES

Turn your fall New Hampshire road trip into an opportunity to win prizes with the White Mountains 100-Mile Photo Challenge. Simply download the list of stops throughout the White Mountains region — from breweries, local historic markers, shops, ski areas, varied accommodations, spas and more — and take a selfie or group photo at each location. Then upload your photo to your social media with the hashtag #WhiteMts100Miles. Once you’ve visited 10 categories, upload your photos to the challenge website and enter to win more than 100 prizes. Enter often, uploading 10 photos at a time, through Dec. 6. Weekly winners are announced every Friday. One grand prize, an Omni Mt. Washington Hotel getaway and a White Mountains Attractions Pass for the summer or fall of 2021, will be chosen Dec. 7. whitemts100milechallenge.com

CONNECTICUT HIKING PACKAGE

Who says you can’t combine challenging outdoor adventures with pampered accommodations? Not us! Lace up your hiking shoes and get out in Connecticut’s Litchfield Hills with the Take a Hike! package offered by the Manor House Inn. Package includes a deluxe room or suite; complimentary bottle of wine at check-in; directions and trail maps for Haystack Mountain, Campbell Falls and Dennis Hill State Park (offering a combo of easy-to-moderate to challenging trails); and full breakfast at a private table for two in a dining room with garden views.



Don’t forget to pick up your picnic for two — packed in a convenient backpack — of either a locally sourced cheese platter or cranberry chicken salad on baguettes, plus fruit and sparkling seltzer. Available until Dec. 22. From \$179/night. 860-542-5690, manorhouse-norfolk.com/specials/take-a-hike/

THERE

INNOVATIVE AIRPORT DEBUTS IN UTAH

Those traveling to or through Salt Lake City can expect to be wowed by the new Salt Lake City International Airport, the first hub airport to be built in the United States in the 21st century. The \$4 billion innovative airport facility (financed by user fees with no taxpayer dollars!) has just completed its Phase One renovations. Designed to accommodate 34 million passengers with two new linear concourses, travelers can enjoy 45 gates with jet bridges, making departures and arrivals faster and more efficient (and a total of 67 gates when Phase Two is completed in 2024); 45-foot floor-to-ceiling glass walls offering dramatic views of the nearby towering

Wasatch Mountains; numerous dining and shopping options; on site rental car facilities; and more. In addition, a new Utah Transit Authority TRAX light rail station — debuting in summer 2021 — will make it quicker and easier to get downtown. slairport.com

COSTA RICA REOPENS TO US TRAVELERS

The good news: As of Nov. 1, Costa Rica will reopen its borders to US residents who meet its entry requirements, including negative COVID test result within 48 hours of travel, medical insurance, and health pass form. (Full requirements on Visit Costa Rica’s website. www.visitcostarica.com/en). Even better news: Nayara Resort’s two tropical rainforest retreats have reopened and are operating at a safe 50-percent capacity. Located below the Arenal volcano, and home to myriad animals such as tree frogs, toucans, sloths and monkeys, the property offers completely private getaways.



Adults-only Nayara Springs sports villas with private plunge pools fed by natural hot springs surrounded by lush vegetation. From \$619.50/night. nayaraspings.com. At family-friendly Nayara Tented Camp, sprawling luxury tents with private mineral spring-fed plunge pools feature large decks with volcano views. \$720 per night. nayaratentedcamp.com. Those who need to work or tune into remote learning at either retreat can access property-wide WiFi.

EVERYWHERE

GIFTS SUPPORT ARTISANS IN AFRICA AND INDIA

You might not be able to travel to India and Africa right now but you can still enjoy beautiful, ethically sourced and utilitarian goods that support the artisans who make them. Two Boston social impact entrepreneurs, Joy Kolin of Giving Joy and Greer Goodman of Abroad Modern, have collaborated to

create the Modern Joy holiday collection. Your purchase of home goods, kitchenware, baskets, and jewelry from India, Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda also builds revenue to endow Giving Joy, a women-owned social enterprise that provides microgrants to women entrepreneurs worldwide. The collection includes include copper water bottles, fabric-wrapped soaps, and hand-painted postcards from India; and colorful reversible totes, sterling silver earrings and brass bracelets from Africa; and more. www.abroadmodern.com

VACATION HOME RENTAL SITE

With more and more people looking for home-rental getaways this year, VacationRenter is making it easier to find exactly what you want. By bringing leading travel sites together in one place — including Vrbo, Home Away, Outdoorsy, RV Share, and many more — you can easily choose from a multitude of properties, no matter if you’re planning a last-minute booking or months in advance. Narrow your search with filters for destination city and accommodation preferences (beachfront homes, mountain cabins, lakeside cottages, city condos) as well as desired activities such as skiing, swimming, or surfing. You can even filter for pet-friendly homes, and those with a pool or hot tub. www.vacationrenter.com

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