GOODLIGHT · BULHO LABS

Photographing your rental *with a phone*

How to shoot every room and order the gallery on Airbnb and Booking.com, with what the studies and 20,000 Portuguese photos show.



19,964 PHOTOS ANALYSED · PORTUGAL · NOV 2026

EDITION · NOVEMBER 2026

BEFORE YOU START

This guide is for people who run one or two holiday rentals and take the photos themselves, on a phone. You don't need a camera, a tripod or editing software. You need a morning with good light, a tidy home and a few simple rules.

Every claim carries a number in square brackets, like [1]. It points to the source list at the end, where each source has a tag: official (Airbnb, Booking.com, the law, the phone makers), academic (published studies), vendor (companies that sell services), practitioner (photographers' advice, never tested against bookings), secondary (law firms) and own (our database).

The boxes come in four kinds. **Data**: our own numbers, always with the sample next to them. **Rule**: what a platform or the law says. **Warning**: a risk. **Not known**: what nobody has published or proven. When a study finds a link, we write “associated with”. No study here proves that a better photo brings a set number of bookings, and we promise none.

CONTENTS

01 What the studies say about photos
Three academic studies measure Airbnb listing photos against bookings. They say quality matters, the cover matters more than the rest, and that quality is within reach of a phone.

02 What we found in 20,000 Portuguese photos
We analysed 19,964 images from 681 listings in Portugal one by one, and measured the light and sharpness of almost 280,000. The most common flaw isn't the light.

03 Before you shoot: light, time and tidying
Half of a good photo is made before you pick up the phone. Choose the time, set up the light and clear away everything a guest won't find.

04 Shooting with a phone: the basics
A phone held horizontal, upright and at the right height solves most flaws. The lens and the corner of the room do the rest.

05 Room by room
Every room has its typical mistake. Here is what to show in each one, and where most photos go wrong.

06 The gallery: cover, order and captions
Good photos in a poor order are wasted. The cover and the first five are what almost everyone sees.

07 Editing honestly

Fixing the light and straightening a wall is allowed. Hiding a flaw or adding what isn't there is not, on either platform or under the law.

08 The one-page checklist

Everything in this guide, in the order you'll need it. Print this page and take it with you on photo day.

What *the studies* say about photos

Three academic studies measure Airbnb listing photos against bookings. They say quality matters, the cover matters more than the rest, and that quality is within reach of a phone.

The main study: 7,423 homes, 16 months

Zhang, Lee, Singh and Srinivasan followed 7,423 Airbnb listings in seven US cities from January 2016 to April 2017 [1, 2]. Of these, 212 got photos taken by Airbnb's own photographers. Compared with the rest, those listings had **8.98% higher occupancy**, which the authors translate into about 19.5 extra booked nights a year [1].

It is an observational study, not an experiment: hosts chose to ask for the photos, and only 212 did. The result says better photos were associated with higher occupancy in that market and those years. It doesn't say how much a rental in Portugal would gain in 2026.

+8.98%	212	12
occupancy associated with Airbnb-photographer photos	listings with those photos, out of 7,423 followed	attributes measured in every photo

Zhang et al., US, 2016–17 [1, 2]. An association, not an experiment.

It isn't the photographer. It's what the photo looks like

The authors measured 12 attributes of every photo: composition, colour and how the subject stands out from the background. Once those 12 measures were added to the model, the advantage of professional photos stopped being significant: the coefficient fell to 1.721, with no statistical significance [1].

The authors read this as the gain coming from what the photos look like, not from the professional badge [1]. For you, that is good news: balance, clean colour and even light can all be done with a phone. The per-attribute numbers come from the 2019 version of the study, in the

first author's doctoral dissertation; the 2022 journal version says “most”, not all, of the links are significant [1, 2].

THE 12 ATTRIBUTES AND THEIR LINK WITH OCCUPANCY



Coefficient on monthly occupancy per extra standard deviation of the attribute. 2019 version of the study (dissertation), US, 2016–17 [1]. Bars show size; uneven light has a negative sign.

Three practical lessons come out of this table. A tidy, balanced frame weighs more than any filter. Even light across the room (no blown-out window next to a dark corner) counts for more than strong light. And “make it brighter”, the first thing many people adjust, is one of the weakest colour levers [1].

Warm hues and saturation also carry a positive sign, but both platforms forbid over-saturated photos [17]. The safe reading is to get the white balance right and avoid a grey look, not to push the sliders.

OUR DATA

A yardstick for light

In the study, Airbnb photographers' photos had an average brightness of 175.8 on a 0–255 scale, against 136.0 for weak photos . In our pre-screen, we call a photo dark when its average brightness is under 118 . That data is from another country and another decade: use it as an order of magnitude, not a target.

The cover counts more than all the others

Li, Simchi-Levi, Wu and Zhu studied photo order on Airbnb. The cover has a far larger effect than any other photo. In their model, a listing that adopted the best order would get **about 11% more bookings** [3]. It is a structural model with assumptions, and we could not confirm the sample size.

He, Li and Wang looked at the image shown in search, in New York and San Francisco, over a 16-night holiday window. A living room in the search image was associated with a 35% higher booking rate; a bedroom, with a lower one [4]. Li et al. found the opposite: in their data the best cover was a high-quality bedroom [3].

The two studies disagree on the room but agree on the essential: the cover is the photo that weighs most. The rule we draw from this is in chapter 6: put your strongest space on the cover, and compare it with your best bedroom.

