

## **Lodgings in Fantasy Settings: Where Do Adventurers Spend the Night?**

Here's a common scene in western medieval-based fantasy:

“The weary adventurers rode into the village as twilight fell, looking for an inn where they could spend the night...”

The fact is, depending on the exact location and era (or its analog to our own times), these road-weary travelers are just as likely to end up sleeping in stables or some family's cottage or cow byre as they are in an inn. Or more likely, in many cases.

This is an inconvenient fact for the writer who just wants to get on with the “good parts”, or the rpg player or GM who only wants to use some random inn's convenient tap-room as set-up for the next job-related NPC encounter. But historically, inns were not like motels in modern times: abundant and available in every burg, no matter how small or remote.

If you travel today in the less-visited parts of Europe, you can still encounter exactly what the medieval traveler did: small towns and villages with nary an inn in sight, or at best something small and already full up with farmers come to market and the occasional landowner on the road on business. Is there room for yet one more gaggle of travelers? Maybe. Or maybe not.

### **The Chances of Finding an Inn**

First, let's define “inn.” An inn is a building, often built for the purpose, with many rooms to let, and possibly also some dormitory-style sleeping in a common area for those who can't afford a private room. There is a busy kitchen and tap-room; food and drink are served there for travelers, and there is stabling to accommodate animals.

Structures like this were actually fairly uncommon until into the High Middle Ages (12th-14th centuries). Before that time, trade was more local than trans-regional, meaning there was less movement of people and goods across country. What inns existed were found mostly in large towns and trade centers, along the major trade road from the capital through the hinterland, or on routes that pilgrims followed on pilgrimages.

The earliest inns that we would recognize as such were accommodations built and kept by monasteries on church land. They were often visited by pilgrims but more typically hosted well-born travelers who stopped by the monastery expressly to seek lodging for the night. As trade networks and population density increased, more and more people were on the road and the demand for overnight lodgings grew to the point that inns began to be built to serve travelers.

I've seen a writer say of England of this period that nearly every village had an inn. This is not correct. Whether a village had an inn depended on the trade and through-traffic it received. Many, perhaps even most, villages had an inn during the Renaissance (15th -16th centuries),

but during the Middle Ages the coverage was much more spotty than that.

## **Are There Enough Customers to Support an Inn?**

There are two central questions to ask when deciding if a location has an inn. One is, what is the local population density? If it is high enough, then enough local trade brings people in from outlying areas and that is sufficient to support an inn's operations. But if it is too low, an inn won't be found.

The other key question is, "is there a special reason why this place would see a lot of visitors"? If yes, a surfeit of visitors can support an inn even if the local population is relatively sparse. Is it on or near a pilgrimage route? Is it on a major trade road or river landing? Is it on a road connecting one major travel route with another? Is there a noteworthy structure or institution nearby that people travel to visit? Or (one of the most common reasons), is this settlement the location of a fair or the gathering place for festival goers? In the Middle Ages as many as ¼ of the days of the year were saint's day or holy days, and a great many of these had celebrations attached, some of which drew people together from the entire countryside.

If the answer to one or more of these questions is yes, lodgings will eventually exist to accommodate the crowd.

In his well-known essay [Medieval Demographics Made Easy](#), S. John Ross suggests that one inn requires a supporting population of 2,000 people in the nearby area. If your adventurers are in a village of 400 people, there is not sufficient population to keep an inn in business. Ross treats this as a reduced percentage chance to find an inn in that locale. Writers and GMs may want to tinker with the percentage chance of finding a place based not only on population but other travel and social variables noted above. If a person wants to just arbitrarily place an inn somewhere, be sure to invent a correspondingly dense population or special reason why there is sufficient business here to support the inn.

As to the bigger question of population density in the area, I recommend reading and working through the numbers in Ross' essay. There are convenient calculators at the bottom of the article to ease the process.

So where does an adventurer stay when there is no room at the inn—or indeed, no inn at all?

We'll look at that in a future post. To catch that article when it appears, please subscribe to the RSS feed for updates (button's in the page header), or check back near the end of this month.