



Daily Breeze

WEDNESDAY
July 1, 1998

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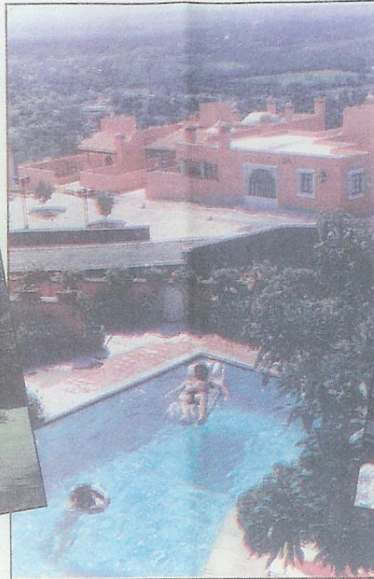
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TRADING PLACES



ROBERT CASILLAS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Alfons and Teddy Nielander of Germany, at left, look over information about Southern California with Iolene and Bob Whittenbrook of Torrance. The couples, who have mutual friends, have arranged to trade their homes for six weeks. This trend of vacation "home trading" is catching on in popularity.

Growing trend lets travelers cut costs by switching houses elsewhere

By Meredith Grenier
STAFF WRITER

Vacations can bust the budget in a hurry — especially when children tag along, multiplying costly hotel, restaurant and car rental bills.

But innovative travelers are going on holiday in the United States and abroad for little more than the price of staying home.

They simply swap houses.

That's right. You take mine for three weeks or three months and I'll take yours — cranky plumbing, white carpet and all. Cars, sports equipment, club memberships, cribs and even pets often come with the deal.

The concept worked so well for Torrance residents Bob and Iolene Wittenbrook that they are now on their third home exchange — spending six weeks in a town near Munster, Germany. Plans are also under way for a home exchange in Kauai later this year.

Home Trading organizations (or clubs) publish listings both in magazine format and on the Internet of individuals willing to exchange, giving data (and photographs) of the house, flat, apartment — even farms, cottages and castles are available. For fees ranging from \$65 to \$100, a person can advertise a home and gain access to other would-be traders.

From then on the company steps out and the homeowners communicate. This may or may not result in a trade after discussing details of timing, logistics and responsibilities. Most opportunities

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Travelers

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are in the United States, England, Canada, Australia and Europe, but some exchanges are available in places such as Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and South America and Central America. Some companies offer guidelines such as sample introduction and agreement letters. Money is never exchanged except for incidentals such as telephone bills or repairs.

Barbara and Steven Leutz of Redondo Beach found their house exchange a godsend when vacationing with their 3-month-old baby. They realized that with all the infant paraphernalia, a hotel room soon would become cramped. So they signed up with Trading Homes International, a Hermosa Beach company that publishes 70 pages of listings of homes available worldwide, and wound up making a one-week trade: their South Bay historical landmark for a beautiful home with a pool near Hawaii's Diamond Head.

Exploring the area

With the extra space offered by a home exchange, traders can invite friends and family to join them in exploring the area surrounding their new home. The Wittenbrooks will play host to their daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren, ages 6 and 13, in early July when the group uses the residence as a starting point for travel to Denmark and Holland.

Their German counterparts, Teddy and Alfons Nieländer, are headquartered at the Wittenbrooks' comfortable 1,800 square-foot home, within walking distance of Del Amo Fashion Center, Wilson Park's farmer's market and freeway-close to amusement parks, San Diego and Las Vegas — all on the Nieländers' list.

With help from their hosts, who introduced the German couple to their circle of friends before departing for Germany, the visiting couple will experience "cultural immersing," a trend that is fueling home exchanges. Many travelers want to mingle with the natives to learn the culture firsthand, rather than riding buses to crowded tourist sites and returning home having met only waiters, hotel clerks and tour guides.

Before departing, the Wittenbrooks gave their guests a tour of the immediate area and left a folder of names and numbers of friends, gas, electric and insurance companies, mechanic, handyman, plumber and instructions on all appliances, TV, stereo and VCR equipment. There are also brochures of tourist attractions, restaurants and maps with detailed directions.

"We tried to think of everything they could possibly need to make sure they have a great time," says Bob Wittenbrook, a retired Torrance building inspector.

While home exchanges are popular with retired couples (the concept was started by a group of retired school teachers 20 years ago) about 60 percent of exchanges are between families, who even supply neighborhood children for playmates and care for pets — dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters, even horses.

"Stretching out in a house really comes in handy after a day of sightseeing with kids," says Hermosa Beach resident Ed Kushins, a divorced father of two adult children, who developed Trading Homes International five years ago. He started the company after finding that all the listings in his destination areas had already been taken.

