



# Swap homes for great vacation

• Local families discuss benefits of home exchange program

By Sue Tabb

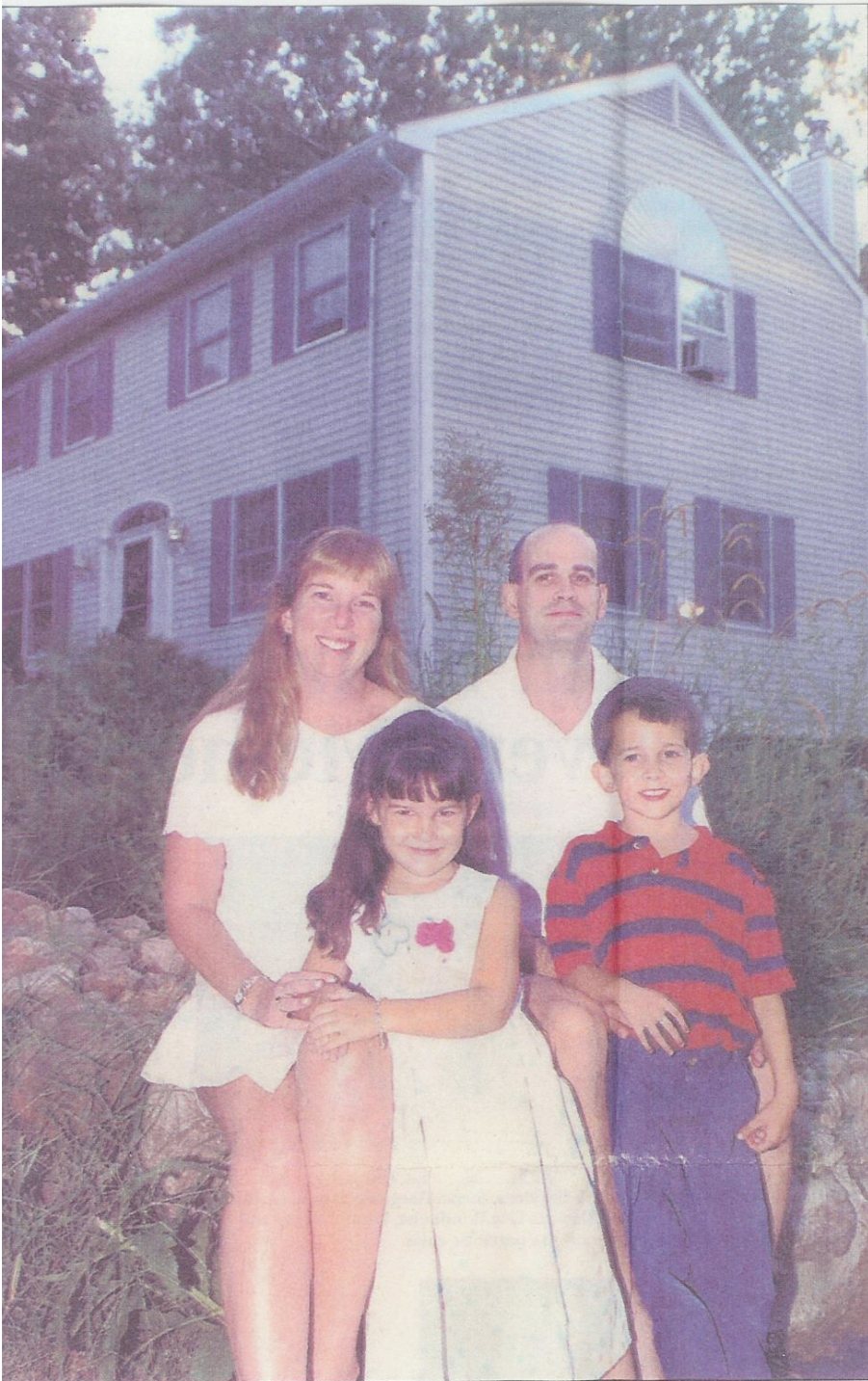
Many of us are forced to consider a long weekend at the in-laws as a bonafide family vacation because of traveling logistics and the constraints of a limited budget. However, a new trend in home swapping seems to be cutting the ties that bind by offering families an affordable way to take a longer, more exotic vacation to destinations they had only dreamed about in the past.

The way it works is pretty simple in concept. You literally trade houses with a family in another location for a set period of time so that each family can have a less hectic, less cramped and far less expensive experience. Some fami-

lies trade cars, even household responsibilities or pet care. The savings on things like auto rentals, restaurant meals, accommodations, phone calls and taxi trips can be enormous. What's more, you have an entire house (maybe even a large yard, porch or pool) to relax and spread out in rather than a confining hotel room.

The Hollenbeck family of North Andover recently returned from two weeks in England after swapping homes with a family in the Cotswolds area. Kristen Hollenbeck says the experience was wonderful for her and her family, including husband Rodney and children Erik, 6 and Corissa, 4.

Please see HOME SWAP, Page 4



Scott Proposki/Town Crossings

The Hollenbeck family swapped their North Andover home for a brick cottage in England. Kristen, Rodney, Erik, 6 and Corissa, 4, are shown in front of their home after their vacation adventures abroad.

## HOME SWAP: for the adventurous

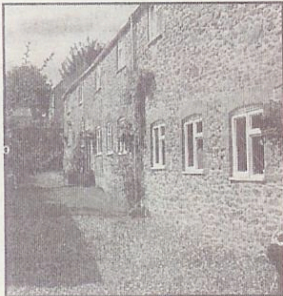
Continued from Page 1

children Erik, 6 and Corissa, 4. Hollenbeck was delighted to share a love of travel with her children and branch out into other parts of the world with them. The home swap provided many benefits that a more traditional vacation could not.