WHAT ISN'T KNOWN

Airbnb's own numbers

Airbnb says listings that used its professional photography programme had 19% more bookings and 21% more earnings in a year, comparing more than 14,700 listings with professional photos against about 62,300 without [14]. Hosts chose to join and Airbnb doesn't say how it controlled for the differences; the page itself says results are not guaranteed. Airbnb publishes no price and no list of countries: to find out whether the programme runs where you are, use the eligibility button on the programme page [14].

A study by a US company that sells photo shoots, covering 3,103 listings, found professional-quality photos associated with 23% more revenue and about 12% more booked nights, with no difference in nightly price. Twilight shots showed no measurable gain [33]. The markets are not named and the author sells the service: read it as a hint, not as proof.

WHAT ISN'T KNOWN

What nobody has tested

We found no peer-reviewed study from 2023 to 2026 on the ideal number of photos, on one photo per room, on people in photos, on changing photos with the season, or on staging and occupancy. Nobody has tested lights on or off, phone height or lens choice against bookings. What this guide says about those is practical advice, and it is marked as such.

What we found in *20,000 Portuguese photos*

We analysed 19,964 images from 681 listings in Portugal one by one, and measured the light and sharpness of almost 280,000. The most common flaw isn't the light.



The photos we analysed come from listings across the country, from the Minho to the Algarve and Madeira.

Photo: Ndumiso Zimu / Pexels

19,964	681	89.7%	2.9%
photos analysed one by one	Airbnb and Booking.com listings	have at least one flaw	got the top score, 5 out of 5

Goodlight, Oct–Nov 2026 [32].

OUR DATA

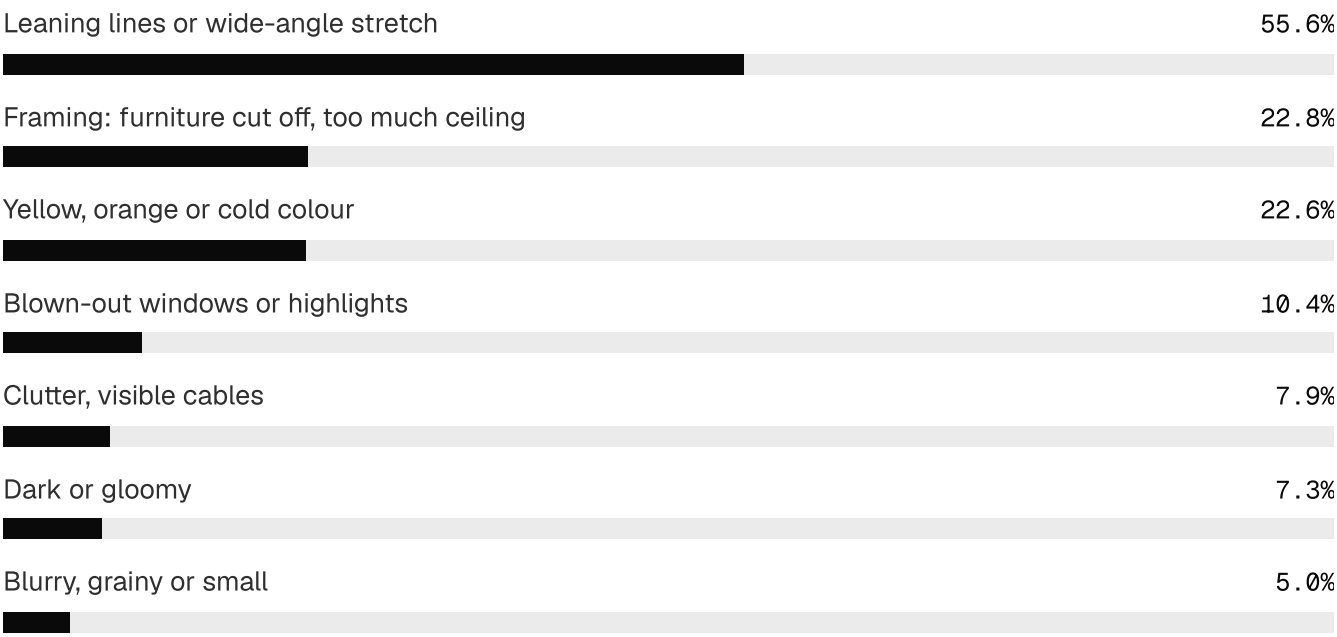
Who these 681 listings are

They are not a random sample. We picked them for outreach, many because an automatic pre-screen flagged weak photos: 62.8% of them have a gallery flagged as weak, against 40.9% of the other listings in our database . The numbers in this chapter describe these listings, not the whole market. For the market, see the automatic pre-screen further down.

The most common flaw: leaning lines

Almost half the photos have walls, doors or windows that lean, or the stretched look of a wide-angle lens. Indoors, more than half [32]. It comes from tilting the phone upwards, or switching to 0.5× to fit everything in.

