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B&Bs keep their bounce

Even in an uncertain economy, vacationers still spring for a quick getaway in picturesque towns like Lenox, Mass.

B&Bs welcome recession-weary travelers

By [Laura Bly](#),
USA TODAY

LENOX, Mass. -- When the [Great Depression](#) forced wealthy summer residents of this bucolic New England enclave to abandon their opulent, late-19th-century "cottages," the homes' transformations to bed-and-breakfast inns gave city-weary, romance-minded travelers a vicarious glimpse of the Gilded Age.

Now, even as the Great Recession prompts mainstream hotels to slash rates in a scramble to fill rooms, most of Lenox's two dozen B&Bs look to October's explosion of color in the surrounding Berkshire Mountains — and a corresponding influx of leaf peepers — with guarded optimism.

"There was a lot of panic earlier this year, but I can't remember a single weekend this summer that all inns didn't sell out," says Stan Rosen, head of the Berkshire Visitors Bureau lodging committee and owner of Hampton Terrace Bed and Breakfast in Lenox. Bookings at his 14-room, 110-year-old inn are up by nearly a third this year, with an



The Hampton Terrace: Breakfast is a convivial all-you-can-eat buffet, and the dining room is always lit with candles. Private tables also are available for guests at this fully restored "Berkshire cottage."

average nightly rate of \$200.

Lenox's B&Bs aren't the only ones bucking an ebbing lodging tide.

According to a recent study by the New Jersey-based Professional Association of Innkeepers International (PAII), bed-and-breakfast occupancy rates held steady last year, while their average daily room rate of \$150 was up 3.4% from 2007. In a new survey of 3,500 B&B travelers by the website BedandBreakfast.com, just under 55% of respondents said the recession was having an impact on their travel plans this fall, down from 65% last winter and spring. Another 84% said they would take the same or more trips as last year.

"While some properties are of course hurting, generally we just haven't seen the sharp drop-off in our industry that hotels have been experiencing," PAII's Jay Karen says. "Our bread-and-butter is the drive-in, long-weekend vacation market, and that fits well during a recession."

Tradition with tech-savvy updates

Though definitions remain squishy — B&Bs can mean anything from urban home stays to 30-room country inns that serve dinner as well as breakfast — most of the estimated 20,000 U.S.-based bed-and-breakfasts are owner-occupied, with between four and 11 rooms.

Thanks to what Karen calls the "Darwinian effect" of user-generated reviews on TripAdvisor and other websites, part-time hobbyists are giving way to Internet-savvy innkeepers armed with [Twitter](#) feeds, [Facebook](#) fan pages and real-time availability calendars. (IloveInns.com's free iPhone app even lets you search for B&Bs by GPS location.)

Conviviality remains a hallmark of the bed-and-breakfast experience, but morning repasts served at flexible meal times — and at tables set for two — are wooing those who blanch at the prospect of pre-caffeine conversations with strangers. Starched doilies and shared baths have been supplanted by Jacuzzis and high-end toiletries. A majority of B&Bs now offer free Wi-Fi and in-room TVs as well as more traditional afternoon tea or wine, robes and fireplaces, Karen says.



And while ruffles still reign supreme at many inns (including those in Lenox), "you're starting to see more inns trend towards a Pottery Barn look rather than a Laura Ashley one," he says. "Traveler tastes are changing, and so will what they find at B&Bs."

Bed-and-breakfast owners "have done a good job of convincing people that they're not Bob Newhart (who played a folksy, cardigan-wearing New England innkeeper in the TV series *Newhart*) or Mom and Dad renting a spare room when Junior goes off to college," says Mary White, founder of BnB Finder.com and author of *Running a Bed & Breakfast for Dummies*.

"Their target audience is an upscale traveler looking for an experience, not just a room," adds BedandBreakfast.com's Sandy Soule.

That said, more bed-and-breakfast innkeepers are fielding "what can you do for me?" calls from insistent deal hunters — including those in the former robber baron stomping grounds of Lenox, home to the Boston Symphony Orchestra's summer Tanglewood music festival and a lineup of sophisticated restaurants.



Garden Gables Inn: Free wine or sherry in the afternoons is a popular amenity at many bed-and-breakfasts.



Downtown Lenox: The quintessential New England town was once the Gilded Age playground of the very wealthy.

Value-added packages entice

In recent years, many travelers have booked directly online, says innkeeper Bosa Kosovic of Lenox's 14-room Kemble Inn, an 1881 "cottage" built by President Chester Arthur's secretary of State and set on 3 acres overlooking the Berkshire Mountains. "Now," she says, "everybody's calling and negotiating."

While you won't see Priceline-like rate cuts at B&Bs in Lenox or elsewhere, many are lowering midweek prices, easing two-to-three night minimum stays on last-minute weekend bookings and promoting more value-added packages, from a "fun-for-foodies vacation" at Lenox's Birchwood Inn and five other New England properties to a "taste of fall" deal at Lenox's Garden Gables Inn. Included in the latter: free hiking, cider doughnuts, wine tastings and bag of ripe apples at the owner's nearby orchards and winery.

And for B&B fans like Sandra Aplin of Jupiter, Fla., the chance to soak up the ambience of a bygone era among like-minded travelers is priceless.

"A lot of people tell me they wouldn't stay at a B&B because they're not sure what to expect and they're afraid of being disappointed," says Aplin, tucking into chocolate-chip French toast at the Hampton Terrace while resisting the entreaties of the inn's resident pooch and "real owner," Atticus.

"But in places like this, you can feel at home away from home."