

## The Vacation-Home Swap



Illustration by Nancy Donger

By AMY GUNDERSON  
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Evan Julber admits that his first home swap was a leap of faith. He traded his house in Bend, Ore., for a stay at a home in Guadeloupe, a French island in the Caribbean. “They didn’t speak much English and we didn’t speak any French,” he said. “And it was all done with a handshake, an email handshake.”

The trip turned out to be problem-free. Mr. Julber was hooked on the concept. Subsequently, when he and his wife, Patricia, thought about buying a second home, they had one aim: Buy something swappable.

Home exchanges are hardly a new concept, but swapping vacation homes is gaining momentum. Services like Digsville Home Exchange Club ([www.digsville.com](http://www.digsville.com)) and HomeExchange.com report that about 20 percent of their listings are now second homes, with HomeExchange.com posting 5,500 listings in the United States and 1,400 in France alone. Another site, HomeLink International ([www.homelink.org](http://www.homelink.org)) has a database of homes in 68 countries, from apartments in Budapest to an ocean-view house in Tahiti. And unlike swapping a primary home, owners do not have to trade at the same time. Additionally, second homes are usually set up with fewer personal items and valuables than a primary home, especially if they also serve as rentals.

The key to a successful vacation-home swap lies in the way owners promote their homes to potential swappers. “You are marketing your home, your neighborhood, and you are marketing yourself,” said Ed Kushins, the president of HomeExchange.com. A listing should describe not only the house or condo, but also the neighborhood and nearby amenities, as well as the basic house rules, including any rooms or items that may be off limits to visitors. The listing should also include multiple photos, Mr. Kushins said.

“It’s personal,” he said. “It’s not only what the house is like but what you are like.”

Home descriptions at Digsville, which charges \$44.95 to list a house, say not only whether there is a stroller or high chair available but also if there is a home office and wireless Internet access. Owners can also list their favorite local restaurants and coffee houses and describe their level of housekeeping standards.

While some home-trading Web sites provide written agreements for owners that will cover the number of guests in the house, determining who pays for phone calls, and what happens if an appliance breaks, the culture of the home swapper is often more casual.

“We had an agreement on our site, but it was never downloaded,” said Helen Bergstein, the founder of Digsville, noting that her site members are likely to employ a written agreement only if the use of a car is involved in the exchange.

Some swappers prefer to go through a more formal service, where homes have been previously visited and vetted. Representatives from Geene.com, a London-based, home-swapping service, visit prospective homes in a handful of cities and rate them from one to five stars based on condition and location. Allan Rienecker, the founder of Geene.com, estimates that 60 percent of the listings are second homes.

Although a majority of home-trading Web sites act as a nexus to connect owners, International Vacation Home Exchange ([www.ivhe.com](http://www.ivhe.com)) takes a different approach. Suzie Magnus, the founder, said she started the company to enable second homeowners who might own a property in a less prime location, say in the suburbs of a city, to use their home in a swap for a more desirable property, like a villa in the Caribbean.

Each property is assigned a credit value based on its potential weekly rental income. (A town house in Fort Lauderdale might have half the credit value of a ski condo in Copper Mountain, Colo., for instance.) Home owners earn credits each time another member stays at their house. Owners can then spend those earned credits to stay at other properties on the site. The Web site charges the owner staying at the home seven percent of the weekly rental value as a fee and prepares a contract for each owner to sign before the exchange.

Veteran home exchangers say that what often starts as a casual home trade between two strangers can grow into a friendship that has its own rewards. After their first

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exchange, the Julbers, from Bend, Ore., kept in touch with the family in Guadeloupe. They eventually met face to face on a trip to California. "Then they invited us to stay at their house again," Mr. Julber said. "And this time it wasn't even a swap."

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