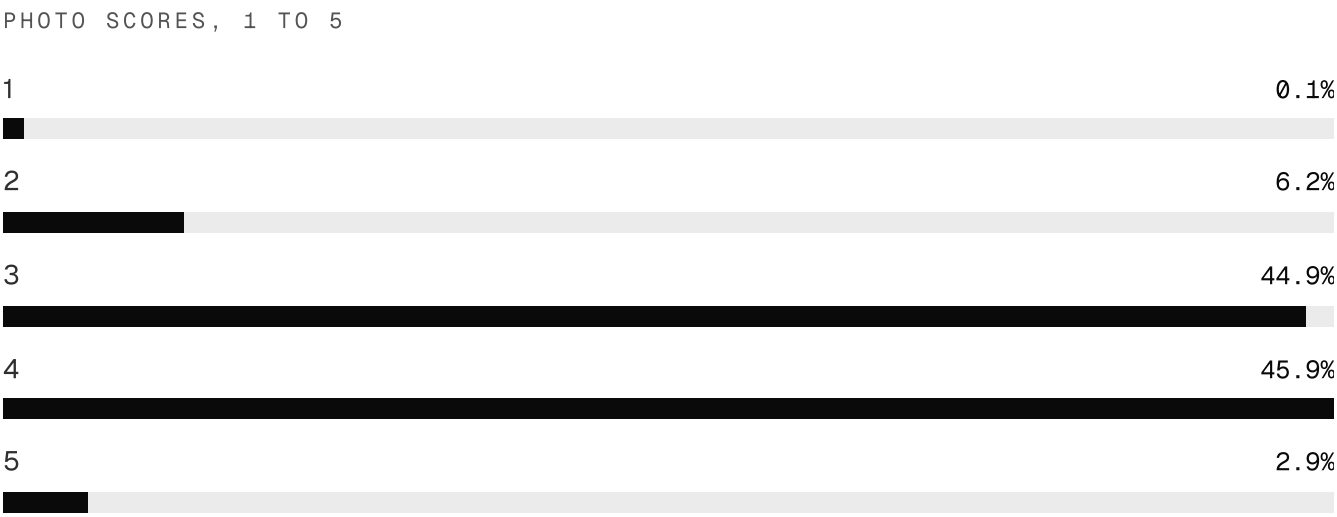
WHAT'S WRONG WITH INDOOR PHOTOS



Share of indoor photos with each flaw; one photo can have several. Across all photos, indoor and outdoor, leaning lines appear in 46.8% [32].

Framing and colour come next. Yellow bulb light mixed with daylight is a flaw in more than one indoor photo in five [32]. Dark or blurry photos are rarer than people think.

Good photos, rarely great ones



19,964 photos, scored by a vision model with the same brief for all [32].

Nine photos in ten land on a 3 or a 4: they show the place, but nothing stands out. In 99.1% of listings with at least 8 analysed photos, half or more of the photos have a flaw [32]. Hardly anyone is doing very badly; hardly anyone is doing very well.

Room by room

ROOM	PHOTOS	WITH A FLAW	LEANING LINES	AVERAGE SCORE
Hallway and entrance	717	96.1%	59.8%	3.27
Living room	2,843	95.5%	59.4%	3.58
Bathroom	1,905	95.0%	59.5%	3.34
Bedroom	3,701	94.8%	53.3%	3.50
Kitchen	1,784	92.8%	54.0%	3.46
Exterior	1,537	88.2%	52.1%	3.46
Balcony or terrace	1,536	87.5%	47.4%	3.59
View	1,596	84.7%	23.1%	3.46
Pool	431	79.6%	32.5%	3.75

Rooms with the most photos in the audit. Score 1 to 5 [32].

Small spaces come out worst: hallways, living rooms and bathrooms. That's where the wide-angle lens is most tempting, and six photos in ten end up with leaning lines [32]. Outdoors there is plenty of light and no walls to lean.

And the rest of the market

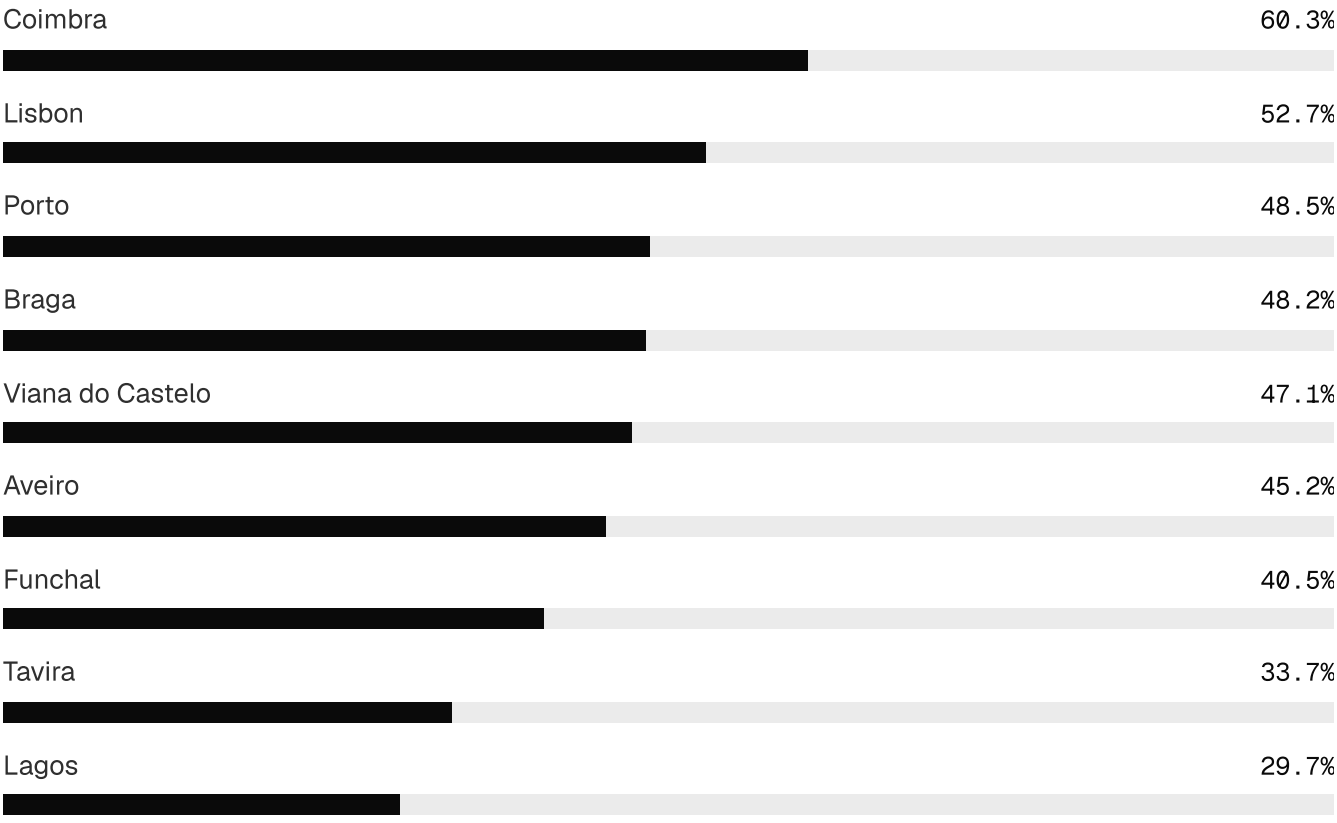
To look beyond the 681, we measured, without AI, the brightness, fine detail and size of 279,906 photos from 7,787 listings [32]. It is a simpler measurement, but the same for everyone.

