

# The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

## TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER



CHRIS J. RATCLIFFE/BLOOMBERG

Skyscrapers in London's financial square mile district.

## This hotel room is way too small! Can I get my money back?

By Christopher Elliott  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

**Q.** Hotels.com is refusing to honor the terms of our reservation, and I would like your help with getting a refund. My wife and I made a refundable reservation and prepaid the entire amount of \$3,630 (and \$504 worth of OneKeyCash) on Hotels.com for a 10-day stay at Lost Property St. Paul's London — Curio Collection by Hilton.

The rules said we could cancel without penalty. After checking in, we found that the room was much smaller than advertised, with barely any room for us to move after laying down our bags. Also, we could not open the window.

As a result of insufficient ventilation, I woke up with a migraine headache the next day, so we checked out the same day. I called Hotels.com to let them know that we were checking out. A representative said they would contact the hotel's reservation team about the refund. Hotels.com offered to make another reservation at a different hotel if we paid the price difference. We had already checked into another hotel through a reservation I made on Hotels.com.

I asked for a refund for the nine nights that we didn't stay at Lost Property. But Hotels.com refused because Lost Property would not refund the money. Can you help me get my \$3,630 and points back?

KRISHNAMURTHY VISWANATHAN,  
Sunnyvale, Calif.

**A.** You prepaid for a hotel room, but also had free cancellation, so you should have been able to get a refund. But before I get to my answer, you might be wondering if the hotel breached its contract by giving you a small room with a window that you couldn't open.

I say maybe. Small hotel rooms are fairly common in London, as are hotel rooms with windows that don't open. I have also stayed in some really small rooms in Europe, and like you, I think we deserve a fair warning before we pay good money for them.

The best thing to do when you get a room that doesn't work for you is to immediately ask someone at the front desk if you can move. If the hotel won't relocate you, then you should contact your online travel agent.

But you should have allowed Hotels.com to fix the situation instead of taking matters into your own hands. I think the company would have been able to find you new accommodations at a reasonable rate, but you had already booked another hotel on your own. So, you ended up paying for a hotel room again.

But what if it couldn't find you new accommodations? I publish the names, numbers, and email addresses of key customer service executives at Expedia (owner of Hotels.com), and you could have appealed to them. And don't forget the hotel! I also have the names of Hilton's executives on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org.

Your case seemed pretty cut-and-dried. You should have been able to cancel your room. (After all, you had a free cancellation, and oddly, you were still within that window when you checked in.) The hotel wouldn't let you, and Hotels.com wouldn't help you. After you contacted my advocacy team, we took up your case and reached out to Hotels.com.

In response, the company sent you \$100 in OneKeyCash, which is Expedia's loyalty program currency. That didn't sit well with you — or me. So, we sent your case back to Expedia. The company reviewed your case again, and this time, it gave you a full refund, including your points.

