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Past week:

## Trading spaces

### Vacations can be happier — and cheaper — when trusting travelers swap houses

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(August 7, 2005) — John and Paulette "Cookie" Lombino took the plunge in July.

They moved out of their home in Ontario, Wayne County, temporarily turning the keys over to Claudia and Hermann Rauchegger, an Austrian couple they met for the first time at Greater Rochester International Airport.

For three weeks, the Raucheggers and their teen daughters took over the Lombinos' house overlooking Lake Ontario — sleeping in the couple's bed, swimming in their pool, chilling in the hot tub, feeding their goldfish, using their computer, driving their car.

Was this a home invasion? A surprise drop-in from distant relatives? A case of couples gone wild? No, it was a home exchange — an increasingly popular way to find less expensive, more comfortable vacation lodging. Exchanges typically take place between two parties who simply switch residences based on similar vacation dates and desired destinations.

The primary cost: a listing fee on specialized Web sites, which runs an average of \$50 a year.

"This is not a gimmick. There are no charges involved," said Helen Salem, a swapper and owner of Only in America Home Exchange, one of a string of online vacation house-swapping companies that have sprouted up since the advent of the Internet.

The Lombinos and Raucheggers met through HomeExchange, a popular home-swapping site.

Vacation house-swapping got its start in the early 1950s in Europe as a travel alternative for schoolteachers vacationing on a shoestring budget, travel experts say. In 1953, they formed an organization called Intervac that connected them through catalogs and is now an established company with about 10,000 members. "It is definitely a niche market," said Linda Allen, owner of International Home Exchange Network, another online house-swapping business.



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JAMIE GERMANO staff photographer  
John and Cookie Lombino, foreground,  
swapped houses with the Rauchegger family  
of Austria: from left, Clara, Hermann, Claudia,  
Olivia and Teresa.

Day in Photos

#### Tips on swaps

Thinking about trying a vacation home swap? Experts offer these guidelines:

- Swaps work best when you plan to stay two weeks or more.
- Be flexible with travel dates and where you want to visit.
- Be prepared to invest time. You have to research your destination, as well as prepare your house for guests
- Swappers in cities that aren't tourist magnets need to work harder to write compelling profiles to attract a match.

While house-swapping still tends to appeal to the adventurous, the Internet has heightened its popularity. HomeExchange saw its listings climb from 100 in 1992 to 7,500-plus today.

Allen said most house swappers today "are seasoned travelers, empty nesters, upper middle class, and they usually have traveled to that destination before."

A new trend is for people to swap use of their second, or vacation, homes. The Lombinos and Rauchegggers both have second residences — the Lombinos in Florida and the Rauchegggers a condo-styled attachment to their house — that they could swap while still having a place to stay.

"People are realizing that this is not a weird alternative way to travel and that this is a great way to save a lot of money, and it's much more comfortable than staying at a hotel," said Ed Kushins, president and a founder of HomeExchange.

#### Swapping's perks

Travel experts say swapping offers many perks, including big savings. Depending on where the swap is, savings can run into the thousands, said Brad Tuttle, senior editor at Arthur Frommer's *Budget Travel* magazine.

Heavily-sought-after swap cities include New York and San Francisco, where hotels can cost more than \$200 a night.

The Rauchegggers estimated that they saved up to \$5,000 on hotels, transportation and dining. The Lombinos picked them up at the airport and dropped them off, and they stocked the refrigerator, which is unusual in such arrangements.

Savings from swapping are even greater at a time when travel costs are up, said Andrew Wang, a financial adviser at Runnymede Capital Management in Mendham, N.J. Domestic lodging and dining will jump 5 percent this year over last year, and lodging rates will average \$129, a 3.9 percent rise, according to AAA.

Swappers can even choose to reap the comforts of a luxury home, depending on what their house offers, too. In general, a top-flight house and location gets something similar in return, but a lot of the deal depends upon negotiation.

A surf through HomeExchange's listings showed that homes range from those on suburban cul-de-sacs to city apartments, seaside cottages and mansions. And there is the villa on the Red Sea coast in El Gouna, Egypt, that stands on a sprawling golf course.

#### The downside

Although the home exchange companies said they had no nightmarish stories to share, there are tales of broken items, bad pets and houses that look better online than in real life. Those who trade take a leap of faith. "The big thing is your trust. It's hard to know 100 percent what you get on the other end," said Frommer's Tuttle. "Most people have pictures (online), but they don't show everything."

Jill and Tom Palmer of Corning, Steuben County, had a lukewarm experience two years ago, during their fourth exchange using the Intervac.

"The area wasn't as easy to get around in as some of the others, and it didn't help that I sprained my ankle, too,"

#### Protect yourself

If you're planning a vacation home swap, consider this advice from experts:

- Read the listing information carefully.
- Communicate via e-mail or other methods to work out any concerns beforehand. It's the best way to ensure a successful exchange.
- Ask for referrals of prior exchanges.
- Remove things of particular value from your home to ensure they aren't accidentally damaged.
- Ask friends or relatives to check in with the people using your home. It not only gives you peace of mind, it provides your guests with a local contact.
- Prepare agreements that outline details and responsibilities. Your insurance policy may cover some situations, but be sure to check with your agent about your particular coverage.
- If you're going to let the family drive your car, put the details in writing and have it notarized.



said Jill of their stay in the village of Fulmodeston, England. In addition, the couple was stuck with an uncooperative cat.

"We learned to be more inquisitive about the surroundings," said Jill, admitting that detailed research helps prevent bad swaps.

Jessica Jaffe, Intervac's U.S. representative, said the company rarely receives complaints, but when it does, it takes them seriously — such as throwing out swappers who falsify information.

"That's a good example of 'Make sure you do your research pretty thoroughly, investigate where the home is ...,'" Jaffe said. "With pets, research exactly what you are getting into. In general, some vacations are better than others; research always makes a difference."

A smooth exchange takes work, home swappers say. Most people leave behind detailed booklets with phone numbers and instructions on the house. The Lombinos cleaned their house, bought new sheets, compiled a folder of maps and things to do for their guests, and cleaned their pool early.

Bottom line? There are no guarantees.

#### **My house is your house**

The Lombinos said they went into the experience open-minded, trusting that things would work out. They began e-mail correspondence in February.

"I said to them, 'It's your house; don't worry about breaking anything,'" Cookie said. "Why not? They are trusting us with their house."

In October, the Lombinos will take over the condo attachment of the Rauchegger's house, which has a grand view of the Alps, an illuminated swimming pool and a private garden.

They plan to use the house as a base for their monthlong travels through Europe and might stay with some of the Rauchegg's friends in different countries.

For these couples, the swap has worked so far. The Rauchegg's say they will miss the house, Lake Ontario, Wegmans and the warm welcome they got in Rochester. "We could have stayed another two weeks," Claudia Rauchegger said.

When the Rauchegg's left, the Lombinos' house was exactly the way it had been when they turned it over: The garden was watered, the fish well fed and the refrigerator stocked with food.

The Lombinos said they look forward to future exchanges.

"I'd absolutely recommend it to friends. It is a good way of seeing the countries and seeing it more reasonably," Cookie says. "And when you're gone for a length of time, it's so nice to have a home."

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