THE UNSOLICITED OPINIONS OF

The Alabama Housewife

The Unsolicited Opinions of The Alabama Housewife is a recurring column by Mary Alayne R. Long. For more from this columnist, visit thealabamahousewife.com.

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You never know how many friends you have until you buy a lake or beach or mountain home.

You’ve seen this sentiment on luscious signs, embroidered pillows, and dish towels, and you likely giggled at them, thinking, “Oh my god! Is that the truth?” And while it can be tons of fun to have a vacation home in which you entertain folks from time to time, it can be an entirely different scene when you find yourself living full-time in an area that many visit only while on holiday.

The endless stories I have heard of houses overflowing with uninvited houseguests often leave me puzzled. In each case, it seems as though I like who otherwise laid perfectly normal, cordial lives lose all sense of propriety when seeking a free place to lodge. Long ago, one friend—who has a two-year-old and a baby on the way—told me of a long weekend that involved a few family members who have an open invitation. They brought with them some of their neighbors, and the neighbors brought a tagalong who was sad after a breakup and couldn’t go anywhere without bringing her dog. My friend and her husband are kind and welcoming, so they took it all in stride. However, I was shocked at the unbelievable insensitivity of a friend of a friend who felt it was acceptable to lodge with a complete stranger. And includes a pet. Have you ever?

Another friend, who lives along Scenic Highway 90-A with a breathtaking view of the Gulf of Mexico, often opens her home to guests. Some invited, some not. Recently, she allowed one of her old school chums to stay in her home for a weekend while she was away. She returned to find the air conditioner (which the guests had set to 65 degrees) leaking all over the floor, dirty dishes littering in the sink, an unmade bed still laden with unwashed sheets, and the worst of the worst—her ruin sitting on the shelf in the shower after being used by what appeared to be a male gorilla. Suffice to say, that childhood friendship will not be revisited anytime soon.

One dear pal of mine, who lived in a common vacation spot for years and years, told me about her strategy for dealing with the phone calls and emails she gets far too often. She says, “When you receive word from family or friends announcing they are planning a visit, always be polite but direct. If you want them to come stay with you, that’s great. If not, there is a simple way to stop it.” She has learned through the years not to beat around the bush, but rather to respond to the presumptuous visitors by saying, “Oh, how exciting! I will be so glad to see you again. Please let me know when you have your hotel reservations booked, and we will plan a time to meet for drinks or maybe supper. I can’t wait to catch up with you!” Smart girl.

If you find that you have friends or relatives whomever in a place you desire to visit, don’t assume their guest room is designed for you to be the guest. Also remember that even though you will be vacationing in the area, it is likely they still have to get up and go to work or get their kids to school each day. They aren’t living there simple to be your personal entertainment whenever you arrive. If they enjoy company, they will issue an invitation when the time is right. Also, keep in mind that when you are invited to be a guest in someone else’s home, you should always offer to help while you’re there. Take a turn loading the dishwasher, carry out the trash, walk the dog, make a trip to the grocery, or cook a meal. And don’t forget to bring along a bottle of wine or two—or three or four, depending on the length of your stay. When you get ready to depart, strip your bed and ask your hosts if they would like you to replace the clean sheets or clean your bathroom before you go. While they will likely say no, it’s the gesture that counts—and it’s the very least you can do. Once you have returned home, be sure to drop your hosts a note in the mail. (Remember: being a grateful guest is sure to earn you an invitation for another visit to paradise.)

Ultimately, keep in mind the words of yet another likely dish-cluttered “House guests are a lot like fish—both start to stink after about three days.”