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## THE VIP LOUNGE

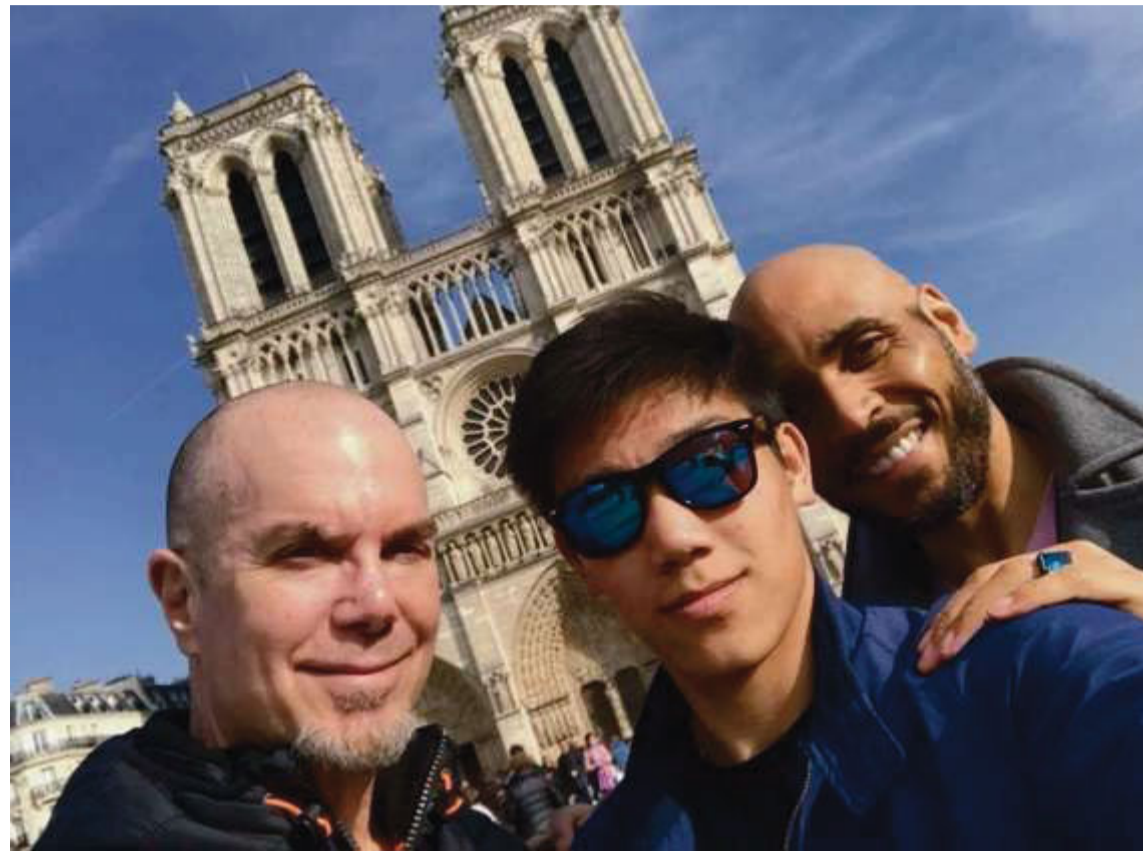
# Michael Bobbitt and the beauty of 'do nothing' days

**M**ichael Bobbitt, executive director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, said he is eager to learn more about his ancestry and eventually travel to Africa — specifically Cape Town, South Africa; Egypt; and Nigeria. He said these places “keep popping up in numerous conversations,” so it might be a sign. Bobbitt, 51, will, on Feb. 1, mark his three-year anniversary at the helm of the state Cultural Council. And while the Washington, D.C., native said he thrives on challenges, he admits that starting this job in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as “having to advocate for funding, [addressing a] racial reckoning, the need for jobs, pay equity across the state in the arts ...” was a major undertaking. He stressed the importance of experiencing the arts — especially for people from marginalized communities. “It [the arts] saved me from a dysfunctional home, and I want that for others,” he said. Not only is Bobbitt — who was previously artistic director of the New Repertory Theatre in Watertown — in charge of allocating funding to arts organizations throughout the state, but as a theater director, choreographer, and playwright, “I try to keep my art going” and is currently working on four plays and three musicals. Bobbitt has a 22-year-old son, Sang Bobbitt Hanna, a recent University of Florida graduate, and lives in Watertown with his husband, Steve Miller, a marketing executive. We caught up with Bobbitt to talk about all things travel.

**If you could travel anywhere right now, where would you go?** My son inspires me a lot. He's recently been on a journey to discover his roots. He was adopted from Vietnam and has been researching his culture — reading historical books, autobiographies, and other nonfiction — studying the language and listening to lots of podcasts. He's even considering dual citizenship, teaching English in Vietnam, and legally changing his name back to his full birth name. His connection to his culture has me intrigued about my own roots. For some time, I have been wanting to travel to Africa — specifically Cape Town, Egypt, and Nigeria. These places have been popping up in numerous conversations, so I wonder if it's a sign. Like my son, I have a lot of research to do before deciding to go and learn more about my ancestry.

