

Home exchange— The “free” vacation

Your next trip could include free accommodations and the chance to explore a destination as if you were a local. Those are the benefits of a home-exchange vacation: You stay in someone else’s home, short- or long-term, while your fellow exchanger lives at your place—for nothing more than a modest membership fee.

While home exchanges can save you money, they’re not for everyone, and it’s important to understand both the advantages and disadvantages to help you decide whether they’re for you.

How it works

Home-exchange companies facilitate the arrangements by offering listings of potential swaps on web sites and in printed directories. You can find an exchange partner by posting an ad yourself or answering someone else’s.

Not surprisingly, the Internet has helped home exchanges to become more popular. Online listings and e-mail now provide consumers with quicker and more convenient access to—and communication with—potential exchange partners. You can gain access to more up-to-date listings, view photos of the homes, and send follow-up notes much more easily than in the past.

Dozens of home-exchange companies do business on the web, and they differ in their membership costs as well as in the number and variety of listings they offer. An alternative version of the home exchange is the hospitality exchange, where you agree to host your counterpart at your home and your guest does the same for you at a different time.

Benefits of home exchanges

The money you save on home exchanges can be substantial—up to thousands of dollars, depending on the length of your stay. You’re eliminating not only lodging costs, but often car-rental tariffs, too, since many home-exchange arrange-

ments include use of a vehicle. You can also trim your food budget by shopping locally and eating at your temporary home, cutting down on restaurant meals.

Less tangible benefits include the chance to live like a local instead of like a tourist. You’ll have a stable base from which to venture out on day trips or longer journeys—and be able to decompress from those travels in a cozier environment than a hotel room.

Other perks: Having your home occupied while you’re away decreases the risk of burglary; you may also get a live-in pet-sitter and someone to water your plants.

Is it for you?

Home exchange is definitely not for everyone. You have to feel comfortable opening your home and possessions to someone you’ve probably never met face-to-face. If you have qualms of any kind, you should probably say no.

Keep in mind you’ll be staying in somebody else’s house, which is different from staying in an anonymous hotel room. Your fellow exchanger may have different standards of cleanliness or neatness from yours. In fact, varying standards of cleanliness rank as the biggest complaint from exchangers, according to Roy Prince, owner of HomeExchange.com, based in Santa Barbara, Calif.

However, owners of several home-exchange companies said the most serious problems they’d seen were damaged

furniture, broken dishes, the rare occasions when a deal falls through at the last minute—and one thirsty exchanger who helped himself to his host’s expensive wine cellar. “When I talk to people who exchange two and three times a year and have been doing it for a while, they say, ‘We’ve had experiences that are not perfect, but we continue to do it because the majority of our experiences are still fabulous,’” Prince says.

Responsibilities

Home exchanging isn’t all rent-free living in Italian villas, either. Fulfilling the dual roles of host and guest, you’ll have more responsibilities than if you were checking into a hotel. For one, as guest, you’ll have to clean up after yourself instead of enjoying complimentary maid service.

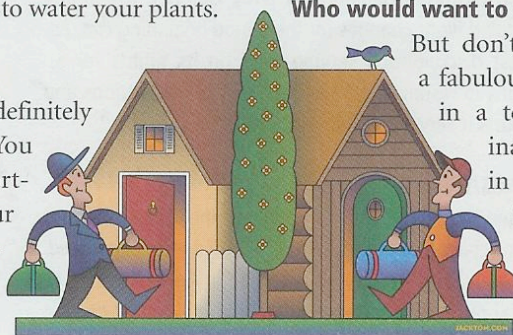
Your host duties can be even more extensive, from making sure your house is clean and hospitable to leaving your exchange partner extensive information on the workings of your household and your hometown’s attractions.

Who would want to stay in my house?

But don’t you need to have a fabulous house and/or live in a tourist-worthy destination to participate in a home exchange? No, according to home-exchange companies. Your small but comfortable place should

be fine for most exchangers, who generally appreciate free digs and may be using your house merely as a bedroom between jaunts.