AUTOMATIC MEASUREMENTS ON 279,906 PHOTOS



Goodlight, 7,787 listings, Nov 2026 [32]. The sharpness measure is the least reliable of the three.

LISTINGS WITH A WEAK GALLERY, BY TOWN



4,938 Airbnb listings returned by each town's search. Weak: at least 40% of photos dark or soft, or at least 20% small [32].

One photo in seven was uploaded at under 1,200 pixels on the long side [32]. Often it is an old photo, or one that went through WhatsApp, which shrinks and compresses images. Always upload the original file from the phone.

OUR DATA

The good news

The most common flaws we found (leaning lines, framing and mixed colour) need no equipment. They are fixed by how you hold the phone, the time of day you shoot and the light switch . The next chapters show how.

Before you shoot: *light, time and tidying*

Half of a good photo is made before you pick up the phone. Choose the time, set up the light and clear away everything a guest won't find.



Sheer curtains open, light coming in from the side: the room is lit evenly, with no dark corner. Notice the wall edges and the door, standing straight.

Photo: Max Vakhtbovych / Pexels

Choose the time

Airbnb advises shooting indoors when rooms get the most daylight, and outdoors in the golden hours: the 60 minutes after sunrise and before sunset [6]. In practice each room can have its own time. An east-facing living room is shot in the morning.

Avoid the sun shining straight into a window that will be in the photo. The gap between the window and the rest of the room is what blows out windows and darkens corners, and uneven light is the only one of the 12 attributes with a negative link to occupancy in the Zhang et al. study [1].

Daylight first, flash never

Turn the flash off. Open blinds, shutters and curtains [6]. From there, Airbnb itself gives two instructions: one page says to turn on the lights only if the photo is still too dark [6]; another says to open the blinds and turn on the lights [7]. It is your call, room by room.

Photographers are split too. With the lights off, daylight spreads evenly and colours stay clean. With the lights on, a room feels more welcoming, especially kitchens and bathrooms, as long as every bulb is the same colour [28]. This is practical advice: nobody has tested it against bookings.

OUR DATA

One colour of light

In 22.6% of the indoor photos we analysed the colour is off: yellow, orange or cold . The most common cause is mixing warm bulbs with window light. If the bulbs don't match, switch off the odd ones out, or swap them .

Tidy as if it were the guest's first hour

Clean and declutter is Airbnb's first rule for photos, and the mistake it names is leaving random objects in view [6]. Shoot the home as the guest will find it: no emptier, no fuller. Removing your toothbrush is tidying; hiding a stain on the wall is not.

CHECKLIST BEFORE YOU START

- [ ] Home clean: floors, surfaces, mirrors, glass.
- [ ] Beds made with the linen the guest will use.
- [ ] Personal items out of sight: family photos, post, toiletries, fridge magnets.
- [ ] Cables, chargers and remotes put away.
- [ ] Bins and brushes out of the frame.
- [ ] Blinds, shutters and curtains open.
- [ ] Dead bulbs replaced; bulbs of a different colour switched off.
- [ ] Flash off on the phone.
- [ ] Phone lens wiped with a soft cloth.
- [ ] A time with good light chosen for each room.

Wiping the lens is our advice, not a source's: a fingerprint on the lens makes the photo hazy, and colour clarity is the second-heaviest attribute in the Zhang et al. study [1].

Shooting with a phone: *the basics*

A phone held horizontal, upright and at the right height solves most flaws. The lens and the corner of the room do the rest.



Phone held horizontal, grid on screen. The grid lines are there to line up the room's verticals: doors, windows, wall edges.
Photo: Jakub Zerdzicki / Pexels

Set up the phone once

01 **Turn on the grid and level**

On iPhone: Settings, Camera, Grid and Level [21]. On recent Samsung Galaxy phones: Camera, Settings, Composition guide [24]. The grid helps you keep verticals straight; the level warns you when the phone is tilted.

02 **Turn off the flash**

Flash makes hard shadows and reflections. Airbnb asks for natural light with the flash off [6]; on iPhone the flash is switched off from the control above the frame [21].

03 **Leave lens correction on**

On iPhone, Lens Correction (Settings, Camera) adjusts ultra-wide photos for a more natural look, and is on by default on models that have it [22].

04 **Leave HDR on automatic**

HDR blends several exposures to keep detail in windows and shadows; on iPhone it is automatic [23]. Booking.com asks you to avoid excessive HDR [17]: the phone's automatic setting rarely is, but filter apps can be.

