



Comforts Of Home

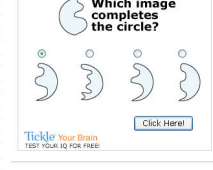
Tourists want to hit the road but also eat in, work a bit and even blend with the locals.

By Mac Margolis
Newsweek International

May 14-21, 2007 issue - For slow travelers, getting away from it all doesn't mean leaving everything familiar behind; it means re-creating some version of home wherever they go, complete with the comforts, intimacies and conveniences of everyday life. The hum in the hospitality business these days is over home cooking, staying in nights and renting DVDs, shopping at neighborhood grocery stores and other ways to make strangers feel like locals. "It would be dumb to say that mass tourism is dead, but there's no question a major shift in travel is underway," says Julio Aramburi, professor of tourism at Drexel University. "Once the idea was to keep up with the Joneses. Now it's about keeping away from them." Rather than follow the hordes of other tourists, visitors want to blend in.

- Subscribe Now
- Table of Contents
- Periscope
- National News
- My Turn
- Politics
- World News
- International Ed.
- War in Iraq
- Business
- Entertainment
- Tech & Science
- Health
- Society
- Education
- Entertainment
- Tip Sheet
- The Boomer Files
- Columns
- Letters & Mail Talks
- Multimedia Photos
- Search Archives
- Y!a.newsweek.com
- Video
- U.S. News
- Politics
- World News
- Business
- Sports
- Entertainment
- Health
- Tech / Science
- Travel
- Weather
- Blogs Etc.
- Local News
- Newsweek
- Multimedia
- Most Popular
- NBC NEWS
- Today Show
- Nightly News
- Dateline NBC
- Meet the Press
- HSN&C TV
- Disable Fly-out

Story continues below



An expanding array of home-style accommodations makes that increasingly possible. Dominant brands like Marriott and Hilton are running up against all kinds of competition: in the new world of in-depth travel, anyone with a beach house, a country cottage or a pied-à-terre in the city can be a player. The Voltaire, a three-bedroom luxury apartment in the heart of Paris, rents for \$980 a night—a bargain considering the day rates of comparable hotels. In Rio de Janeiro, visitors can stay in the quirky Maze Inn, an 11-room bed-and-breakfast built atop a private home in the midst of a sheer-sloped favela. "In every single major-destination location there's a whole subindustry in lodging that's not hotel based," says Paul Chiu, a travel analyst at the international consultancy Accenture. "For anyone with a large family, that's an attractive alternative."

At the top end are villas that come with housekeepers, cooks and kitchens fully outfitted with cutting-edge appliances—not to mention Wi-Fi, satellite TV, PlayStation and all the other technological toys people take for granted at home. A week in May at the Villa sur Mer, a palace for hire on the Côte d'Azur with sweeping ocean views and an English-speaking chef, goes for a cool \$35,715 on rentvillas.com. High-end destination clubs charge hefty membership fees for the use of premier homes in popular spots. Donn Davis, CEO of Exclusive Resorts, which keeps 400 mansions around the world for money on the move, says their \$350,000 membership fee is a small price to pay. "The working affluent have so little time to see their families," he says. "In order for them to relax we need to give them an environment that allows them to work." Though purists may scoff at the refusal of today's travelers to leave their BlackBerrys behind, it's the ability to stay connected that allows them to take longer vacations to more-remote locales. "It's funny to see all these idyllic places offering wireless access, but without them they'd be lost," says Aramburi. "More and more people want to get away and relax, but they can't do without contact with the company."

A considerably more affordable way to make oneself at home on vacation is to stay in someone else's. A California firm called HomeExchange.com lists 16,000 homes in 30 countries available for swapping. After the site was featured in the romantic comedy "The Holiday"—Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet swap houses to escape collapsing love lives—business doubled, says Ed Kushins. "It's cheaper. It's more rewarding. You tend to find new friends," says Dave Ashton, a Phoenix, Arizona, golf-course owner who is preparing to change places with two French families over the next year. "Home swapping is changing the way people take vacations." Since the advent of the internet, international home exchanges have risen from a cottage industry to a booming niche, with just a handful of Web-based agencies logging 50,000 swaps a year.

