

SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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MIGUEL MORENATTI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

People watch as lava flows from an eruption from the Fagradalsfjall volcano on the Reykjanes Peninsula in southwestern Iceland. The glow from the bubbling hot lava spewing out of the Fagradalsfjall volcano can be seen from the outskirts of Iceland's capital, Reykjavík, which is about 32 kilometers (20 miles) away. Fagradalsfjall volcano has awoken from a slumber that has lasted 6,000 years.



The North Atlantic country is now open to vaccinated Americans, and its diversions are running hot — and bitterly cold

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

REYKJANES PENINSULA, Iceland — The Icelandic Meteorological Office's warning was quite clear. Its website advised would-be thrill-seekers not to make the three-hour round-trip hike up the Fagradalsfjall volcano because of persistent gale force winds. Nice try Icelandic Meteorological Office. A little breeze was not going to keep me from hiking Fagradalsfjall, which has been regularly erupting since March. It's the biggest show in town. But as we neared the top of the volcano around 1 a.m. I thought, "Well, this may not be the smartest thing I've ever done." And this is coming from a man who once broke his arm trying to ride a bicycle

while wearing roller skates. We were fighting gale force winds (sustained at 40 to 55 miles per hour and gusting much higher) the entire ascent. I tried to think of the adventure as throwing caution to the gale force wind. I was finally in Iceland again! I was about to see a volcano in action! As we neared the top of the volcano, my husband, Alex, and I were hanging on to each other to keep from getting blown into the lava field. But there it was. As promised, Fagradalsfjall was spewing fiery lava into the pink sky every 10 minutes or so. The gale force winds kept the smoke away and visibility clear. We spent about an hour looking at it from different vantage points. Sure, I ended up

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CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF
A lamb strolls up to the window of a restaurant in Mývatn, Iceland.

How to use bad travel reviews to have a great vacation

By Cheryl Maguire
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Last summer when we were confined to our home state because of COVID travel restrictions, we decided to visit Martha's Vineyard. Before booking a few nights in a hotel, I checked the most recent one-star reviews on Tripadvisor. I quickly surmised that people were unhappy with the high prices, room categories, and COVID restrictions. I narrowed down my search to one hotel, and then contacted the hotel manager to learn more about people's concerns. He helped me understand the room categories, explained the COVID restrictions that were in place at the time, and offered me a modest discount. Our stay ended up exceeding my expectations because I prevented possible issues and understood that the high prices are for the location, not the room. So how can you use negative travel reviews to have a great vacation? Travel experts share some ways to analyze the feedback so that you can use those negative responses to your advantage.



NADEZHDA/ADOBE

Often the one-star or two-star reviews provide more honest information than the positive ones that may be written by people who were comped. **Pay attention to red flags** When reading negative reviews, look for issues that might conflict with your personality or travel needs. "Bad travel reviews can provide good insight on experiences that might

make the traveler unhappy," said Kristin Braswell, founder of CrushGlobal Travel. She explained that if you read a review that stated that the property is on a noisy street and you are a light sleeper, then this place would probably not be the best fit for your stay. Safety concerns are an issue to pay attention to when reading reviews. Angela Arbab, 32, a fashion content creator, **REVIEWS, Page N13**

Top gear picks for summer camping

By Kari Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Fresh air, birdsong, peaceful nights, and a chance to disconnect — just a few of the reasons why summer camping is the best. We tracked down some of the coolest new camping and adventure gear so you can sleep, cook, and chill in comfort. **Try this cozy mattress** We love a camping mattress that doesn't make scratchy noises — and disturb our tentmates — inflates and deflates easily, packs down to a manageable size for our car-camping adventures, and doesn't cost a fortune. The

ust Fillmatic Sleeping Mat fits the bill on all counts. Open the valve and let it self-inflate for a while and then blow into it to achieve your preferred firmness. The 4-inch-thick mat has a soft (meaning nonscratchy) surface that won't drive your tent mates crazy and open-cell foam with horizontal baffles that create a cozy sleeping platform. With an R-value of 6, this pad will insulate you from the ground year-round. The regular size measures 72 inches by 25 inches when inflated (and packs down to 26.8 inches by 4.4 inches by 6.5 inches), while the 80-by-30-inch XL works for **GEAR, Page N13**

