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TRAVEL

You don't have to live in Paris or NYC to swap homes

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Nancy Abwater sits on the sofa in the living room of her home outside Sperry, Oklahoma.

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(AP) — When Nancy Abwater first heard about home exchange programs, she thought it would be a great way to travel. Her only concern: Who would want to vacation in her home in Sperry, Oklahoma?

The appeal of home exchange vacations — where people swap homes, and often vehicles and even pets — is basic: free lodging with many of the comforts of home.

It's easy to imagine swapping for a vacation destination — a loft in New York, a pied-a-terre in Paris, a beach house in Florida or a ski condo in Aspen. But what if your hometown doesn't immediately come to mind when vacations are being planned?

"At first there was skepticism about who would want to come to Oklahoma, but the answer is all sorts of people," Abwater said. "It's people who realize the U.S. is more than just the East Coast and the West Coast."

Over the years, she and her husband, both retired, have arranged three exchanges through home-swapping Web site HomeExchange.com. They've gone to England twice and are planning a trip to Virginia Beach for Easter.

Abwater said they have had many more offers for their home — from people living in Austria, Japan and Paris, to name a few — than they could accommodate because the timing simply didn't work out.

Sheila Shockey, who has traded her home in Shawnee Mission, Kansas, for stays in Hawaii and Australia and is planning a trip to Lancaster this summer, said her midwestern location is actually a draw. She said people are attracted to Kansas' frontier history and Native American sites.

Staying in a home in a location that is not typically filled with tourists, Shockey said, is a way to get a feel for a place and to get to know people. Meeting locals — often neighbors or family members of the home's owners — can lead to a richer vacation experience.

"You kind of get a sense of what life would be like to live there, whereas if you were staying in a hotel in a touristy area, you don't get that," Shockey said.

Mandurah, the Australian city she and her son and mother visited on a swap in 2005, was a suburb like their own, where her 8-year-old son played with the neighbors' kids.

Meanwhile, back in Kansas, Shockey's boyfriend was entertaining the Australians in her home, taking them to see fireworks and giving them a tour of the area's sights.

Flexibility a plus
Some people are even surprised to learn why people want to swap with them. Kate Blazock, a stay-at-home mom, said she was "shocked, absolutely shocked" to receive exchange offers from Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland and the Netherlands for her family's home in Cleveland.

When she and her husband signed up on a swap site in 2004, they thought they might get offers from people looking for a place to stay during brief treatment at the nearby cardiac clinic. Instead, they got an offer from a Dutch family of roller coaster enthusiasts who wanted to try the world-class rides at Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio.

Sometimes people aren't looking for a vacation destination. They're looking to go home — but not all the way home. Abwater said she was contacted by a couple who live in Japan but are originally from the Tulsa area. The couple wanted to visit their families but wanted to have some space to themselves.

Ed Kushins, president of HomeExchange.com, the Web site featured in last year's film "The Holiday," said people shouldn't be discouraged if they live in a place that isn't generally thought of as a vacation spot. They just might have to work a little harder.

"You have to be a little more proactive in sending out inquiries," Kushins said. "If you're enthusiastic and descriptive about the benefits and what there is to do where you live, you're going to get some responses."

Abwater said openness to different locations is helpful when looking to try a home swap. She readily admits that the Tulsa area is not a top vacation destination, but she also said she and her husband agreed to go to a part of England they had never considered.

"I'm not sure I would ever have chosen Lancaster to go to, but it became a wonderful jumping off point for us. We went to Wales and Ireland and Scotland," she said.

'The real America'
Graham Brandwood, the owner of the Lancaster home where the Abwaters stayed in the summer of 2003, said he was originally looking for a place in the Rocky Mountains when he was planning a special vacation for his daughters, then 16 and 18, after they had each finished important exams at school.

In the end, though, Brandwood said he was happy with the way the vacation ended up. Sperry, he said, is a small town and "not even a very charming one," but having already visited big American cities like Chicago and New York, he was floored when he walked into a bank and the teller had never seen a traveler's check before.

"The girls gotta see a slice of normal America, the real America," Brandwood said. "And I think it was better for them."

The Abwaters even had horses for his riding-fanatic daughters.
"Everybody was happy," Brandwood said. "Nancy and Mike were convinced they'd had the best deal but I knew we'd had the best deal."

The relationship between the two families ended up including Abwater's sister, Sue, who befriended Brandwood and his daughters during their stay and has visited them in England. When Brandwood returned to the U.S. last year to hike the Appalachian Trail, she dropped him off at the start and picked him up at the other end.

Those unfamiliar with home swapping may think it strange that swappers trust complete strangers to stay in their homes. But Shockey and Abwater said that they are in touch with their fellow swappers by phone and email for a few months and feel almost as if they know them by the time the swap takes place.

Home exchange Web sites generally don't have an official screening process, but profiles often reflect the number of swaps done so potential exchangers can ask for references. In addition, there are usually sections for comments — much like those for sellers and buyers on the online auction site eBay.

Kushins' site also provides template agreements that he encourages swappers to sign to avoid misunderstandings about whether food can be eaten and should be replaced, whether appliances can be used, how to care for plants and pets, among other topics.

But what about liability if someone falls down the stairs?
"In general, your homeowner's insurance covers anyone on a home exchange, just as it would cover any other guest in your home," Kushins said. And the same goes for auto insurance, he said, but it is a good idea to check with your insurer.

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