How to hold the phone

01 **Horizontal, always**

Both platforms show photos in landscape, and Airbnb crops them to squares in search [6, 8]. A vertical photo wastes half the space.

02 **Upright, not tilted up**

Airbnb asks you to shoot straight ahead, without tilting the lens up or down [6]. Photographers say the same in other words: every vertical line should stay vertical [27]. If the walls look like they are falling, the phone is tilted.

03 **At chest height**

Photographers' practical advice: start at about 1.2 to 1.5 m from the floor. In bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms, drop to about 40 to 60 cm above the bed or counter, so the top surface shows rather than the underside of cupboards [25]. Booking.com gives 3 to 5 feet, about 0.9 to 1.5 m [17].

04 **From the corner, two walls**

The easiest framing shows two walls, with a corner near the centre [27]. It works most often in an ordinary room. Leave the third wall out so the room doesn't look boxed in.

05 **Straight on, only if symmetric**

Facing the back wall gives very clean photos but needs exact symmetry: a bed a few centimetres off centre spoils the shot [27]. It suits kitchens, bathrooms and details.

06 **Subject in the middle**

Airbnb asks for the subject in the centre because it crops photos to squares [6, 8]; Booking.com pre-crops galleries too [17]. Don't put the most important thing at the edge.

07 **Tap to set the light**

On iPhone, the exposure slider brightens or darkens the photo before you take it, and the value stays for the next shots [21]. If the window turns white, bring it down a little; if the room is dark, bring it up.

0.5× or 1×: where sources disagree

The ultra-wide lens (0.5×) fits more of the room in, and some guides recommend it for that. Airbnb asks you to avoid ultra-wide angles that make a space look bigger than it is [10, 11], and Booking.com lists extreme wide-angle and fisheye among things to avoid [17].

Photographers explain why: the stretching at the edges of a very wide lens can't be fixed afterwards; the only way to avoid it is a less wide lens [26]. So our order is: start at 1×, step back to the doorway, and only then think about 0.5×.

OUR DATA

The 0.5× in Portuguese photos

Leaning lines or wide-angle stretch appear in 55.6% of the indoor photos we analysed, and in about 6 in 10 photos of hallways, living rooms and bathrooms .

IF YOU REALLY MUST USE 0.5×

- [ ] Phone perfectly upright: with this lens any tilt shows twice as much.
- [ ] Nothing important at the edges of the frame, where the stretch is worst.
- [ ] Lens correction on.
- [ ] Crop the edges a little afterwards.
- [ ] Check the room doesn't look bigger than it is.

How many photos per room

Airbnb asks for a mix of wide, mid-range and close-up shots [6], and suggests two to three photos per room [11]. That is also what the photographers in Airbnb's programme do: two to three per room [14]. Take more than you need; choose later.

Room by room

Every room has its typical mistake. Here is what to show in each one, and where most photos go wrong.

Living room

It is often the cover candidate, so give it more time. Shoot from the corner furthest from the window, with light coming in from the side, and show two walls [27]. If the living room has a view or opens onto a balcony, let the window into the frame, but not with the sun shining straight in.

In the living rooms we analysed, 59.4% of photos have leaning lines [32]. It is the room where people most often back into the wall and press 0.5×.

Bedroom



A detail shot: smooth bedding and folded towels. It works as a pause between wide shots, not as the cover or as the only photo of the bedroom.

Photo: Jaycee300s / Pexels

Bed made, no creases, with the linen the guest will use. Lower the phone to about 40 to 60 cm above the mattress, so you see the bed rather than the ceiling [25]. Shoot the whole bedroom at least once, from a corner; then, if you like, the bed up close.

Say in the caption what the photo doesn't show: bed size, floor, whether it has an en-suite bathroom [6]. In homes with several bedrooms, show each one.

