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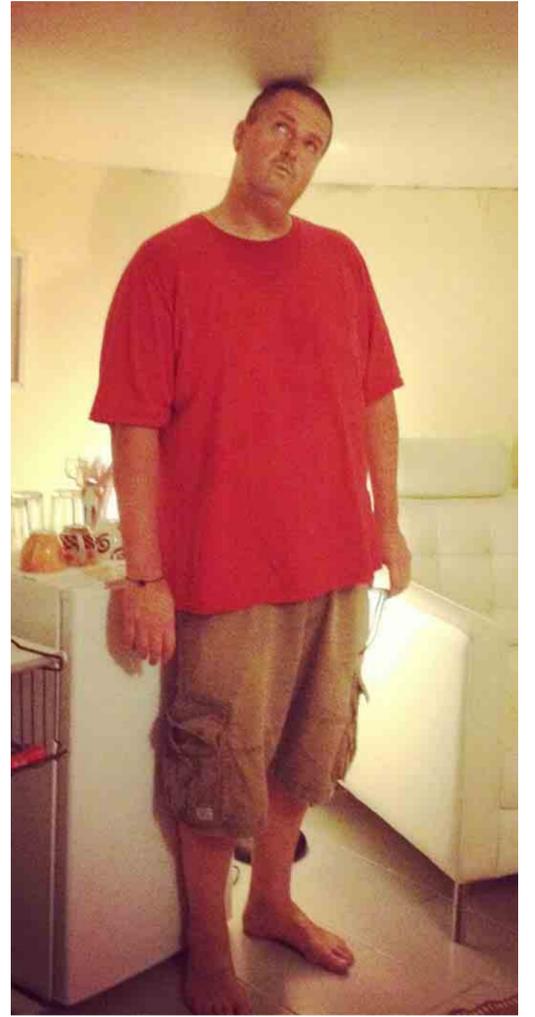
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As Airbnb spurs similar ventures in Asia, one expat has used the room-booking site to discover Hong Kong. Vanessa Yung meets the man who spent a year sleeping in different homes each week

To say that Kevin Lynch knows more about Hong Kong than many local residents may be something of an understatement. For the past 14 months, the advertising executive has lived out of a suitcase, bunking down in different homes across the city every week.

His stays have ranged from a luxury flat in Pok Fu Lam to far less salubrious rooms where he shared space with cockroaches. He has slept on a yacht in the Discovery Bay marina, in a teepee in Cheung Sha and in a converted cowshed in Mui Wo. He has also found himself reminded of the post-apocalyptic film *I Am Legend* during a stay at Sea Ranch, a semi-abandoned development on Lantau.

All were part of Lynch's experiment living with Airbnb, the web service that links travellers to people wishing to rent out bed spaces, rooms and homes for short stays.

Previously based in Shanghai, Lynch came to Hong Kong last year after taking on a new role as executive creative director of BBDO South China. But he flies back most weekends because his family has remained in Shanghai, so instead of renting long-term digs he decided to spend a year living with local hosts listed with Airbnb. His experiences are documented in the "YearBnB project" on an Instagram account and Tumblr webpage.

"This approach allows me to get out of the expat bubble. It's actually a lot cheaper than [regular] housing, especially because I want to explore all these different places that are often far away and cheaper. The price wasn't so much the reason as the desire to get to know Hong Kong and to meet people," Lynch says.

"If you really dive into the neighbourhood and watch how people live or work, such as at the midnight fruit market in Yau Ma Tei, Hong Kong is such a fascinating, inspiring place. There's such a wonderful depth to the place - it's much richer than the pictures everyone else sends back after they go to The Peak and the cable cars. "You can stay in a nice serviced apartment or in a great neighbourhood, but eventually you will start forming tunnel vision ... You're not going to look around and you're not going to stop someone on the street for advice on what's a good dim sum place [in the area]. So being able to constantly do that, I end up making so many discoveries in each of the neighborhoods."

Airbnb has taken off globally since it started in California in 2008 as a way to offer travellers an alternative to scarce or expensive hotel rooms. The company, which attracted more than US\$100 million in start-up investment, now claims more

than 800,000 listings in 190 countries and officially launched in Hong Kong a few months ago.

Its success has spawned similar ventures in the region, including Singapore-based Roomorama and PandaBed, which launched last year.

Teo Jia En, who founded Roomorama with her husband Federico Folcia in 2009, says platforms like hers are popular for several reasons.

Firstly, it provides a discount of up to 40 per cent to a regular hotel room, Teo says. And for the same cost or less, travellers may get amenities such as a kitchen, Wi-fi and washer, which cost extra in a hotel.

