

Lodging With the Locals

This post carries on the line of thought I first explored in ["Lodgings in Fantasy Settings: Where do Adventurers Spend the Night?"](#)

In eras and settings where inns and public traveler accommodations are not common, where does a traveler or adventurer stay for the night?

Historically, wayfarers had only two choices: they slept rough in the countryside, essentially camping whenever they needed to overnight, or they turned to the locals and asked for lodgings at a farm or village, or even a random house in a town.

What kind of response they received would depend largely on the culture and customs around guest-hosting that prevailed in an area. In Western European settings, the range of responses could vary widely: an unfriendly farmer might turn strangers away entirely, or only allow them to stay in the barn or cow byre. A self-interested host might demand some kind of payment even if for the poorest of lodgings, or a promise of labor performed (wood chopped, water carried, and so on) in exchange for the accommodation. More hospitable (and trusting) folk might allow strangers to sleep with the family in their own dwelling.

This would be more likely with one or a few travelers, and not a large party, or only when the family felt its safety was assured by the nearby presence of other villagers or townsfolk. Food might be offered, or not, depending on the resources of the family and how comfortable they were with offering hospitality to strangers. In worst-case scenarios, when there were no private parties who would offer lodgings, travelers could usually turn to religious establishments (monasteries, abbeys, and so on) and ask lodging of them. In most cases there was a religious obligation to extend hospitality at least for the night, and some religious communities made a regular business of housing pilgrims and other travelers who passed through their area.

Hospitality Cultures

In contrast to this grab-bag of reactions in the west, there are "hospitality" cultures where the kind treatment of strangers who become guests is strictly dictated by custom. A classic example is found in Middle Eastern cultures, for instance, where if a stranger asks for lodgings a host feels obligated to extend hospitality and take as good care as possible of the guest. In fact, this hospitality is usually extended even if the guest does not request it, for he will be pressed with offers to eat and refresh himself before moving on. Even the poorest of families will offer food and possibly lodgings, even when they have very little to spare for themselves, and expect nothing in return. (Reciprocally, if the host travels, he can be assured of equally hospitable reception wherever he goes.)

The hospitality custom seems more marked and prevalent in places with a history of harsh living conditions, since to turn a stranger away in such places might be tantamount to condemning them to death from the elements or marauders. There may also be a religious element in play, as in Islam where guest-hosting is a behavior expected and reflected in scripture.

The traveler's own attitude also plays a role in what lodgings may be secured for the night. Where an unwelcome reception is expected, a wayfarer may content himself with something clandestine, like burrowing into a hay rick for the night, or sneaking into a barn without permission.

At the other end of the spectrum, a traveler may be quite assertive or even aggressive and demand hospitality which would not otherwise be forthcoming, effectively intimidating a householder into aiding them. Some travelers, desperate for food and lodging, might essentially take over a domicile and help themselves to whatever they want, possibly even displacing the family if the place is remote enough not to incite immediate retaliation from neighbors. This "You may not like it, but we're spending the night here anyway" attitude can also come from the high-born, who feel entitled to accommodations whenever they feel the need, or from outright outlaws and ne'er-do-wells who take what they want when they want it.

Obviously there is a wide range of interaction possibilities for travelers seeking lodgings and the households they turn to for same. In hospitality cultures there is a stricter code of conduct observed between host and guest, and persons who violate it might find swift retribution visited upon them, either by the injured party or their friends and neighbors. In any setting, the action and reaction process must be gauged depending on the local situation.

Historically, however, travelers have been able to ask locals for lodgings and generally this transaction works out to everyone's satisfaction. There are still parts of the world today where the only lodgings to be had will be with some local family, and a traveler in such places must be willing to engage in social interaction and come to terms in order to have a meal and a roof over his head for the night.

When an area sees a higher number of road travelers, eventually accommodations come into existence for the traffic that passes through. This may range from rooms advertised for rent in a private house or cottage, to public houses and taverns with lodgings in some corner of the building, to inns express-built for the purpose of housing wayfarers. As a rule of thumb, one may assume that the more specialized the establishment is, the higher the prices and the better the quality of accommodations. An inn will have a stable and servants to tend to horses and carriages, rooms ranging from common-area sleeping to high-end private suites, and a variety of food and drink for travelers. A cottager who lets a bed to travelers may or may not be able to offer care for mounts, and the fare they provide will likely be pretty much whatever the family is eating. Even in places where inns and taverns are well established, personal economics may force a wayfarer to use only the low-end services (like a bed in a cottage), if the more commercial services are financially out of reach.

The moral of this story is to consider the density of traffic, how much trade and travelers move through a region, village, or town, how hospitality-oriented a culture is, and what the real cost is to stay in public lodgings versus working out a deal with a local family. This will give you a good idea of what kinds of food and shelter a traveler may have to rely upon when on the road, and what the local "lodgings culture" is like.

This post originally appeared at [Notes From the Lizard Lair](#), my authorial blog.

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