Kitchen

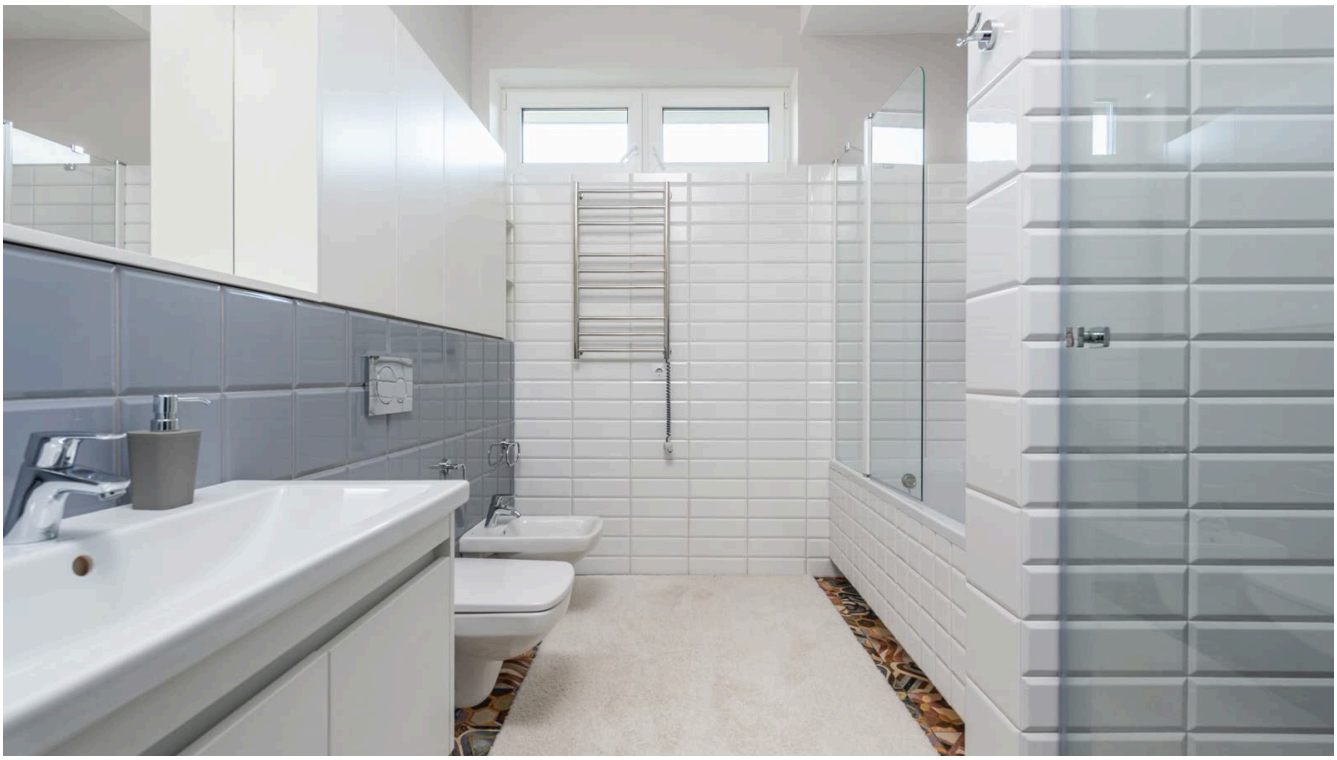


In a kitchen the worktop should be seen from above: phone a little above the counter, upright, and counters clear.
Photo: Mateusz Pielech / Pexels

Clear counters, with one or two objects at most. Phone about 40 to 60 cm above the worktop [25]. Small, symmetric kitchens work straight on [27]; and in a kitchen the lights on usually help, as long as they are all the same colour [28].

Show the appliances the guest will use: oven, hob, coffee machine, dishwasher. And check they are ticked in the amenities list (see the table at the end of this chapter).

Bathroom



In a bathroom the first thing people check is cleanliness: glass, taps and grout. Notice also where the mirror is relative to the phone.

Photo: Max Vakhtbovych / Pexels

It is the hardest room: small, with mirrors and little light. Shoot from the doorway, phone upright, and make sure you don't appear in the mirror. Toilet lid down, towels smooth, personal bottles out of sight.

Booking.com asks for at least one photo of each bathroom and toilet [17]. In the bathrooms we analysed, 95.0% of photos have a flaw and the average score is 3.34, among the lowest [32].

Outside, balcony and view



A balcony with a view: show where the guest sits and what they see from there, ideally close to the golden hours.
Photo: Hyeda Picture / Pexels

Shoot outside in the golden hours [6]. Airbnb's example is a garden: the whole garden, the pool, the patio with sun loungers and the gate latch [6]. In other words, the whole space and the details that matter to someone staying there.

The view is the photo that comes out best in our analysis: only 23.1% have leaning lines [32]. If the view is a strength, show it from the window or balcony with a little of the home in the frame, so it's clear where it is seen from.

Details and accessibility

Details (the coffee machine, a bookshelf, the keypad lock) help tell the story of the home between wide shots [6]. Don't overdo it: a detail doesn't replace the photo of the room.

Accessibility features have their own section on Airbnb, separate from the gallery, and Airbnb reviews each photo before showing it. It asks for at least one photo per feature, from several angles, with a tape measure in view for dimensions [15].

What the photos show and the list doesn't say

Search filters read the amenities list, not the photos. In 92.8% of the listings we analysed, the photos show amenities the host didn't tick: almost four per listing on average [32].

AMENITY VISIBLE BUT NOT TICKED	LISTINGS
Books and reading material	32.2%
Garden view	31.6%
Outdoor furniture	30.5%
Dining table	28.9%
Private patio or balcony	20.6%
Oven	17.1%
City skyline view	16.8%
Sun loungers	16.2%
Sea view	16.1%
Room-darkening shades	15.3%

678 listings with a full analysis, Goodlight, Nov 2026. A vision model can see an amenity that isn't there: always check [32].

The gallery: *cover, order and captions*

Good photos in a poor order are wasted. The cover and the first five are what almost everyone sees.

The cover

On Airbnb the first photo is the large image shown in search, and the first five are the most important because they are shown prominently on the listing [5]. The cover is the photo that weighs most in the studies [3]. Airbnb says listing quality, photos included, is among the factors that most influence where a listing appears in search, without saying how much it weighs [16].

The studies disagree on whether the cover should be the living room or the bedroom [3, 4]. Our rule: put your strongest space on the cover (the living room, or a view or terrace that is the reason to choose the home) and compare it with your best bedroom. Never a small kitchen, a bathroom, a hallway or a floor plan.

WHERE THE BEST COVER PHOTO IS



Position, in the current gallery, of the photo our analysis picked as the cover. 678 listings analysed, Goodlight, Nov 2026 [32].

OUR DATA

The best photo, hidden

In 78% of the listings we analysed the cover is not the best photo the listing has. In a third, the best one sits 11th or later . Before taking new photos, check whether your best cover already exists.

The first five

Use the first five for five different spaces: your strongest space, the main bedroom, the kitchen, the bathroom and the outside or view. This is practical advice, not a measured effect. Three photos of the same living room in the first five show less of the home, not more.

On Airbnb you can only reorder the five cover photos: in All photos, drag them. Changes can take up to 30 minutes to appear [5].