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After an inspiring trip to Ghana, Sheena Collier founded Boston White Black

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TO LIFE IN THE WILD**

Mansion stays, an app for marina reservations, and campfires on the go

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Top gear picks for summer camping

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taller campers. Bonus: It comes with buckles on the sides that let you snap it to another mattress to form a double sleeping mat. \$164.95 regular; \$179.95 XL. www.ustgear.com.

A sleeping bag with wings
Pair the Fillmatic Sleeping Mat with ust's unique Monarch sleeping bag. On its own, the Monarch behaves like a regular sleeping bag (rated to 37 degrees), but has a few cool extra features including a zippered opening at the feet for venting, a pillow sleeve that keeps your camp pillow from escaping, and a zippered pocket at your left breast for keeping a headlamp within reach. Here's the fun part: The Monarch comes with two sleeping bag blankets — called wings — that attach to the sides of the sleeping bag. Layer one blanket on top of the Monarch to bring the warmth rating down to 24 degrees or both on top to keep you warm down to 17 degrees (the bag's main zipper runs three-quarters of the way down the top middle, so you can still climb out with the wings layered on top). Or keep them each attached on one side of the bag and open them like butterfly wings — good for covering a kid next to you or making a nice bed for your dog. Each wing has a built-in stuff pocket, letting you use it as a pillow when stowed. \$239.99, short or regular. www.ustgear.com.



Efficient, collapsible cookware
Cookware can take up precious space in a backpack, but GSI's Escape series of pots and bowls collapse down for easy transport. They offer a few other welcome surprises. The new Escape Pot, which comes in 2- or 3-liter sizes, has a hard anodized Teflon base and a protruding metal heat shield on the bottom with aluminum blades that look like radiator fins. This technology traps heat from escaping and radiates it back to the pot, helping food and water cook 30 percent faster — and saving about 30 percent of your fuel. The pot also has durable food-grade silicone sides that collapse accordion-style, and it nests with a 9-inch frying pan with a fold-away handle. The lightweight metal lid comes with holes for straining water and fits on both the pot and frying pan. When packed down, the pot and pan measure just 2 inches tall and stow in a carry sack. The Escape series also includes bowls with BPA-free plastic bases, collapsible silicone sides, and handy lids that twist on for storing leftovers. \$54.95 (2-liter pot) to \$79.95 (pot and frying pan); \$19.95 bowl with lid. gsioutdoors.com.



Pure drinking water anytime
MSR's new Guardian Gravity Purifier produces 1 liter of safe drinking water in two minutes with little effort required. This easy-to-use purification system removes microplastics and 99.99 percent of viruses, bacteria, and protozoa from water — and, thanks to the activated carbon technology, it doesn't leave your water tasting like a chemical bath. Use the 10-liter Dirty Water reservoir to scoop water out of a lake or stream (or even fill with campground water) and then hang it from a tree branch or any elevated point 6 feet above your clean water container. Then go stick your feet in a stream and relax while gravity does the rest, feeding the dirty water down through the purifier and then clean water into your bottle or hydration bladder. The handy Universal Bottle Adapter screws onto a variety of water bottles for a drip-free process. The purge hose cleans dirt and debris out of the system so no fussing with backflushing, and the replaceable cartridge purifies about 3,000 liters. \$249.95. www.msrgear.com.

