



ANY PORT IN A STORM

Paula Slier has learnt the hard way that when booking a hotel in a warzone, you can get a lot more than you bargained for

THERE USED TO be a British TV series called *Holidays From Hell* and I'm now fully qualified to write the sequel, with a special focus on horrific places to stay.

You know the drill: you've booked your flights and day trips and now need a place to rest your weary head. Call me old fashioned, but I prefer to know at least an hour in advance where I'll be sleeping that night. And it's ideally in a room that has not mistakenly been given to another hotel guest, as happened to my cameraman on a trip to Kurdistan. He checked in, left his luggage in the room and went out, only to return to find a half-eaten meal resting beside a Kalashnikov on the table and a fat man lounging in his bath. No points for guessing who gave up the room first!

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My biggest problem when booking hotels online is that most websites don't suggest many options in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. On a recent trip to Baghdad, my taxi driver recommended a hotel that had been bombed a few days earlier, because the chances of it being bombed again anytime soon were low. Had I been able to ignore the fact that the entire west wing (including the dining room) had been reduced to rubble, I might actually have liked the place.

But this was still better than my experience in a Kabul establishment, where a suicide bomber blew himself up in the entrance. Luckily I was out at the time, but the police would only let me inside that night. Most of the walls and windows of my room had been blasted away, but miraculously, the door

was still intact with the Do Not Disturb sign hanging from its handle.

I've learnt to carry my hotel's business card with me when I go out. It's one thing flagging down a taxi to take you *from* the hotel, but quite another getting one to take you back if you don't know where you're staying.

Take it from me, there are several Holiday Inns in many cities. I learnt the Arabic phrase "*Hamdullah*" ("Thank God") after driving around Cairo for three hours in a taxi looking for my hotel. I don't know who was more relieved when we finally stumbled upon the right one by chance – the driver or me!

I remember once being embedded on the frontline with Kurdish fighters and my sister, who lives in London, was frantic with worry. She phoned each

night to check that I was still alive and in bed. Her mistake was never querying where that bed was. So while yes, I assured her that I was under my blankets, I failed to mention I was on the edge of a cliff with only a couple of sandbags separating me from Islamic State fighters just a few hundred metres away. Bless my sister; she slept soundly, while I didn't sleep a wink.

However, my best experience, by far, accommodation-wise was in Vilnius, Lithuania. I arrived at 2am at a hotel I'd selected at random online. The receptionist informed me that I'd been given the "Spy Room", which had no number. I therefore had to search for it, floor by floor. Fun, but not exactly what you want to do at two in the morning!

I was rewarded with a telescope on the balcony and a dartboard over the bed. Smear of lipstick stains and gun stickers were hidden behind the toilet and in the cupboards. As I looked for them – participating in the "secret mission" – I wondered if I'd been given the room because I work for Russian TV. Here's hoping I'm not reading too much into that! 🌈

As the Middle East Bureau Chief for Russia Today, Jo'burg-born Paula Slier has had her fair share of hair-raising adventures. She shares first-hand encounters of her travels off the beaten track.

TWITTER:
@PaulaSlier_RT