Order only helps if the photos are good. The photo company's study found that reordering weak photos on its own barely moved revenue [33]. Quality first, order second.

Airbnb's photo tour

Airbnb sorts new photos into rooms with AI and builds a photo tour. Each room needs at least one photo to appear in the tour; a room without a photo can be added or removed [5]. Check that every photo sits in the right room.

OUR DATA

Photos assigned to rooms

In Guest Favourite listings, 48.0% of photos are assigned to a room; in listings under 4.5 stars, 30.2% . It is an association: more careful hosts do everything more carefully, this included.

How many photos

Nobody has published an ideal number. Airbnb asks for at least 5 to publish [8] and gives no maximum; its photographers deliver between 15 and 25 photos, depending on the size of the home [14]. Booking.com asks for at least 10, four per room or unit and one per bathroom [17].

In the Zhang et al. study, the number of photos was associated with higher occupancy for the same listing over time; the share of photos of each room had no link [1]. In our data the median listing has 30 photos [32].

GUEST FAVOURITES, BY NUMBER OF PHOTOS



Airbnb listings in Portugal with at least 5 reviews, Goodlight, Nov 2026 [32]. Bigger homes have more rooms to photograph: this is an association, not an effect of adding photos.

The practical rule: show every room and don't repeat angles. In 77.9% of the galleries we analysed there are repeated photos, the same angle two or three times [32]. Deleting the repeats takes nothing away from the listing.

Captions

Airbnb asks for captions that say what the photo doesn't show: how many people the table seats, which floor the bedroom is on, whether it has an en-suite bathroom, the bed size [6]. The cover caption is optional [5].

CAPTIONS THAT ADD INFORMATION

```
Bedroom 2, first floor: two single beds that can be pushed together.
The table extends to seat six.
En-suite bathroom off the main bedroom, with a shower.
West-facing balcony with a table for two.
```

In 59.7% of the Airbnb listings we collected there isn't a single caption [32]. In our data the share of captioned photos doesn't clearly separate the best-rated listings from the rest [32]: write captions to inform, not in the hope of an effect.

Airbnb and Booking.com side by side

RULE	AIRBNB	BOOKING.COM
Orientation	Landscape [6]	Landscape [17]
Minimum size	Three versions on Airbnb's pages: 1200×800 [6], 1024×683 [5, 7] and 800 by 1200 [9]	2048×1080, preferably 4000×3000 [17]
File	Up to about 10 MB [6]	JPEG or BMP; one page says 1.3 MB at most [18]
Minimum photos	5 to publish [8]	10 [17]
Per room	At least 1 to appear in the tour [5]	4 per room or unit, 1 per bathroom [17]

Rules read on the official pages on 12 November 2026. When in doubt about size, use the larger one.

GALLERY	AIRBNB	BOOKING.COM
Cover	1st photo, the search image [5]	You can set a preferred main photo [18]
Order	You reorder the 5 cover photos [5]	Automatic ordering on by default; can be turned off [18]
Organisation	Automatic sorting into rooms [5]	Photo tags, such as living room [18]
Cropping	Square in search [8]	Galleries pre-cropped [17]
Time to appear	Up to 30 minutes [5]	Up to 48 hours [18]

THE RULE

On Booking.com, photos feed the quality rating

For apartments and homes, Booking.com gives a quality rating that uses, among other data, the number and quality of your photos [19]. Booking.com also recommends a separate gallery for each unit, showing only what that unit has [18].

WHAT ISN'T KNOWN

The 1.3 MB limit

Booking.com's requirements page asks for large photos [17], but its upload page still says 1.3 MB at most [18]. We don't know whether the system rejects larger files. If a photo is refused, export it as a JPEG with a little more compression, without reducing the pixels.

Editing *honestly*

Fixing the light and straightening a wall is allowed. Hiding a flaw or adding what isn't there is not, on either platform or under the law.

What you can do

Airbnb lists the edits: brightness, contrast and highlights (the phone's auto button will do), and crop, straighten or rotate [6]. The iPhone Photos app also adjusts horizontal and vertical perspective [21]. Put together, honest phone editing looks like this.

- Straighten the verticals and correct the perspective.
- Set the brightness and recover a window that is too bright.
- Correct the white balance to remove a yellow or blue cast.
- Crop to landscape.
- Remove what is temporary and won't be there at check-in, such as a cable or a personal item.

BEFORE AND AFTER, REAL HOSTS



BEFORE



AFTER



BEFORE



AFTER

Before and after, from hosts who agreed to be shown. When comparing, check what a guest would check: the same furniture, the same room, the same windows.

What you can't do

THE RULE

Airbnb

Photos and description must represent the space accurately. Airbnb asks for content to be removed when AI or other technology was used to edit flaws, hide damage or add amenities the listing doesn't have [12]. It also asks you not to use ultra-wide angles or over-edit, which makes rooms look bigger or brighter than they are [10, 11]. Its content policy covers material generated or edited with AI, photos included [13].

THE RULE

Booking.com

The list of things to avoid includes over-processed photos, filters, strong contrast, over-saturation, excessive HDR, collages, watermarks, black and white, skewed or stretched photos, extreme wide-angle and people as the main subject [17]. Its content rules forbid anything likely to mislead guests [20].

THE RULE

Portuguese law

The local accommodation (alojamento local) rules forbid advertising that suggests features the property doesn't have. For an individual, it is an administrative offence with a fine of €150 to €500 [31].

Photos better than the home cost you later

The second part of Zhang's dissertation models what happens when photos promise more than the home delivers: more bookings at first, then disappointed guests, worse reviews and less demand later [1]. It is a model, not an experiment, but the logic is every host's: a review compares the home with the photos.

