

HOW I BECAME AN URBAN CAMPER  
(A Guide to Making the Most of Your Next Hotel Stay)

By

G. J. Chapman

Chapter 1: How Toledo's Secor Comfort Inn Became My Second  
Home and My Favorite "Staycation" Spot

I live in the Great Lakes region where camping is a way of life.

Every weekend during the summer months, thousands travel from urban areas to the countryside to camp out in RV's, mobile homes, cabins, weekend homes, or the dozens of resorts clustered around the lakes. Lake Erie is nearest Toledo and there is a thriving camping industry that centers around our local Great Lake and its tributaries.

I actually belong to a resort located on the Portage River that leads directly to Lake Erie. It's only forty minutes from my house to a

nice little cottage close to the water; however, when not working I was rehearsing with a music group I sang with for the first six and a half years I lived in the city, then attended the local university for two years to work on a post-graduate degree and after that, joined a theatre group that rehearsed on the weekends, and then became a weekend reporter for a local weekly newspaper and for six years worked seven days a week, unable to get away for the weekend very often.

So, I found another way to “get away” without leaving town.

Instead of staying in a cottage or the resort’s hotel, I started to take short “staycations” in a local hotel. Initially, I chose one close to home, a Comfort Inn on Alexis Road in Toledo, Ohio. It’s close, convenient, reasonably priced, and offers a continental breakfast. It’s also located on a street that has a number of restaurants where I could have lunch and/or dinner.

I enjoyed getting away from home while remaining in town so I could rehearse on the weekends. Then, I moved to another hotel in the same chain on Secor Avenue that was within walking distance

of a movie theater. There are also several restaurants nearby, including one at a hotel next door.

It was great! I could go to a movie, have dinner, and walk back to my hotel. Unfortunately, the theater closed; but by the time it closed, I was hooked on my new Comfort Inn that's smaller and friendlier than the one close to home, and is also located in a more central location to get to other places I needed to go, including the library at the university where I was enrolled and where I needed to go on weekends to do research. Another phenomenal thing happened after the theater closed. Eventually, I cared less and less about leaving the hotel and it became first, a place of refuge, then a work place.

Once my hotel stays graduated from using a hotel room as a place to crash after going other places to my *primary destination* for either rest and reflection or work and inspiration, I found myself spending more and more time there.

## Chapter 2: Effortlessly Moving My Hotel Room from Crash Pad to Meditation Room/Think Tank OR Going from “Stay”cating to Urban Camping in My Favorite Urban Campsite

I love watching television, and cable TV and I are on really good terms. Due to financial considerations, I went from having every cable channel available to just basic cable as cable costs continue to soar. So, staying at a hotel where I can watch HBO is always a treat. There's always at least one movie that I want to see while there, as well as some of HBO's other programming and specials. However, when I first started actually staying in my hotel room instead of just using it as a place to sleep and change clothes, rest and relaxation were the main reasons for my stays. I'd bring all of my spa products – shower gels, lotions, nail care kit, shampoos – and favorite snacks and beverages.

I also stopped going out to the local restaurants in the area and getting food delivered so I could spend every minute possible in

my hotel room. I have developed a relationship with my Cottage Inn delivery guy who gets my order to me in record time due to my generous tips. I'm partial to their hot wings, Greek salad, and subs. I know most of the hotel staff, also, and they seem to be glad to see me when I arrive. I started taking a class for work and found out I could get a lot more work done researching and writing papers at the Comfort Inn in a quiet room with no ringing telephone, street traffic from the busy thoroughfare where I live near downtown Toledo, and sounds of the neighborhood children playing, which I actually enjoy when I'm not trying to think.

I was at the Comfort Inn writing a paper for class on Valentine's Day in 2007, when the whole city closed down due to a huge snow storm. I got an "A" in my class. The next year, I had to take another class and got a laptop to take an online course. Of course, I spent many hours at the hotel using its wireless network to participate in discussion threads and complete assignments for my marketing class at the University of Phoenix. When I retired in 2008, from both my week day and weekend jobs, I started working

part time as a consultant and using my writing talent to re-write a play I'd written two decades earlier and to write a curriculum guide for professionals in my field.

