

2000: Hostelng for Those Over Forty:

Breakfast at Your Hostel,
Picnic with New Friends at Lunch,
And Dine Out with a Loved One at Dinner

Are you over 40? Have you stayed at a youth hostel recently? Because of the gray hairs at my temples, I was afraid nobody at a hostel would speak to me, or worse, they'd distance me with the title of "sir." Neither fear came true. The experience was great.

This past winter, my partner and I went to southern Africa for six weeks. We wanted a blending of social classes and creature comforts, so I arranged for us to spend 60% of the trip at hostels and backpackers' accommodations, and the rest of our stay in hotels. We stayed at 2-star hotels in Zimbabwe; a government accommodation in Zambia; and one 5-star hotel in Namibia – just to see how the other half lives. The hotels gave me the luxurious comfort of soaking my aching limbs in a tub and the wonderful convenience of making phone calls in my room. But, hostelng helped me meet the people, my main reason for traveling.

The young adults at the backpackers' lodges and youth hostels in Namibia and South Africa often showed interest in us, maybe *just* because we look a little seasoned. I think they knew we could have afforded to stay in hotels if we had wanted to, but we don't like to travel around the world just to find ourselves alone in strange hotel rooms. I travel to talk and to listen, but mainly to listen, and hostelng offered me a much-needed opportunity to exercise my ears.

In downtown Cape Town, we stayed at the YHA Albergo for Backpackers Hostel – double room for \$20/night including kitchen and laundry facilities, a helpful staff and an unending surprise list of interesting guests from around the world. Our hostess, Beate, with whom I initially made the reservation from the States, started a fax-friendship with me months before my arrival. When we met, it felt more like a reunion.

When I was invited to play a game of Monopoly [with South African place names] with a young woman from Zambia at the Cardboard Box backpackers' lodge in Windhoek, Namibia, I didn't hesitate to say "yes." Hours later, I came away having learned much about her and her life in Zambia; she made my arcane explorations through the pages of National Geographic's fall flat by comparison. At that same lodge, I met a college student from Sweden who described his Ph.D. program in "World Peace" to me and how it had brought him to a work/study program in Namibia. Where was I when they were offering majors in world peace? Of course, I didn't *always* meet fabulously, interesting people; some folks just sat around the hostels drinking beer, smoking foul-smelling, black tobacco cigarettes and watching T.V. Asking for a non-smoking room solved some of that problem for me.

I can't forget the young Irish woman who arrived at the Backpackers' Lodge in Lüderitz, Namibia, covered in sun blisters after having trekked days through the Namib desert. She was on summer break from her job of teaching English to village children in Botswana. Within a day of meeting us, she was willing to lend us money until the banks reopened the following Monday morning when we could cash a traveler's cheque.

A South African couple we also met in 12and who also live in Botswana told me that I could save more than US\$100 when visiting the Chobe Game Park in Botswana by arranging to have my guide pick us up at the Zimbabwean border rather than at our hotel in Victoria Falls. Renting a car was one way to get to that border, and we combined that trip with visits to many other sights as well – and the cost of the car was almost recouped by the savings.

I've now learned from experience that the best place in the world to have breakfast is in a youth hostel. The hosts and visitors will give you better tips on what to do than any guide book, and there's often a lone traveler who would love to spend a few hours sightseeing in your company. My recommendation for those over 40: breakfast at your hostel, picnic with new friends at lunch and dine out with a loved one at dinner.

Obviously, you'll need to book in advance to reserve private rooms at most hostels, but the privacy and the price can't be beat. I particularly appreciated the communal kitchens where I could chat with others while I cooked, which also happened to be a good opportunity to see the exotic foods that others were preparing. I like breaking bread with strangers because it encourages me to feel connected to the world, reinforcing my feelings of being a grateful, participant in life – and the very best travel keepsake.

But, bring your own soap, towel and flip-flops. Youth hostels aren't the Ritz, but you'll come home with souvenir memories, not souvenir matches.