



THE NEW RULES FOR VACATION RENTALS

Plan now but stay nimble to score the best deal in 2021.

BY RACHEL CHANG

DEMAND FOR PRIVATE ACCOMMODATION has soared since last spring, as travelers seek out stand-alone villas, condos, and cabins that offer built-in social distancing and room to relax. As a result, the old rules for finding the perfect retreat won't necessarily apply this year. Here's what experts recommend for getting the best deal on the escape of your dreams, whether you're looking for a mountainside chalet, a beach villa, or an off-the-grid hideaway.

▲ *This woody escape in Ashford, Washington, not far from Mount Rainier, is listed on Vrbo.*



▲
A geodesic dome rental in Hendersonville, North Carolina, available on Airbnb.

WHEN TO GO

Peak seasons may not follow the traditional calendar this year—or indeed exist at all—because many travelers can now work remotely and many parents have kids taking virtual or hybrid classes. “Travel won’t be as closely tied to the school calendar,” says Alison Kwong, a Vrbo spokesperson. “And many families now have the freedom to start their long weekends early.” To take advantage of that flexibility, Kwong recommends starting any search for rentals with just a destination—without specific dates—to maximize the number of results.

Such flexibility will also result in deals in some typically pricey destinations, predicts Felix Brambilla, CEO of Overseas Leisure Group. He’s keeping an eye on coastal southern California from October to February; Palm Springs from November to January; and Arizona and New Mexico in May.

WHERE TO GO

Most travelers are staying closer to home. A year ago, some of Airbnb’s top cities were Paris, London, and Rome. For 2021, homes near U.S. national parks, ski towns, and beaches are the most popular. These include rentals in the Great Smoky Mountains; Breckenridge, Colorado; Davenport, Florida;

and Palm Springs. (Tulum, Mexico, has been one international outlier.) Still, travelers are looking for distinctive places to stay in domestic and often rural destinations, and Airbnb reports an uptick in searches for one-of-a-kind lodgings such as tree houses, yurts, and geodesic domes.

One place travelers are extremely keen to go—but are hesitant to book—is Europe. “It’s the big unknown for summer 2021,” Brambilla says. “People are desperate to live *la dolce vita* again.”

HOW FAR AHEAD TO BOOK

Pre-pandemic, guests would book, on average, 142 days ahead of a trip, according to Vacasa spokesperson Josh Viner. By fall 2020, that window shrank to just 40 days. Ever-changing travel restrictions and work-from-anywhere flexibility are driving the last-minute trend, Viner says. “We expect it to continue.”

Nevertheless, you’ll still find the best selection—and, often, the best prices—the further ahead you plan. The key is to double-check cancellation policies; Airbnb and Vrbo let users filter results based on whether listings are fully refundable. “Booking early gives you peace of mind,” Kwong says. “But this way you’ll have the freedom to cancel penalty-free if your travel plans end up changing.”