"(I liked) the convenience of being able to cook your breakfast and dinner and pack a lunch every day and also the luxury of being able to spread out in a whole house," Hollenbeck says. "We met the neighbors and got invited to a cookout; I was invited to a girls night out at a pub; my husband got to haul bales of hay and drive a tractor (at a neighbor's farm). That's the kind of experience you'd never get as a tourist, but by living there you become part of the community."

Day visits in England included LegoLand, Windsor Castle, Oxford, Warwick Castle, Cotswold Wild Animal Park and Stonehenge, just to name a few. Swapping cars proved to be extremely beneficial according to Hollenbeck because you could go where you wanted and not be restricted by the train or bus schedule. "But, you did have to drive on the opposite side and the roads are narrow and full of brush this time of year...we did OK," laughs Hollenbeck.

The home swap idea came to her from a Boxford friend, Donna Ellis, whose family returned just last week from a four-month swap in Belgium. Ellis' husband, Jim, works for a Cambridge pharmaceutical company whose headquarters



Submitted photo

The Cowley home in England.

are in Belgium; they decided to swap homes with a co-worker who also has young children like the Ellis'.

"We literally switched everything - toys, cars, everything" says Donna Ellis. Her husband even switched jobs, sort of. "They didn't totally switch jobs; they did switch offices and he (Jim) got more involved in operations in Belgium."

Ellis says her kids enjoyed the experience, especially her 5-year-old, and they are planning to make a scrapbook of their experience. Ellis turned Hollenbeck on to the idea of home swapping earlier this year.



Submitted photo

Dave and Lesley Cowley sit with son Joe and nephew Ben at home before their trip to the U.S.



Submitted photo

Kristen Hollenbeck enjoyed her visit to the London Bridge with children Corissa and Erik. Her husband Rodney snapped this shot.

Hollenbeck spent more than six months researching and coordinating in preparation for their trip to England. She began by surfing Web sites and looking for a home and family that would fit her criteria including being in a suburb rather than a city in England, having a certain number of bedrooms and having children that would be respectful of her North Andover home.

Hollenbeck admits that there is a lot of homework to do before taking the trip. She e-mailed her English host, Lesley Cowley, weekly for several months getting all the details (car arrangements, house cleaning, insurance, passports, etc.) taken care of and making sure that all expectations would be met. Beyond that, Hollenbeck says you have to place some trust in another family.

"You have to do your homework as far as making sure you are compatible and let go of the material things in your house and that takes a leap of faith," notes Hollenbeck. "Your life is an open book; you have to put away what you don't feel comfortable sharing. I was lucky with Lesley because we seemed to click right away..."

Cowley felt a similar connection, feeling at ease with the Hollenbeck's early on. "I felt that I got a very good impression of Kristen and her family and became friends with her," explains Cowley. "It was lovely to meet the family when they arrived in the U.K."

The Cowleys, Lesley and Dave, their 10-year-old son Joe and 14-year-old nephew Ben, had a wonderful stay in North Andover and spent time sightseeing, relaxing, even mingling with neighbors. Cowley says it was not her first trip to the U.S., but her first time in New England and her very first home exchange.

"We had such a great time, we will be returning to the U.S., doing another home exchange, and hope to return to New England sometime too," says Cowley.

The Cowley's were especially impressed with the larger-sized homes in the area, the rural feeling of North Andover, the longer retail hours and the inexpensive gasoline. Cowley says they were made to feel welcome and were really immersed in the local culture.

"The neighbors were so friendly, we felt part of a very nice community right from the start," notes Cowley. "We all made some good friends and will be keeping in touch." The only negative she mentions is the lack of street signs at certain junctions which led to a 30-minute trip just to get out of town one day.

To say they took in some local sites is an understatement to be sure. Some of their day trips included: Canterbury Shaker Village, the Kittery outlets, Loudon raceway, Boston (Faneuil Hall, aquarium, etc.), Cranes Beach, Plum Island, Rockport, Six Flags and Plymouth Plantation. Cowley says one of her

favorites was Shaker Village while her husband really enjoyed the raceway. Of course boys will be boys and they had their own personal favorites as well.

"Joe's favorite was Six Flags as he won a four-foot-high stuffed dog

there which we then had to get home," Cowley jokes. "Ben's favorite was the North Andover dance he went to where he was able to impress the local girls with his English accent and general coolness!"

Cowley says that home exchanging is a great way to "holiday" for a number of reasons. "Not only do you not have to pay for hotels, home rental or car hire, but you get someone responsible to look after your own home rather than leaving it empty," she says. "You get to experience a new friendly neighborhood rather than some impersonal hotel or rental property."

### Suggested Web sites (from recent issue of Parents magazine):

[www.homeexchange.com](http://www.homeexchange.com)  
[www.trading-homes.com](http://www.trading-homes.com)

### Home swapping planning tips (from recent issue of Parents magazine):

- Start planning at least six months in advance of your trip.
- Browse listings on home exchange Web sites which have easy-to-use databases searchable by destination and keyword.
- Try to find families with children as close in age to yours as possible; that way you can swap toys and a list of child-friendly activities.
- Ask lots of questions about the home's amenities and the surrounding neighborhood; insist on photos of the interior and exterior of the home.
- Have both families sign an agreement to affirm commitment to the trip (sample agreement on [homeexchange.com](http://homeexchange.com) site)
- Prepare list of important phone numbers and directions to grocery store, movie theater, hospital, etc.
- Inform family about any quirks in the home.
- Discuss how you will handle phone expenses, minor repairs, plant watering, etc.
- Check insurance policies for car use.
- Temporarily pack away any off-limit items like precious heirlooms.