I completed both the play re-write and the curriculum guide at the Secor Comfort Inn. I also used the wireless service to create a website, start several blogs, including one in OpenSalon on salon.com (I'm FrogTown Diva), and publish my curriculum guide on scribd.com. Finding my home away from home the perfect place to create and write, I finally did something I'd wanted to do for years. I wrote a novel New Year's week 2009. It took only four days because I'd been plotting the story in my head for over twenty-five years. I also wrote a couple of inspirational books ("Finding God's Secret Place: A Spiritual Journey," published on scribd.com and "Ten Cent Faith," published on lulu.com as is my novel, all under pen names).

While at breakfast in the lobby, I struck up a conversation with a guy from Mississippi who was in town on a work assignment and when he found out I'm a writer, he told me about an online

publication that was looking for reporters. He had been unable to find the publication's website, so I gave it a try since I have fierce googling skills. I found the site and submitted an application. I got a job with the publication and wrote my first half dozen or so articles at the Secor Comfort Inn. I also wrote more plays there, including some one-act dramas I submitted to a theatre festival for inclusion in a readers' theatre series, and created some proposals for my consultant job.

Now, if I have work to do that requires time, focus, a quiet setting, and intense thought, I just check into the hotel. I've even used my ChoiceRewards points whenever I need to do a project. It works every time. Only sometimes I go to the hotel to work and end up just resting and relaxing because I'm so tired. Who knew retirement would be so busy? There are still times when I go to the hotel just to rest and relax, but either way I always enjoy my stay. I even stayed at a Comfort Inn when I visited my home state, Texas, to go to my 40<sup>th</sup> Class Reunion July Fourth weekend in 2009, and spent a couple of nights there while in Houston. Unfortunately, I

didn't pay for the room so I didn't get any rewards points. But I did get some when I stayed in a Quality Inn in Winston-Salem, North Carolina the next month while attending a theatre festival there.



### Chapter 3: How to Locate and Create Your Own Urban Campsite

Finding a place to set up camp is relatively easily if you consider the following :

- 1.) budget
- 2.) location
- 3.) distance
- 4.) amenities
- 5.) amount of time needed to complete task
- 6.) purpose of “camping” trip or your “mission”
- 7.) personal needs/preferences

Budget has to be your first consideration because that will determine whether you use a moderately priced chain like Choice Hotels, my personal recommendation, or a higher priced alternative like the Holiday Inn Express. I actually stayed at a

Holiday Inn Express in Hearne, Texas, when I attended my class reunion nine miles away in Calvert, and I highly recommend this chain if you can afford to pay more. This hotel has the most luxurious accommodations for the price, includes a microwave and mini fridge, along with a flat screen television, and its wifi is the best I've ever seen.

However, if you're like me and want to be able to afford to stay at your favorite urban campsite frequently and for as long as possible to complete your mission, you probably need to follow my lead and choose Choice Hotels or a less expensive chain. One of the reasons Choice Hotels are a good "choice" is because you can earn reward points that can be used for free nights at the hotel. I used six nights in 2009 before I went to my reunion to complete some work that I needed to do before I left town for two weeks.

Remember, also, rooms cost less Sunday through Thursday than they do on Friday and Saturday. Choice Hotels also give a discount for members of AAA and AARP, as do many other hotels. You may also find discounts in your Entertainment book for pricier

hotels or hotels in other cities (Toledo's Choice Hotels don't offer Entertainment book discounts); and some hotels give discounts for government employees (my cousin in Texas paid for my stay at the Holiday Inn Express and got a state employee's discount because she works at Texas A&M University). Take all of these factors into consideration when making your budget and take advantage of any discounts you can get.

Once you've determined your budget and know how much you can spend, locate a hotel that is near to areas of town that you find stimulating or that provide you with the most choices of restaurants and other places you may need to access during your camping trip. If you don't like pizza, don't choose a location where the only available take-out or delivery is pizza places. Conversely, if you're only interested in having food delivered make sure you are near an area with restaurants that provide this service. Also, consider how far away the hotel is from home in case you need to go back in an emergency or just to pick up something you forgot.

Distance is also an economic concern. You don't want to choose a hotel so far away that you have to use a tank of gas to get there even if the gas prices aren't high at the moment. Gas costs, as well as cost of food, are part of your budget, so you want to keep these costs as low as possible.