**Where was the first place you traveled to after COVID restrictions were lifted?** I went to see a musical that I wrote: “Bob Marley's Three Little Birds” performed in Orlando at the Orlando Family Stage the first weekend of February 2022. It was a terrific production and I got to spend time with my son — who was studying marine biology at the University of Florida — and visit with my husband's brother, niece and nephew, and their partners. It was a great trip.

**Do you prefer booking trips through a travel agent or on your own?** My husband seems to dig the logistics of planning trips, so he makes all the arrangements. He's much more traveled than I. The one time I used an agent was for planning a trip to Vietnam as a high school graduation gift for my son. In addition to his graduation and impending move to college, my husband and I were moving to Boston to take a new job, so planning a trip to Vietnam required professional help. The trip included working with a person to help us find his birth family and re-



Michael Bobbitt (right) with his husband, Steve Miller, and son, Sang Bobbitt Hanna.

visit the orphanage he was adopted from.

**Thoughts on an “unplugged” vacation?** It depends on what “unplugged” means. I will peek at email to see if there is anything urgent, and if not, I'm good. I do have trouble unplugging from social media and streaming though.

**Do you use all of your vacation time or leave some on the table?** As of late, I do. I think as I've gotten older and more connected to well-being and mental health, I see the value in taking vacation and leave. I'm obsessed with arts and culture, but taking a break only helps to keep me [more] focused on my work when I return.

**What has been your worst vacation experience?** I had a trip to London and Paris for Christmas about 10 years ago that was over-scheduled, fast-paced, and sabotaged by the flu for the whole family. Trying to find cold and flu medicine on New Year's Eve was difficult. And the trip over there was delayed by a major storm. It was a lot.

**Do you vacation to relax, to learn, or for the adventure of it all?** I've learned to discuss and label the type of vacation prior to planning. Defining these makes all the difference. “Do nothing” days is something that I have coined. Because of my focus on arts and culture, I can pack in visits to museums, shows, and events. I used to think of travel as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and needed to see everything. I now realize that it's hard for me to even remember all that I saw, because so much was packed in.

**If you could travel with one famous person/celebrity, who would it be?** This is an unfair question. I have a large list. Recently, I've discovered the bril-

liance of civil rights activist Ella Josephine Baker. Her behind-the-scenes organizing and leadership, plus her willingness to disagree with some of our leading civil rights leaders, was astounding.

**What is the best gift to give a traveler?** I'm guessing that you want something specific and tangible. If so, I'd say a filtered water bottle. But, if it was something intangible, I'd say, the spirit of adventure. I encourage people to try new things when they travel: Food, art, a tradition from that culture ... things that you would never do at home.

**What is the coolest souvenir you've picked up on a vacation?** When I travel, I have a rule to buy an ornament or three for my Christmas tree that reminds me of the trip. Consequently, I have a pretty whacky tree, where no two ornaments are alike or match. My favorite is a Santa in a grass skirt that I got from Hawaii. I surprised my mother with a trip to Hawaii. She's afraid of flying, heights, and water, but she did it. She went into a cave, saw the sunrise on a tall mountain, got on a boat to look at us snorkel, got in the water, rode in a submarine, and tried all the Hawaiian cuisine. I was so proud of her, and the ornament reminds me of that trip.

**What has travel taught you?** To embrace other peoples' culture. It's fascinating to see how people live and to experience life from their point of view. Cultural differences are another obsession of mine. It's taught me that our differences are things to revere and not fear.

**What is your best travel tip?** Experience things you would never experience, and schedule “do nothing” days, where you just relax.