If you live in a small town or a remote location, finding an exchange partner can be more of a challenge, but it’s still possible. You’ll have to work harder, perhaps answering many ads and thinking of creative ways to sell your hometown as an attractive destination. Remember, too, people seek home exchanges for family reunions and exploring nearby colleges, retirement homes, or job opportunities—reasons other than for vacations.



What we found

We looked closely at seven major home-exchange companies (see chart below). Note that these companies facilitate exchanges by listing available homes. They leave the rest to you. The companies do not get involved in the basic home-exchange process—though they say they are available through e-mail or (except for Seniors Home Exchange) a toll-free number for trouble-shooting problems and handling complaints.

The best value

We found three levels for yearly web listings—the \$30 companies, the \$50 companies, and one \$65 company. We also found one company that charged \$50 for three years of web listings.

We couldn't find any special features that would justify the higher price of Trading Homes, the \$65 web-only company. The two \$50 companies, HomeLink and Intervac, may be worth the higher rates. They are the oldest in the pack by quite a few years (founded in 1952 and 1953, respectively) and thus likely to be the most stable. Both say they have the

largest database of listings—claims difficult to substantiate. However, they are the only companies with official branches in many other countries (18 for HomeLink, 29 for Intervac), which certainly extends their worldwide reach. They're also the only ones based in Europe, which could mean they have more European listings. If you'd like to run photos with your web listing, though, HomeLink is the better value of the two, since it doesn't charge extra for web photos (Intervac adds \$18 for that service).

The three \$30 companies all represent a good value, and each has its particular selling points. Digsville and HomeExchange.com offer friendly sites, with chatty listings and areas for online interaction. Digsville's site includes a spot where members can describe and plug their hometown (whose web site can be linked to their listing)—a good feature for those from smaller towns. Check out Home Exchange for literate, detailed member testimonials that present a good idea of what the exchange experience is really like.

Vacation Homes Unlimited, the third \$30 company, is a well-written site with

very thorough information, including a useful members' handbook—an example of extra attention to detail that speaks well for the company's service ethic.

There are even home-exchange companies specializing in older travelers. Seniors Home Exchange—which charges \$50 for three years of web listings—caters to members who are at least 50 years old.

Not everyone (especially those in developing countries) is on the Internet, so if you're interested in increasing your pool of potential partners, consider companies that offer printed directories as well as web listings: HomeLink, Intervac, and Vacation Homes Unlimited. For directory listings that include a photo, Vacation Homes Unlimited is the least expensive company in our sample, with a \$75 rate that's a substantial saving over its competitors'—\$126 for HomeLink, \$117 for Intervac.

It's important to note that beyond requiring members to pay a fee, home-exchange companies do nothing to screen those who sign up for their services (though at least one said they'd revoke the membership of somebody who received

Continued on page 16

trading places

COMPANY	PRIMARY REGIONS SERVED	RATES	STAND-OUT FEATURES	SAMPLE LISTINGS
Digsville 800-974-6860 www.digsville.com	U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia	Web listing, \$4.95/month, \$29.95/year; \$49.95/2 years; free 30-day trial	Friendly web site aiding member interaction	Paris: 2-bedroom apt.; 4 London listings
HomeExchange.com 866-898-9660 www.homeexchange.com	U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia	Web listing, \$30/year, \$60/3 years, \$90/6 years—2nd year free if no partner found in 1st year	Friendly web site aiding member interaction	Paris: 2-bedroom apt. near Eiffel Tower; 66 London listings
HomeLink 800-638-3841 www.homelink.org	U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia	Web listing, \$50/year ¹ ; web plus 3 directories, \$106/year, \$126 with photo	Branches in 18 countries	Paris: 2-bedroom apt. near Musée d'Orsay; 251 London listings
Intervac International 800-756-4663 www.intervac.com	U.S., Canada, Europe	Web listing, \$50/year, \$68 with photo; web plus 3 directories, \$99/year, \$117 with photo; senior discounts	Branches in 29 countries	Paris: 2-bedroom apt. near Eiffel Tower; 10 London listings
Seniors Home Exchange www.seniorhomeexchange.com	U.S., Canada, U.K., Australia	Web listing, \$50/3 years; \$100/lifetime membership	Limited to members 50 years and older	Farmhouse in Champagne area of France; 6 London listings
Trading Homes International 800-877-TRADE www.trading-homes.com	U.S., Europe, Australia	Web listing, \$65/year	Plenty of interaction opportunities for members	Paris: 2-bedroom apt.; 40 London listings
Vacation Homes Unlimited 800-848-7927 www.vacation-homes.com	U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand	Web listing, \$30/year; web plus 3 directories, \$75/year; no charge for photos	Extra-thorough web site with detailed handbook	Paris: 3-bedroom apt. on Left Bank; 62 London listings