40.1%	39.6%	93.2%
of listings: at least one guest found the home worse than the photos	at least one guest found it better than the photos	guests praised something no photo shows

369 listings, themes written by a model from the 20 newest reviews of each; picked for outreach, not at random. Goodlight, Nov 2026 [32].

The goal isn't the prettiest possible photo. It is the photo that shows the home on a good day, the way the guest will find it.

AI and the duty to disclose

Since 2 August 2026 the transparency rules of the EU AI Act apply [29, 30]. Anyone who uses an AI system to generate or manipulate an image that resembles a real place, and could pass as authentic, must say that it was generated or manipulated [29]. The law exempts ordinary editing that doesn't substantially alter the original image, but that exemption is addressed to the makers of the tools [29].

WHAT ISN'T KNOWN

Does a relit photo need a label?

The law doesn't say whether a photo of a real room, with the light corrected or the walls straightened by AI, needs a label. It is a matter of interpretation, and no decisions have settled it yet. What we do know is that adding, removing or swapping something a guest would see (a sky, a view, a piece of furniture) is on the wrong side of the line, label or not [12, 31].

Our recommendation, which is a reading and not legal advice: always keep the originals; if you used AI to change anything beyond light, colour and framing, say so in the caption; and never use generated edits to make a windowless room look full of daylight.

EXAMPLES OF A CAPTION LABEL

```
Edited photo: light and colour corrected.
Furniture added digitally: the room is let unfurnished.
Sky replaced in editing.
```

The *one-page* checklist

Everything in this guide, in the order you'll need it. Print this page and take it with you on photo day.

BEFORE

- [ ] Home clean and tidy, as on the guest's arrival.
- [ ] Personal items, cables and bins out of sight.
- [ ] Beds made, towels smooth, toilet lid down.
- [ ] A time with good light chosen for each room; outside in the golden hours.
- [ ] Blinds and curtains open; bulbs of a different colour switched off.
- [ ] Lens wiped; grid and level on; flash off.

WHILE SHOOTING

- [ ] Phone horizontal.
- [ ] Phone upright: verticals parallel to the grid lines.
- [ ] At chest height; lower by beds and counters.
- [ ] From the corner, two walls; straight on only when everything is symmetric.
- [ ] 1× first; step back to the doorway before 0.5×.
- [ ] Subject in the centre of the frame.
- [ ] No sun straight into the window; exposure set on screen.
- [ ] Two to three photos per room: wide, mid and detail.
- [ ] Every bedroom, every bathroom, the kitchen, the living room, the outside and the view.

IN THE GALLERY

- [ ] Cover: your strongest space, compared with your best bedroom.
- [ ] First five: five different spaces.
- [ ] Repeated photos deleted.
- [ ] On Airbnb, every photo in the right room of the photo tour.
- [ ] Captions with what the photo doesn't show: beds, floor, capacity.

- [ ] Amenities visible in the photos ticked in the list.
- [ ] Original files from the phone, not WhatsApp copies.
- [ ] Booking.com: at least 10 photos, four per unit, one per bathroom.

WHEN EDITING

- [ ] Only light, colour, perspective and cropping.
- [ ] Nothing hidden, nothing added.
- [ ] Rooms at their real size.
- [ ] Originals kept.
- [ ] Any AI change beyond light and colour stated in the caption.

HOW THIS WAS MADE

Our data comes from the Goodlight database, collected in October and November 2026. The photo-by-photo audit covers 19,964 photos from 681 Airbnb and Booking.com listings in Portugal; a vision model (Claude Sonnet) looked at every photo with the same brief: room type, a 1-to-5 score, flaws and contents. The gallery analysis (cover, repeats, amenities) covers 678 of those listings.

The 681 audited listings are not a random sample: they were picked for outreach, many because the automatic pre-screen flagged weak photos. The audit numbers describe these listings, not the market. The automatic pre-screen, without AI, measured the brightness, fine detail and size of 279,906 photos from 7,787 listings; the town chart uses 4,938 Airbnb listings from nine towns and leaves out the Évora and Guimarães runs, which returned listings from across the country.

The numbers on photo count, captions and Guest Favourites come from 10,986 Airbnb listings (8,577 with at least 5 reviews) collected in about 40 towns; some runs used search filters (entire home, at least €50 a night). The review themes come from 369 listings, using the 20 newest reviews of each, summarised by a model. All of these are associations in a November 2026 snapshot, not causes. A vision model makes mistakes too: it can see an amenity that isn't there or count two similar photos as repeats. We show no individual listing, host or guest.

The Airbnb, Booking.com, Apple and Samsung pages were read on 12 November 2026; platforms change their rules without notice, so check before you upload. Zhang et al.'s per-attribute numbers come from the 2019 version of the study (the doctoral dissertation), because the final journal text was not accessible. We did not confirm Li et al.'s sample size or read He et al.'s full text. Photographers' advice is craft practice: none of it has been tested against bookings.

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GOODLIGHT

Want to see what we'd find in your listing?

Goodlight looks through your listing's photos and fixes two of them for free, no strings attached.

BULHOLABS.COM/GOODLIGHT?LANG=EN

STOCK PHOTOGRAPHS: PEXELS

Lisbon rooftops above the river — Ndumiso Zimu
Empty room lit by large windows — Max Vakhtbovych
Two hands photographing a living room with a phone — Jakub Zerdzicki
Made bed with folded towels — Jaycee300s
Small bright kitchen with a window — Mateusz Pielech
Bright, tidy bathroom — Max Vakhtbovych
View over rooftops and the river — Hyeda Picture

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