

# Welcome Home

Travelers are trading spaces across the world — and in your own backyard

BY LISA MARIE ROVITO

## It's 3 a.m. and there's a stranger in your bedroom.

But that's OK. You're in theirs, too.

Your best sound asleep, dreaming of the next day's vacation adventures.

Such is the way of HomeExchange.com, a membership Web site that certainly has its privileges. For \$99.95 a year, members can list their home on the site and begin contacting other members who own beautiful homes across the globe, including all over the Coachella Valley. President Ed Kushins lists both his second home in Palm Desert and his main residence in Hermosa Beach as part of the program, swapping with other members to plan vacations with his wife to London, Paris, San Francisco, Hawaii, Dublin, and New York City.

A visit to the site quickly reveals the quantity and quality of houses, condos, villas, lofts, estates, cottages, and beachside bungalows represented throughout the more than 12,000 listings. Types in "Southeast" include "Paros Villarta," "Barcelona" or "Lake Tahoe" and it's easy to see why members like Martin Flantz, who has racked up more than 20 exchanges, are hooked for life.

"Staying in a nice hotel costs a small fortune nowadays, and you don't have the kind of freedom or facilities that you have in a home," says Flantz, who has handed over the keys to his south Palm Springs home as he left for exchanges in Laguna Beach, Coronado Island, a canal house in Amsterdam, and Sonoma County's wine country. Over the course of his experience with the Web site, he has had more offers than he can make time to pursue, even though he travels a good portion of the year. Some inquiries from other members have included those boasting added perks from access to Mercedes-Benz convertible to the option of boarding an 80-foot yacht with a captain.



The modern Malibu exchange home overlooks the ocean (above). Opposite: A 2,000-square-foot photographer's loft in New York City'soho neighborhood sits above Helmut Lang's performance with his boutique across the street. The heavy table on the fire escape is a great place to spot models and stars go by.

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78 Palm Springs Life | December 2007

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Some members learned of the site through the movie *The Holiday*, starring Cameron Diaz, Kate Winslet, Jude Law, and Jack Black. The film tells the story of two women who use HomeExchange.com to change their lives as they trade homes between Los Angeles and England. While not every HomeExchange.com member professes to a life-changing experience, the overwhelming majority seem to find it positively addicting. True, if the homeowners site has never coffee, there won't be a coffee maker in sight. If the switch for the kitchen light is under a cabinet or the neighbor's dog likes to howl at the full moon, so be it. Often, though, these are the only sorts of gripes members can think to mention when reflecting to their momentary home away from-home vacations.

To prepare a home for exchange, owners generally put away anything highly breakable or valuable, have the house cleaned, and prepare a list or binder of tips — anything from where to enjoy the best breads in town to the trick of getting the water temperature in the shower just right. When they arrive at their chosen home, they usually find the saying "Mistake no one" in full effect. Members like to leave a bottle of wine or a welcome snack for their guests.

The general rule is to leave the house exactly as you found it and to take care of the home as you expect your partner to take care of yours. Kushins says. As long as they follow that golden rule, members don't need to have comparable homes to make a successful exchange. A modest Manhattan apartment in the Village might be worth as much as a golf course condo to desert dwellers aching for a week in the Big Apple. A property's appeal is all in the eye of the beholder.

Kushins says the idea behind the company stemmed from the belief that vacation travel didn't need to cost \$300 a night for a small room without a view. But

it turned into much more, with member testimonials lauding the experiences of meeting new people, staying in the comfort of a lovely home while exploring the area as a "local," and sampling the life people really live.

About 10 percent of the site's listings are second homes, which work out well since the exchanges don't need to be simultaneous. Assuming the second home is vacant for much of the year, members can travel when it's convenient for them without synchronizing schedules with the other party. Plenty of Southern California members like to trade places



Even families find HomeExchange.com has helped them plan vacations. "Those with children are relieved to arrive and find a crib, highchair, toys, and a kitchen in which they can warm up a bottle or whip up a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

Shannon and Aaron Acton live with their daughters, ages 1 and 11, in Placentia and own a second home in La Quinta's PGA West. They had signed up but had forgotten about the HomeExchange.com program until they received an e-mail from a family in Cortina, France, who wanted to visit Disneyland. The exchange was a thrill for the whole family. "We'd never in a million years thought about going to Cortina," says Shannon, who has received a number of exchange offers by avid golfers — even from Scotland, the home

of golf. "You get to know the other family through phone or e-mail conversations, and you know they're going to treat your house well because they're in the same boat," she says. "We've had no surprises other than how well it has worked."

In the case of members with pets, some offer to board them during the exchange while others make it a required part of the deal, often exchanging with other pet owners or those who miss having one around the house. For homeowners seeking the best of the best, \$500 a year covers a home listing on HomeExchangeGold.com, an elite sister site devoted to luxe properties and estates, including century-old Italian stone farmhouses and a hilltop estate in the French Riviera. "Personally, I would rather have someone else there when I'm not home," says Kushins, who has been house-hopping since he started the company in 1992. "By the time you've arranged your exchange, the other party is anything but a stranger." ■