Sleep like a baby on this
After my first night sleeping on Helinox's Cot One Convertible, I told my husband we needed a new bed at home — the camping cot was *that* comfortable. Now I take it wherever I go, whether we're car camping or going anywhere where an extra bed would be helpful. The super lightweight portable cot weighs about 5 pounds for the regular size (75 inches long and 27 inches wide), packs into a 21.5-inch-long travel bag, and holds a person weighing up to 320 pounds (add 1.3 pounds for the 82.5-inch-long version). The built-in

Clockwise from bottom: Helinox's Cot One Convertible, Big Agnes's new Dog House 4, MoonShade's portable awning, ust's Monarch sleeping bag, Tarpestry's heavy-duty blanket, GSI's Escape series of pots and bowls, MSR's new Guardian Gravity Purifier, ust's Fillmatic Sleeping Mat, the nomadiQ gas grill.

thermal mattress pad offers extra insulation, making it warm enough for winter camping. The cot sets up quickly using two DAC aluminum poles that slip into sleeves on the cot's sides and three aluminum crossbars that clamp into place, creating a no-sag, stable platform that stands 6.5 inches off the ground. It's a surprisingly sturdy and comfortable setup. Optional legs raise the cot 10 inches above ground — perfect for storing gear underneath. \$299.95 regular, \$349.95 long, \$89.95 legs. www.helinox.com.

Sleep in the Dog House
Not every adventure warrants a high-end stormproof shelter. Big Agnes's new Dog House 4 ticks the boxes as an affordable and lightweight car-camping tent that's ideal for summer fun. The single-wall tent sets up so easily the kids can do it — just point out the pole sleeves and clips and send them on their way. Steep walls help create more usable interior space in this dome shelter, which has a maximum interior height of 60 inches (tall campers should opt for the 80-inch-tall Dog House 6). The large mesh back window aids with air flow and allows for great stargazing — or zip the window's rain flap closed in wet weather — and prop open the window vents to further boost air circulation. A cross pole creates awnings over the back window and front door that prevent all but a driving rain from coming in. The no-frills tent has just two interior mesh pockets up high, but plenty of loops for hanging optional gear lofts (not included). The tent also makes a perfect game



room on drippy days. \$249.95. www.bigagnes.com.

A do-everything blanket
There are ground cloths, entry mats, and blankets — and then there's Tarpestry, a heavy-duty, water-resistant ground cloth/picnic blanket all in one. The super-handly and virtually indestructible blanket has heavy water-resistant material on one side — so you can throw it on the sand or wet grass and be completely protected — and a softer and colorful blanket side for sitting on and relaxing. It works great at the beach, a campsite, or an outdoor music festival, or in the entryway to your tent, creating the perfect transition zone for kicking off your shoes. Buy one with the standard four grommets — one on each corner — or choose up to 10 grommets when ordering and hang your Tarpestry overhead. For camping, choose from the Rugged version, which has UV- and water-repellent layers on top and bottom, or the Epic version, which has a UV- and water-resistant base layer and a poplin layer with wonderful artistic prints on top. Size averages 7.5 feet by 4.5 feet. Prices start at \$150. tarpestry.com.

Enjoy this instant shelter
Create a sturdy shelter beside your car with the MoonShade portable awning, which offers 9 feet by 7 feet of covered space — perfect for camping to picnics. The compact shelter sets up in five minutes, tops, and works with RVs, vans, and cars of all sizes (even my four-door Mini Cooper). Attach two suction cups to one side of your vehicle spaced at least 7 feet apart (use the included strut pole if the distance is shorter), fasten two corners of the MoonShade to those anchors using the attached carabiners, affix two cross poles on top of the awning, and then add the two telescoping support poles, which can be adjusted to your desired height. MoonShade also sells magnetic and adhesive anchors, and anchors for the roof rails on Sprinter vans and Airstream Basecamps — or you can get creative based on your rig. Use the included guy lines and stakes to secure the shelter in windy conditions. The awning is made with 420-denier ripstop polyester on top and has a reflective coating on the underside for brightening up the space. The entire setup weighs 8 pounds. \$325. moonfab.com.

Happy travels this summer, whatever cool new — or old — gear you take on your adventures.

Kari Bodnarchuk can be reached at travelwriter@karib.us.

