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Great Budget Vacations

Looking for a fun, affordable trip with the kids? Here, three creative families share their strategies for unforgettable getaways.

Swap Homes

Money-Saving Tactic #1

By Lisa Gibbs

I'd always dreamed of taking long, exotic vacations with my family. But the thought of spending more than a few days in a cramped hotel room with my husband, Rick, and our kids, Benjamin, 7, and Laura, 5, gave me the shivers. And the cost was way beyond our budget. So each year, with a sigh, I would resign myself to another visit with my in-laws. Then I read about home exchanging. Families arrange to vacation at the same time, trading houses and often cars. It sounded great: The savings on accommodations, car rental, and restaurant meals would make the trip affordable. Plus, we'd have the space to decompress.

That's how my family, along with my mother, Carole Gibbs, ended up swapping homes with Pierre and Martine Poirier and their children, Jean-Francois, 8, and Catherine, 11. For most of July 2001, we lived in their three-bedroom house in a suburb of Montreal while the Poiriers took over our home outside Fort Lauderdale. And this summer, we're planning to spend three glorious weeks in a seaside town in Ireland, at the residence of Declan and Joan Fortune.

Home exchanging lets me give my kids a fantastic cultural experience without breaking the bank. But a successful swap takes plenty of preparation. Picking an exchange partner was the hardest part--and the most important. After all, I was letting strangers into my home.

After researching all of the options, I chose HomeExchange.com (800-877-8723), the Website I found easiest to use. Looking up homes on the site is free; listing our house was \$30 for a year. Months in advance of both trips, I began fielding inquiries from potential swappers. If an area seemed promising, we checked plane fares and exchanged photos of our homes and information about local attractions.

We considered not only logistics (Did our vacation dates match up? Would they mind taking care of our cat?) but also more subjective matters: Did we feel comfortable letting these people live in our home and drive our car? We exchanged dozens of electronic messages with the Poiriers and the Fortunes, spoke with them several times by phone, and asked tons of questions. Ultimately, we were won over by each family's enthusiasm and good humor.

Once we'd chosen our exchange partners, we collected local brochures, discount coupons, and helpful articles for them. We typed up lists of important phone numbers, family-friendly restaurants, and things to do. The Poiriers did likewise for us. We also exchanged information about the nearest hospital and care center. This really paid off when Benjamin ran into a wall the day before our return and required five stitches. Finally, we overlapped our trips slightly so we could meet the Poiriers in person in Montreal and hand over keys, a video-rental card, and a homemade tape of how our house worked. We plan to do the same for the Fortunes.

The Poiriers' home was a great base for touring the province of Quebec, and downtown Montreal was only 20 minutes away. And exchanging homes let us experience Canada as if we were natives. We shopped in local supermarkets and swam in the community pool. On the downside, we got lost driving the suburban streets, and Ben and Laura got lonely for other kids at times. For our Ireland trip, we've asked the Fortunes for names of family friends so we can schedule a playdate or two.

Having breakfast with the Poiriers back in Fort Lauderdale, before taking them to the airport, we realized how much we had missed our home. But here's the bottom line: We never would have tried a three-week vacation in a foreign country if not for home exchanging. We saved at least \$3,500 and had all the comforts of home. This year, Ireland. Next year, who knows?

Related Links:

- [HomeExchange.com](#) >>

Web Exclusive: More Tips on Home Exchanges

Getting started: Browse listings of home exchange web sites such as [www.homeexchange.com](#), which have easy-to-use databases searchable by destination and keyword. Start planning at least six months before your trip.

Finding a swap: Try to find families with children as close in age to yours as possible; that way you'll be able to swap toys and lists of child-friendly activities. Ask lots of questions about the homes amenities (do they have air conditioning? Does the car have automatic transmission?) and the surrounding neighborhood. Insist on photos of the home's interior and exterior. Check out HomeExchange.com's Trading Places guide for a sample agreement that each of you can sign to affirm commitment to the trip.

Making it work: Prepare lists of important phone numbers and directions to the grocery store, movie theater, hospital. Don't forget to tell them about the running toilet and other quirks; better yet, fix them before you go. Discuss how you'll handle phone expenses, minor repairs, plant watering, etc. Check auto insurance policies, and write a letter giving permission for the use of your car (just in case.) For off-limits toys or precious heirlooms, it's best to pack them away temporarily.

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