

IT'S GOOD TO BE YOU™

# Women's Health



## surf borders

The new passport rules

As of January, you must flash your passport to enter Canada, Mexico, Bermuda, parts of the Caribbean, and Central and South America. All new passports will feature radio frequency identification (RFID) chips accessible by airport officials, making it virtually impossible to alter or copy your ID. No need to swap now—you'll get a high-tech replacement when it's time to renew.



For whom the bellhop toils? You! Tip well.



### BOOK IT HOTEL

*suite dreams sleep easy wherever you go*

**b**

ooking a hotel room can be a crapshoot. The free wireless and mod decor sounded great on the Web site—but now you're lying awake in your Frette linens at 6 A.M. listening to a jackhammer duet. Handpick the perfect room with this insider advice.

#### 1. Hear the latest gossip.

By the time guidebooks hit stores, they won't include info on whether the current hotel manager is a jerk or the prop-

erty just launched noisy renovations. Scope out recent—and unbiased—reviews from real travelers who were there last week, not last year, on sites like [hotelshark.com](http://hotelshark.com), [tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com), [tripup.com](http://tripup.com), and [virtualltourist.com](http://virtualltourist.com).

#### 2. Ring the front desk.

For the best possible room, talk to a human being at the hotel. Some tips:

- ✦ If you're a light sleeper, request a room far from the front door, kitchen, elevator, and any rumbling major appliances like central AC and exhaust fans.
- ✦ If you crave a satisfying shower and are staying in a high-rise hotel, book a room on the same floor as the pump to guarantee vigorous water pressure, says Peter Greenberg, author of *Hotel Secrets from the Travel Detective*.

- ✦ Ask if the hotel will match the lowest price you found online, and get an exact quote (including taxes and fees) in writing. Look out for extra charges, which can total as much as 17 percent of the bill, Greenberg says.

#### 3. Consider renting or swapping.

Sticking around for a while? Renting an apartment is usually cheaper than staying in a hotel room. And if you live in a tourist city (and are willing to let strangers into your bubble), you may be able to swap pads without dropping a dime. Other perks include living like a local, cooking your own healthy meals, and avoiding the 9 A.M. housekeeper invasion. Ed Kushins, president of [HomeExchange.com](http://HomeExchange.com), one of the largest global networks for house swaps, suggests the following strategies.

- ✦ Use established swap companies like HomeExchange or HomeLink ([swapnow.com](http://swapnow.com)), which has been around for 50 years. Two other popular sites are [intervac.com](http://intervac.com) and [geenee.com](http://geenee.com). Renting is trickier. "To find a local agency that can help you rent a house or condo, do a Web search for 'vacation rental' and your destination—although in some places, like Britain, 'holiday rental' is more common," says Susan Stellin, author of *How to Travel Practically Anywhere*. She also suggests checking out [homeaway.com](http://homeaway.com), a Web site that lists rental properties from all over the world. Fodor's forum is a good place to ask about swaps, rentals, and other travel issues ([fodors.com/forums](http://fodors.com/forums)).
- ✦ Demand dozens of photos. If the property has pricey extras like a pool or terrace and the photo shows only one tiny corner, ask for additional views.
- ✦ Pay nothing until you get a signed contract that states who is responsible for maintenance and damage and says you have the right to a refund if the property isn't as expected. Most online services offer downloadable templates.

#### 4. Double-check your res.

Confirm a week before your stay, especially if you're dealing with a small hotel that may have overbooked or a house swapper who speaks sketchy English. And just because you're using a big, credible site doesn't mean your booking can't disappear into the ether.

#### 5. Have a Plan B.

You thought you wanted historical charm—until you saw the grimy tub and saggy mattress. Avoid a week in hotel hell by having a backup. Book one alternate lodging the day before you leave for the day after you arrive. You can always cancel it within 24 hours if your accommodations turn out fab.

**Q: How much should I tip hotel staff?**

**A:** Give bellhops \$2 a bag—more if the place offers high-end service or your suitcases weigh a ton. Valets get \$2 every time they fetch your car. Housekeeping gets around \$5 a night, depending on the quality and size of the room and whether you've spilled nail polish on the bathroom floor. Spot a concierge \$5 for small stuff like dinner reservations or up to \$20 for custom requests like tracking down a store that carries your favorite running shoes.

**Q: Do ratings matter?**

**A:** It depends on the place, Greenberg says. Stars and diamonds are often granted for minor extras like cable TV and secure door locks—important when you're picking a budget hotel in New York City, but less so when browsing country inns in Scotland. Better to create your own criteria—free Internet, a gym, a well-stocked minibar—and find a hotel that earns your version of five stars.