JULIET PENNINGTON



JOHN ANDREWS/CREATIVE COLLECTIVE

## HERE

### DECADENT FESTIVAL OF CHOCOLATE AND ICE

If you think Salem is all about witches and Halloween festivities, think again. Just in time for some pre-Valentine's Day shopping, the weekend-long Salem's So Sweet, Chocolate & Ice Sculpture Festival will wow you with decadent treats and evening-illuminated ice sculptures (Feb. 9-11). Organized by Salem Main Streets and the Salem Chamber of Commerce, now in its 22nd year, the popular ice sculpture presentation is back with an added evening of ice illuminations. On Friday, get a sneak peek of a limited number of sculptures (on the Essex Street Pedestrian Mall and Lappin Park only); on Saturday, all of the sculptures will be lit for viewing, from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., weather permitting. All weekend, meander the downtown streets where shops and eateries will offer chocolate and love-inspired specials. Visitors are encouraged to participate — and win prizes — in the Hearts Challenge. Simply snap a picture of at least five special Chocolate Hearts logos at a participating business and upload them before the end of the day on Sunday.

The festivities begin with a Friday

night kickoff fund-raising party where guests will receive a commemorative glass, a pour of wine, and a goodie bag of sweet treats before heading out to explore (\$40). Multiple downtown businesses will offer wine tastings and free treats for ticket holders. Viewing the ice sculptures and listening to live music on the Essex Street Pedestrian Mall is free to all and is not a ticketed event. As the event weekend approaches, a map of all ice sculptures and more information will be posted online. <http://saalemmainstreets.org/festivals/salem-so-sweet/>

## THERE

### ICY FUN IN QUEBEC CITY

Those who embrace winter as their favorite season will want to travel north to the 70th-anniversary festivities at the Québec Winter Carnival, presented in collaboration with Loto Québec. Running for 18 days this year (Jan. 25 to Feb. 11) in Québec City, the largest of the world's winter carnivals takes

place across the historic town, with ticketed and free events that include colorful night parades, snow sculptures, a life-size ice palace, an ice canoe race on the frozen waters of the St. Lawrence River, snow bath (think Polar plunge with snow), six musical evenings for dancing under a huge dome — to hip-hop, pop, electro music, disco, and more — and family activities such as games, tobogganing, ice skating, and sugar shack stands with maple taffy. Kids of all ages won't want to miss spotting Bonhomme, the Québec carnival mascot figure — a white snowman wearing a red hat and sash — seen in statue form all over town, and occasionally cavorting “in person” at parades and events. New highlights this year include Slide City, where carnival-goers can slide down Pente-Douce on crazy carpets or saucers, down Promenade-des-Sœurs Street in rafting boats, and down Ross on tubes; Ice Cross, a 100 square-foot ice track composed of small obstacles throughout marked corridors for be-



FRANCIS GAGNON

giner skaters; and a Winter Beach where visitors can try ice climbing on a 45-foot-high ice polar bear, and complete an obstacle course on an electric snow racer. Advance tickets and a Carnival Pass can be purchased online: <https://carnaval.qc.ca/en/>. For more event activities, and tips on where to stay and dine: [www.quebec-cite.com/en/what-to-do-quebec-city/events/quebec-winter-carnival](http://www.quebec-cite.com/en/what-to-do-quebec-city/events/quebec-winter-carnival)

## EVERYWHERE

### STYLISH BAGS CARRY WATER BOTTLES AND MORE

Staying hydrated while traveling can be as important as good-fitting hiking shoes and warm ski gear. If you're tired of dragging around (and often losing) your water bottle, consider WanderFull HydroBags, the new stylish water bottle bags by WanderFull. Suitable for all outdoor adventures, sporting events, or for city-strolling to boutique shops or museums, the adjustable-strap bags can carry more than water. Large, double-zipper pockets will hold all your essentials, such as phone, AirPods, sunglasses, keys, wallet, passport, and more. The waterproof main compartment can accommodate a water bottle up to 32 ounces, or other liquids such as a wine bottle or reusable coffee cup. Made with “Puffer Coat” fabric and sturdy hardware, the bags are available in more than 15 shiny, glossy, and matte colors with solid or patterned 2-inch-wide straps, as well as clear see-through bags with red, black, or navy trim. With so many color choices, you may need more than one to match your seasonal fashion changes. \$59. <https://wanderfullbrand.com/collections/hydrobags> NECEE REGIS