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LOCAL NEWS

Trading places Swapping houses makes for unusual vacation experience

By Brian Saxton
THE NEWS-TIMES

RODFIELD — Ever thought of spending a vacation by swapping homes with a family living thousands of miles away who you've met only through e-mail?

Michael and Stephanie Trolle, who've lived in Rodfield for 30 years, tried it for the first time with a Danish family in 2004 and loved it so much they exchanged homes with a family in France in 2005.

Next month they're off again, this time to the Netherlands, where they'll stay in Amsterdam for two weeks.

"Moving into someone else's home and taking over their lifestyle was a little scary at first but it's exciting," Michael Trolle said in a recent interview. "It's a great way to spend a vacation. Somehow you feel you're part of the real world instead of just staying in a hotel."

The Trolles, who are in their early 50s, trade homes through HomeExchange.com, a California-based Web site that offers more than 15,000 listings in over 100 countries.

Er Kuhns, president of HomeExchange.com, said more than 100,000 successful home exchanges are done every year among people who sign up to join the site.

"Members join knowing they can save thousands of dollars over a hotel vacation," Kuhns said. "They also find they can get even greater benefits from the unique vacation experience of being like a local, shopping at local markets for meals at home, meeting friendly neighbors and getting recommendations for things to do and places to eat."

Typically, a member chooses a home each location from the Web site's list of other members' sites and then pinpoints a specific property.

Once the selection is made, the two homeowners then share information with each other by e-mail to determine whether their homes and they themselves are compatible.

Details always include a picture, description and location of the house, its contents, neighborhood and occupants and whether a car or other transportation is available.

Pets, smoking rules and cleaning arrangements are also often included in the dialogue between the two members.

"It's incredibly hard to fake it," Stephanie Trolle said. "You get to see their home and their personal information through the listing and get a feel for them by their e-mails. By the time we had agreed to the exchange with the family in France we must have exchanged 12 or more e-mails."

The Trolles, along with their daughter, Kayla, switched homes for two weeks with Marc Briens, 47, a computer scientist and his wife, Arine, 46, a laboratory technician and their three children, ages 10, 13 and 16. The Briens had already experienced five other home exchanges, including houses in Sweden, Canada and the U.S.

The Briens lived in Le Rheu, Brittany, a small town in western France where, according to their e-mail blog, "the neighbors are very friendly and welcoming."

The Briens' four-bedroom home had two terraces, a large garden, a barbecue and garden furniture. They listed other temptations such as children's toys, video games, food and wine, five bikes, a piano and a car.

The Trolles, who live on North Street, countered with descriptions of their own four-bedroom home having a nice "clean, nicely decorated and fully air-conditioned" and overlooked a field where horses graze.

They painted Rodfield as "a lovely town known for its old fashioned New England Main Street, its restaurants and antique stores" and emphasized its proximity to visitor attractions such as New York City, Mystic Seaport and Block Island.

After they left, the Briens, who spent much of their time touring the area, e-mailed: "Rodfield is very nice and pleasant. We were very sad to leave the house."

The Trolles, meanwhile, returned with their own memories and reminders of how much they like the home exchange program.

"I enjoy good food so I like going to the local food stores," said Michael Trolle. "They don't set the same things we eat and the bread isn't in English so it's a challenge. We also discovered it's important to show up with your own shopping bag."

Stephanie Trolle especially remembered the bread in France.

"The bread there just doesn't compare with what we get here," she said. "It's so fresh and such a part of the people's lives. We even found a special bread in the kitchen of the house where they cut it."

Other snapshots include the day when one neighbor brought round a bottle of "wonderful old French wine" and the time when another brought flowers.

"We met everyone in the neighborhood," Stephanie Trolle said. "Everyone was very pleasant."

For the Trolle's son, Thomas, who was making his first trip to Europe, it was "an interesting experience."

"It was a lot better than the traditional vacation in hotels," Thomas Trolle said. "You feel more relaxed when you're in someone else's home. My teacher even asked about it and I suggested he do it."

The Trolles concede that while most people they meet like the concept of exchanging homes, they're also concerned about the security aspect.

"I think that's their biggest concern," Michael Trolle said. "They ask 'Is it safe?' and 'Would I be comfortable leaving my home with someone else?'"

Kuhns said that in 14 years of operations and tens of thousands of exchanges, the network has never had a report of a theft or malicious vandal.

"Good communication minimizes misplaced expectations," Kuhns said. "Ask for referrals about prior expectations."

Kuhns said while it's prudent to put away "really valuable" items and jewelry, homeowners usually just leave things where they are.

"We've never had a bad experience," Michael Trolle said. "Not a single item has ever been taken or gone missing. I think when you start communicating with people who want to do a house exchange and see pictures, you get a real feel for who they are."

One souvenir the Trolles brought back from France is a living reminder of their trip — it's a cat.

"There were a lot of stray cats in the neighborhood who were malnourished," Stephanie Trolle said. "When I started putting out scraps and they came to the house, I decided to bring one home."

The feline, a male the Trolles decided to call "LeRou," now shares their home with a 10-year-old dog named Taco and another cat named "Coneycat."

"We wanted to make him into a big fat American cat," Stephanie Trolle said. "He seems to love it very well."

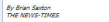
For more information on the home exchange program, visit www.HomeExchange.com.

Contact Brian Saxton at bsaxton@newstimes.com or at (203) 731-3332

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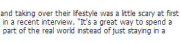
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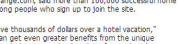
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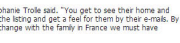
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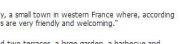
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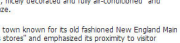
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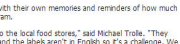
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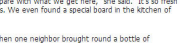
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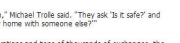
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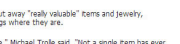
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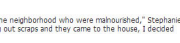
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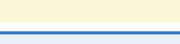
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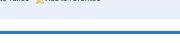
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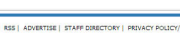
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