¹ Members listed on web and in printed directory, but members do not receive printed directories.

specialreport

Home exchange

Continued from page 13

frequent complaints). Their responsibility generally does not extend beyond that of broker—on some sites it's even difficult to find a phone number or other contact.

However, home-exchange companies will sometimes troubleshoot for you. For example, in the case of a last-minute cancellation, the company may work to find you a suitable replacement exchange.

Check out listings first

We highly recommend that you check out the visitors' listings on a particular site before you become a member, especially if you have a specific destination in mind.

You can browse a visitor's version of online listings for these companies without joining, although the selection is sometimes limited. But with one exception, you can respond to a listing only if you pay a membership fee. That exception—HomeExchange.com—says its open-door policy increases the pool of potential exchangers while maintaining member privacy, since its web site blocks a member's name, street address, and e-mail address in its listings. Digsville and Vacation Homes Unlimited also block contact information, while the other four sites provide it to members. (Seniors Home Exchange provides only first names and e-mail addresses.)

Though many sites mentioned a wide range of countries, from South Africa to China, the Europe-based companies, HomeLink and Intervac, have most of their listings from the U.S. and Europe.

Those based in the U.S. (Digsville, HomeExchange.com, Trading Homes, and Vacation Homes Unlimited) and Canada (Seniors Home Exchange) have the most listings from English-speaking destinations—including Australia and New Zealand.

We checked to see if each site could provide an up-to-date Paris apartment listing asking for an exchange anywhere in the U.S. Every one did except Seniors Home Exchange.

It was difficult to do an across-the-board numbers comparison for a particular destination, since there were many variables we couldn't adjust for—from whether listings were truly up-to-date to whether potential exchangers requested U.S. partners. Despite those limitations, we did a rough count of listings to London. HomeLink, one of the companies claiming to have the largest database, came through with the most London listings—251, nearly four times those of any other company. But when we looked more closely at some of HomeLink's listings, we found that a fair amount were outdated. Intervac, which also claimed to be the largest home-exchange company, was a clear loser, with only 10 London listings. But Intervac was offering what seemed a particularly skimpy range of visitor-only offerings on its site, so it could have offered many more to actual members.

The other two losers in the London tally were Digsville and Seniors Home Exchange, offering 4 and 6 listings, respectively. The others—HomeExchange.com, Trading Homes, and Vacation Homes Unlimited—had respectable tallies, each with 40 or more listings.

Check out these tips if you've decided that a home-exchange vacation is for you:

► Pick partners carefully. Once you've made a choice, enter into an active dialogue with each. Your aim is "to build your comfort level, so by the time you're doing it, the idea that you're exchanging homes with a stranger isn't there," says Roy Prince, owner of HomeExchange.com. "Instead, you feel like you're exchanging with friends."

► Be sure to openly discuss all your worries and expectations. Even friends can disagree on standards of cleanliness as well as the definitions of size and proximity to local attractions.

► Spell out details of the exchange in writing. While a legal contract usually isn't necessary, a written agreement can help you avoid problems. Include special duties you're expecting your partner to perform, such as pet care; any no-nos (for example, areas of the house or possessions you'd prefer your partner not have access to); and arrangements for small household repairs. Sign the agreement and send it to your partner for his or her signature. Once you've gotten the signed agreement back, you might exchange copies of your airline tickets as an extra assurance that you're both committed to the arrangement.

► Check with home- and car-insurance agents. If your partners are staying at your home for 30 days or less, they're usually considered guests and will probably be covered by your home insurance. The same time period is usually in force for car insurance. For longer exchanges, you may have to make other arrangements. ■