Most hotels offer amenities like pools, onsite restaurants, free wifi, and/or a continental breakfast. All of these amenities offer you convenience and, in the case of the free wifi and continental breakfast, can save you money. One of the reasons I recommend Choice Hotels is that they offer both of these money-saving amenities. They are also clean, well-appointed for the price, have free cable with HBO and/or Showtime, free copies of USA Today, friendly staff, and the usual amenities like a coffee pot with free packs of coffee, an iron and ironing board, hair dryer, soap, shampoo, conditioner, and lotion.

My hotel also provides a nice work desk, a comfortable recliner, comfortable beds, ample closet space with hangers and luggage racks, and a storage console that also serves as a countertop for the

television and coffee bar. Smoking and non-smoking rooms are also available as are rooms with either two beds or one king size bed. Handicapped rooms have larger bathrooms. The one I had in Winston-Salem even had a walk in shower that I wish I had in my home. The Comfort Inn I stayed in while in Houston also provided a microwave and mini fridge.

Your last three considerations - amount of time needed, the mission for your stay, and your personal interests/preferences – should be carefully thought out since these three things will determine when you make your reservation. Remember, you save money by staying Sunday through Thursday. Don't hesitate to go to work from your hotel if you can't get time off for your camping trip. Just make sure you bring your work clothes and to make the most of your stay, leave work early if possible and go straight to the hotel every night you stay there.

If your mission is more rest and relaxation than work-related, plan your time to include time for the things that relax you. If you like to meditate, take along your Ipod loaded with music that helps get

you into a meditative state or pack CD's and your CD player. You may also want mood music while enjoying your own personal spa experience along with scented candles (I recommend the "burnless" kind that use batteries), oils, lotions, and other items that make you feel pampered.

Likewise, if your mission is to accomplish a work assignment or other task that involves concentration and thought, leave the music at home and bring your laptop, work materials, notes, and anything else you'll need to get the job done. You may be distracted by the temptation to just relax and enjoy cable television, so make a schedule that includes some relaxation and TV time but mostly work time and stick to it. Also, include meal times in your schedule and even if you don't want to eat in the lobby, go down and get some cereal, a bagel, some yogurt, or a glass of juice to bring back to your room so you can take advantage of the continental breakfast.

Your personal interests and preferences will determine whether you will eat the food offered by the hotel or bring your own food

for a special or organic diet. If you need special food or beverage items, such as whole grain breads or diet sodas, bring them with you. Don't purchase sodas from the hotel's vending machines if you're on a budget because they're not a good bargain. I recommend bringing bottles of water and Crystal Lite. I prefer the lemonade or ice tea that can be put right into a bottle of water that's been chilled in an ice bucket. This is a good bargain and it has no sugar. I also recommend bringing your own creamer if you use the coffee pot and free coffee in the room. You'll have to bring your own sweetener if you like Splenda as I do or you can get some from the lobby. You may also want to bring thicker towels or larger ones if that's important to you.

If you are staying at the hotel for an extended period, bring things that remind you of home such as family photos to put on the night stand, a vase of flowers, or other personal items. I don't do this only because I try to pack as light as possible; and I'm afraid of forgetting things, so I bring as little as possible. However, unless I have a lot of work to do, I bring puzzle books so I can do

cryptograms and logic problems. I also do the puzzle page in the USA Today.

Your interests and preferences will determine what you pack and what you do while you're camping. Try not to bring things along because you think you should do them or someone else takes these things on trips away from home. Only bring and/or do the things that you like. If you keep your own personal likes in mind, you will have very little trouble packing for your camping trip and making it a purposeful and meaningful excursion that will leave you either with a satisfying feeling of being totally relaxed or having accomplished a goal.

Urban camping is not only fun and useful it's also convenient and cost-effective. Although home offices and other such areas are popular in modern homes, most people want to spend time with family and friends when at home unless home is your work place. If it is, you may need an occasional change of environment to get your creative juices flowing. Whatever your reason for camping out, hotel stays that are purposeful can provide you with more than



just a getaway, but a way to rejuvenate, invigorate and even jump  
start your creative and intellectual processes. Give it a try!