Successful trades

Home traders often become friends. Kushins says the key to a successful trade is good communication and accurate representation of the premises. Sometimes members list their second homes, cottages or condominiums instead of their homes or in combination with their primary residences as added enticement. A large number of homes are average residences but there are many on waterfronts or near museums and theaters in cities. There even was an 800-year-old English manor that had been Henry VIII's hunting lodge.

Trading Homes International and other companies such as Intervac and HomeLink are offered on the Internet with color photographs and enticing descriptions so the selection and agreement process has become much quicker with the use of e-mail and faxes. Kushins, who trades his spacious two-story home a block from the ocean in Hermosa Beach once a year, says members' most common concern is "How do you know your house will be safe?"

The answer, he says, emerges as you get to know your trading partners. You find you have things in common, you develop a trust — or you sense it isn't going to work out.

"Those who join this program tend to be individuals who have trust in people. They know how they will treat another person's property and that's the way they expect their home will be treated. By the time the exchange is made, you wish you could spend time with them because you have the sense that you know them fairly well. Often the children are writing to each other as pen pals. Remember, this is not a rental or a time share, but a mutual trust."

Included in the Trading Homes International membership is a 16-page booklet called *Helpful Hints* in which there are sample inquiry letters, regret letters, tips on preparing for your guests and leaving your host's house ("a thank you note and/or small gift is always appreciated").

As the owner, Kushins is also the complaint department, but he says he gets very few. One couple from France staying in Chicago had bought a lot of souvenirs and placed them in a black trash bag, which the maid inadvertently threw out.

Once when Kushins was in Washington, D.C., with his children in a house on a subway line, the owner's car was stolen even though Kushins had never used it. It was later recovered. And while he was exchanging with an English family, his brand new Jeep Cherokee (driven by his English home trader) was involved in a rear-end accident. (Insurance took care of it.)

Because people travel the most in the summer, the searching usually begins around November and can take from four weeks to several months. Some members do sequential trades and are on the road about half the year, going from one home exchange to another. Kushins says the South Bay is a frequently requested "dream vacation" destination with its great weather, beach access, amusement parks and stargazing possibilities.

Whether you have a three-bedroom post-World War II tract home or a contemporary beachfront compound, size doesn't matter as much as location, he says. A Canadian with a country estate may be perfectly happy exchanging for a loft in Greenwich Village or beach cottage in the South Bay.

Mutual agreement

The most important thing is mutual agreement on everything from who will pay for long distance telephone calls to pet-sitting, which can save a bundle on kennel bills.

In 1993, Kushins organized a home trade in England where the neighbors held a big welcome party for his family. In 1994 he and the children stayed in a house 10 minutes outside of Paris along with another family of four whom he invited from home to join them.

In February, they stayed in a four-story home in London belonging to a television producer with the most extensive library he had ever seen in a private home. The entire tab for the two weeks, including some dining out, sightseeing and theater, was less than \$1,600.

In 1996, the Wittenbrooks traded their home and their Lake Havasu condominium for a five-bedroom, stone mansion in northern England that was loaded with antiques and Waterford crystal, had a billiard room and view of rolling hills "that went on forever."

"When we visited the Waterford factory, I told Bob this is nothing like the Toners' house," says Iolene. "But the Toners just loved it here, couldn't get over the beach, the bikinis and the weather."

The family's Mercedes-Benz and seven-passenger sports utility vehicle came in handy when the Wittenbrooks' grandchildren and their parents arrived in England for a 3-week visit.

"There were so many charming villages 5 or 10 miles away. Many had ancient castles. Almost every village had a farmer's market so we cooked dinner every night and usually found a pub for lunch. We took a lot of day tours to places like Scotland," said Iolene.

In May 1993, the couple had a home exchange in a seaside town in Queensland, Australia. They stayed in a beautiful home on a canal for one month and then traveled through much of Australia and New Zealand. By adding home exchanges to existing travel plans, they found they could double their travel time and itinerary and still stay within their budget.

The best thing about trading homes, say participants, is you feel like "a guest" rather than "a tourist."

A sampling of home-trading companies can be found on the Internet. Point your browser at Trading Homes International (<http://www.trading-homes.com>); Homelink International (<http://www.Homelink.org>); or Intervac International (<http://www.intervac.com>).

A how-to handbook called *Trading Places* by Bill and Mary Barbour is available for \$12, including postage, taxes and handling. To order call 798-3864 or send checks to: Trading Homes International, P.O. Box 787, Hermosa Beach, CA 90254.