

SECOND HOMES

Online sites make house swaps even easier for frugal travelers

By TOM KELLY
Special to The Times

Mary Deakers, 53, was flush with air miles but not cash and desperately needed some sunshine. The Bay Area software engineer had just completed a complex project for a longtime friend and client, one of those jobs that somehow stretched into a 90-day assignment instead of the anticipated 45. The idea of spending some days under a warm tropical sun already was mending her frayed edges.

The plan? Trading homes with a woman in the Canary Islands who had been accepted to study dance at a San Francisco academy. Deakers would cash in

her air miles for a flight to London, then on to Santa Cruz de la Palma on the island La Palma. The lush, tropical locale, which a number of Europeans believe to be their best-kept getaway secret, is often compared to the Hawaiian island of Kauai (without the humidity).

Home exchanges historically have involved staying in someone else's home while they stay in yours, sometimes using each other's cars and boats. Exchange services have been around for decades, but the appeal of the cost savings has recently been augmented by an aging population's desire for the comforts and safety of home during extended travel time.

Thanks to the Internet, home swaps in all areas of the country have become easier to organize and execute, especially for single people who do not have to worry about academic calendars or youth sports tournaments.

Representatives from three of the biggest online home-trading sites — *intervac.com*, *home link.org* and *homeexchange.com* — say the swap business also has been pushed along by retirees who seek a comfortable alternative to the same old condo they have been visiting every year.

Costs for home-swap memberships vary depending upon the number of pictures you provide and other services you require. Hermosa Beach-based

HomeExchange.com charges \$49.95 for the first year; the second year is free if you don't find a match during your initial 12 months. "Everybody goes at their own speed," said HomeExchange.com's Judy Saavedra. "Some people plan a year in advance for a family vacation, while others exchange more often for fewer days. It just depends on how much time they have to travel.

"And there's a wide variety of clients who like to travel this way. A family with a lot of children knows what it wants in a big family home. Perhaps they will be focusing on a place that is great for babies and baby-proof."

When you join a home exchange facilitator, you are asked to provide details about your home and contact information, as well as preferred swap locations and available dates. You then gain the same information from other members, allowing you to initiate deals with potential swap partners.

Once you've found a match through e-mails and phone calls, make sure you cover the small details. For example, if a car is involved, it's common to agree in writing on the terms of its use, such as mileage and responsibility for repairs and damages. Many exchange companies have such agreements on their websites.

Similar detailed agreements are also advised for the use of a house and its contents, covering computer equipment, long-distance calls, utility bills, replacement of cooking staples and other housekeeping matters. Be clear on smoking (especially with Europeans) and pet issues.

It's always a good idea to tell the neighbors what has been arranged and ask them or a friend or family member to keep an eye on the house and to help the visitors settle in.

Be sure to leave space in closets and drawers to accommodate visitors' gear for the typical one- to three-week exchange.

Appliances should be in working order, and it's a good idea to provide some groceries for the visitors. Take the time to leave emergency numbers for doctors and repair services.

"Some people are very skittish about leaving their home to strangers," Saavedra said. "But most of the time, these people are members or have opened their home for exchange, so they respect your home just as they would expect you to respect theirs."

Check with your insurance company to see what your coverage is in case of an accident. Homeowners insurance sometimes also covers the loss of your luggage.

I like the idea of packing my luggage in winter, especially when there's sunshine and no huge hotel bill at my destination.

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