Bad travel reviews can help to make a great vacation

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ator living in Bali, said, "As a solo woman traveler, my biggest concerns are always how other solo women experienced the place they visited — do they feel safe, comfortable, and welcomed?"

Cleanliness or possible crime in the area are other problems to be on the lookout for when gathering intel. "If I read the reviews and see that there are several comments about cars getting broken into or rooms being dirty, I will move on to another hotel and not even consider that one. There are too many choices out there to be tied to one specific hotel," said Michelle Phillips, a blogger at Everywhere They Room.

Jennifer Billock, 37, a journalist, author, and writing coach in Chicago, said, "For hotels specifically, I look for anything that might have 'bugs' or 'mold' listed in it. Nobody wants to stay somewhere with bedbugs and a moldy shower."

Another area to search for in the reviews is the amount of personal information you need to provide to stay there. Quia Bethea, 35, a freelance writer living in Spain, recommended that you look at the reviews to see what the requirements are to stay at the destination. "For example, Airbnbs in Europe require you to fill out a form with your passport and contact information. Do you feel comfortable leaving this information with strangers?"

You should also consider the source when reading the review. "If you see a bad review that is especially troublesome about a vacation you truly had your heart set on, reach out to the reviewer for more details. If you don't hear back, there could be a bot involved," said Ruksana Husain, 39, a journalist and publisher in Los Angeles.

Notice trends or patterns
Read the most recent reviews, because those will give you a sense of what is currently happening in the hotel. "When I read travel reviews, I check for consistency. For example, the dates reviews were posted, what the reviews have in common, and how long the listing or attraction has been open to the public," said Bethea.

Phillips said that sometimes reviews will mention that the pool is closed, but the hotel website didn't include this information. Since her kids like to swim, she would avoid booking a hotel with a closed pool. "Social media is a great source too — Twitter, Facebook, Instagram — so use the hashtag symbol and the name of that product or service for the most recent experiences possibly happening in real time," said Husain.

Contact the hotel prior to booking
The best way to truly understand the room categories, location, and other details is to speak with someone who works at the hotel (not the customer service line that might be located off site), preferably the manager who is familiar with everything about the hotel. You can ask questions, mention concerns you have about the negative reviews, and figure out if the hotel is a good fit for your travel needs.

Most managers want to prevent problems as much as you do and are willing to take the time to speak to you before you visit.

"If I am looking for something specific and the website doesn't spell it out, that's when I reach out to the hotel directly, by phone or e-mail, and find out exactly what I am getting," said Phillips.

Contacting someone prior to booking a place can also help with figuring out whether the location is a good fit. Before booking an Airbnb, Bethea sent a message asking for clarification about a broken lock on the door. "I wanted to know if it had been fixed because the apartment was absolutely gorgeous. The person who responded was rude and aggressive, so I went with another listing."

Ask for perks or a discount
After the hotel manager has answered your questions, ask for a discount, to have fees waived, or for a free upgrade. Just by ask-

'For hotels specifically, I look for anything that might have "bugs" or "mold" listed in it. Nobody wants to stay somewhere with bedbugs and a moldy shower.'

JENNIFER BILLOCK, journalist, author, and writing coach

ing, I've often received both a discount and a free room upgrade. You can also ask them to waive fees, such as the facility or resort fee.

Prior to booking a hotel room, Bethea contacted the manager. "The double rooms had twin beds for a lower rate than a queen or king sized bed on a third party app. I mentioned it to the hotel manager and he gave me the better room for the same fee and a small discount for a couple of nights additional stay."

Adjust your expectations
Most of the negative reviews are related to people spending a lot of money and then being disappointed with what they received. The best way to adjust your expectations is to understand what is included with the price of the hotel and whether the price is based on the luxury, location, or both.

"Expectations can factor in a lot. If you think something is going to be five-star, white-glove service, and you get there and it's a self-propelled luggage cart, you'll obviously be disappointed," said Billock. She explained that if you are disappointed on your vacation, try to adjust your response. "Consider it an adventure, where everything is a surprise. Praise yourself for doing something outside your comfort zone."

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