"Another reason is that travellers are looking for new and unique ways of travelling. They don't necessarily want to stay in a cookie-cutter hotel. They want to live like locals and be able to share their experience on social media. There's more that you can talk about if you're staying in cool apartments."

[Travellers] want to live like locals and be able to share their experience on social media

TEO JIA EN, ROOMORAMA

Teo especially enjoys the way this form of accommodation gives her a feel of the local culture. "How each apartment is decorated and furnished is very different from place to place," she says.

"The fact that it's cheaper is allowing people to travel more often and stay for longer periods. The average length of booking on our site is nine to 10 nights, which is significantly more than a hotel."

Lynch enjoyed his Airbnb experience so much that he has extended it beyond the initial one year. "The only downside is that my back is always sore from sleeping on so many different kinds of mattresses," says Lynch, who often makes light of situations that might frustrate others. These include having to tilt his head to stand up in the low-ceilinged, renovated cowshed and "sleeping in the fetal position" because beds are too short for him.

"Part of it is I'm a big fat American, which makes things even smaller. It's just such a different scale of living. Just when I'm used to it - I don't even take pictures of most of the small things any more - and then something will surprise me," Lynch says.

For example, there was the time he crashed at a Sheung Shui home, and discovered that the shower just came up to his shoulder. "I was like 'My god, it's the worst one yet.' It's a good reminder of where you are."

But despite the popularity of such alternative rooming, hosts often fall foul of the law or occupy legal grey areas in many places. While cities from Barcelona to New York are cracking down on the practice, others such as Amsterdam have legalised some form of rental.

In Hong Kong, the Hotel and Guesthouse Accommodation Ordinance requires anyone offering sleeping space for a fee

for periods of fewer than 28 days to obtain a licence. The aim is to ensure that building and fire safety standards are met. Convicted offenders are liable to a maximum penalty of two years' jail, a fine of HK\$200,000 and additional fines of \$20,000 for each day that they are in breach of the regulation.

Although officers typically conduct inspections on premises in response to complaints, the Home Affairs Department says the rise in illegal room-letting through the internet has prompted licensing authorities to set up a dedicated enforcement team to browse webpages and discussion forums to collect information on unlicensed guest houses.

That explains local hosts' reluctance to discuss their decision to take in paying guests. For some it's a way to capitalise on spare space; others see it as a form of cultural exchange. One host writes: "I just like to know more friends. We can share different experiences and lifestyle in this way. Unfortunately, the government doesn't like this."

Lester Kang of PandaBed casts his room-booking platform and similar businesses as part of the new, sharing economy, where people can share, rent, trade things with one another.

"We want more people to be aware and engage in the whole sharing ecosystem," he says. "This sharing economy is very new. You can share so many things: a car, a house, a bicycle and other stuff. The idea is to utilise our assets, and it is smarter and of higher efficiency. Instead of buying, we can rent, we can share. We really wish to push this movement in Asia."

While their clientele tend to be adventurous or tech-savvy types keen to try new things, professionals on business trips or newly arrived expats seeking temporary digs while flat hunting are enthusiasts

of their website. It has even helped a host in Singapore find quick short-term shelter when his home was gutted by fire.

At the same time, Kang and co-founder James Chua recognise the concerns of many Asian hosts about sharing their homes with strangers, so PandaBed helps connect like-minded people, or those with similar profiles, by letting users search for specific host types (Muslim, Buddhist etc). They often make reconnaissance trips ahead of major events or festivals in various countries, such as a religious festival in the Philippines, to identify new hosts.

Cities such as Hong Kong tend to be stricter about alternative accommodation, but Kang believes regular discussions with regulators to explain the overall benefits and new guidelines to regulate the industry, will help.

"Certainly, there's a demand for it, it promotes micro-entrepreneurism among homeowners. They have untapped resources - unused homes and unused rooms - that may, say, supplement their retirement fund. There are many benefits; we just need regulators to say how the general population can enjoy and participate in this economy."

Lynch concurs: "There might be some legality issues but I think it's an incredible way to sell Hong Kong."

"You've got people who are basically more excited about this place than anyone. Yeah, there are people who want to make money, but even more really want to share their lives here and expose people to Hong Kong in a really genuine, authentic way."

"I thought a year would be enough to explore everything but this place is so terrific. I'm totally addicted." vanessa.yung@scmp.com



A home in Barcelona listed on Roomorama, which was founded by Federico Folcia and Teo Jia En (right).