Often it's the little touches that help holidaymakers feel like they belong. Tourists loath to part with their pets will be comforted to know that four-footed travelers are now welcome at a wide choice of resorts (bringyourpet.com, tripswithpets.com) that offer sitting, grooming and even water bowls in their tony restaurants. Travelers can romp through Tuscany with a private chef and sommelier in tow, or book a remote Caribbean island villa like the Ritz-Carlton's forthcoming Molasses Reef "reserve," complete with wireless Internet, flat-screen plasma TVs and a larder large enough to staid them through the next world war. "I like to think of it as Giorgio Armani meets Robinson Crusoe," says the Ritz-Carlton's Ezekiel Couty. "You don't ever have to see another traveler if you don't want to." Some boutique guesthouses encourage repeat guests to keep wardrobes and personal belongings in their rooms—which housekeepers will whisk in and out of storage between visits.

To a growing number of tourists, travel includes reproducing on the road the responsibilities as well as the comforts of home. Plastic surgeons spend part of their vacations repairing cleft palates in South America. Engineers take time off to build village dams in Africa. Schoolteachers lead English-language classes. Holidaymakers may be far from their jobs, but that doesn't mean they can't share their skills and knowledge.

Not everyone is wild about turning a vacation into a transplanted version of everyday life. Skeptics argue that it's practically the same thing as going nowhere at all. "Going on holiday with an old familiar companion is like taking a can of cinders to the arctic, hoping they will keep you warm," writes Michael Bywater, a notoriously grumpy travel writer and critic. And with all the wonders of domesticity at hand, what family would willingly forsake the home theater, microwave popcorn and unanswered e-mails for a visit to the local museum or a pile of historic ruins? That's a risk a growing number of discerning travelers seem willing to run. "People want adventure, but with a safety net," says Aramburi. The combination may not make for the most exciting getaway. But it sure beats trying to keep up with all those Joneses.

SPECIAL REPORT: LUXURY TRAVEL

Introduction
Taking Our Time Off
Staying Grounded: Tips for Traveling

Chapter 1
Luxury's Expanding Reach
The Rise of Boutique Hotels
China's Roadside Eats

Chapter 2
The Comforts of Home
Q&A: Jeff Clarke on the Changing Face of Tourism
Cybertours: Climbing the Highest Peaks—from Home

Chapter 3
Capturing the Travel Niche
Celebrity Hotel Owners
Ski Japan: The Birth of an Industry
How to Brand a Country

Web exclusives
How to Spend a Lazy Day in Rio
The Joys of Slow Diesel Trains
Touring Troubled Lands
Photo Gallery: World Leaders (Caught!) On Vacation
Take Our Travel Survey

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- 1. Audio: Olmert, Over and Out?
- 2. What's Next for France?
- 3. Audio: Al Qaeda Leader Believed...
- 4. Audio: The Price of Conf'r...
- 5. Audio: A Mahdi Meltdown

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Yes
 No
 Not sure

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- Europe's Iron Lady
- Germany's Merkel is the New Tony Blair
- Do Any '08 Candidates Have What It Takes?
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- Opinion: Oil Nationalism Endangers Economic Growth
- The Taliban's New Weapon: Human Bombs
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WORLD BUSINESS

- The Olympic Effect
- The Road of No Return
- Cleaning the Straits
- In America's Image
- Global Investor: Trying Hard to Be a Contrarian
- Samuelson: China's Wrong Turn on Trade

THE GOOD LIFE

- 'The Naxi-Dress is Summer Cool
- Hottspot: Landmark, New York City
- Four Hours in Pepeeete
- The Best Martinis in Beijing

SOCIETY AND THE ARTS

- Asian: 'Spide-Plan 3' Quadruples the Fun
- Great Expectations!
- That Chabon Sure Has Chutzpah
- Homer: Simpson's Big-Screen Odyssey
- Summer Movies: What's So Funny?
- Five Things You Don't Know About Fantasia

GLOBAL INVESTOR

- Global Investor: Trying Hard to Be a Contrarian
- Global Investor: Jeffrey E. Garten
- Ruhir Sharma: Why Brazil is Not a BRIC

