

FOREIGN EXCHANGE

GOING ON VACATION? SWAP YOUR HOME WITH SOMEONE LIVING IN YOUR HOLIDAY DESTINATION.
BY REBECCA L WEBER

Accommodation expenses can easily dominate your travel budget, particularly if you want to visit in-demand locations at peak times. According to a report compiled by PricewaterhouseCoopers, by 2018, the average South African hotel room is expected to hit R1 265 per night, up from R1 040 in 2014. In cities such as London, Los Angeles and Sydney, average hotel prices already run well over R2 000 – and that's before you start worrying about airline costs or essentials like food.

The concept of house-swapping is not a new one. In Europe, it has long been a strategy to avoid the exorbitant costs of lodging when away from home. Intervac, one of the granddaddies of home-exchange companies, began in Europe in the 1950s to allow teachers with long summer holidays a way to stretch their travel budgets and live more like locals. The internet has since revolutionised this sort of personal cultural exchange, enabling people to post profiles of themselves and their homes online, and to browse through global options.

HOME PAGE

You can visit these sites for more info:

- homeexchange.com
- homelink.org.uk
- houseswap.co.za
- intervac-homeexchange.com

Space invaders

The idea of loaning out your most valuable possessions – your home and, sometimes, car – to strangers is a bit more comforting when you consider that they are letting you into their space too.

Ellie Snyman took part in her first house swap a few years ago, when she listed her Johannesburg home on an international site. A young couple outside of Paris contacted her, hoping to make a match.

Ellie, now 55, says they chatted online to get to know a bit more about one another beforehand. 'We watched a rugby game together on Skype.' After agreeing to exchange homes and cars, the families met in France over New Year's Eve, where they traded keys.

Personal touch

Staying in somebody's home means you won't get hotel service, but you may find a different kind of comfort. To help Ellie cope with the freezing temperatures of a northern winter, her house-swap partner laid out coats to borrow while in France.

Pets are another oft-overlooked price of going away – kennels and dog-sitters are costly. In this case, switching with an animal lover can give you peace of mind.

The place to be

If you're dead set on a beachfront Cape Town penthouse during peak season, you may have a harder time

TRAVEL LIGHT

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FINDMEAMATCH

Preparing your home's profile to appeal to potential house swappers requires a mix of real-estate-listing and online-dating skills. Take a tip from pro real-estate photographers and lead your online portfolio with the best image of your property, which is usually the exterior or – if you have one – a great view.

When you find a possible match, start opening the lines of communication – Skype, email, phone – and ask a few questions about amenities, dates and responsibilities. Is it okay to use the landline? Is WiFi a necessity? Do you feel comfortable taking care of somebody else's car or even cat?

After your exchange, do write an online review of the experience to help others in future.

than if you're open to visiting places you wouldn't normally consider. 'I'll go anywhere,' says Ellie. 'It's a nice, affordable holiday. You can do a car swap, fly, and it's not going to cost you a fortune.'

In 2014, after feeling the economic pinch of planning a holiday to Cape Town with their kids, Donald and Sarah Curtis from Knysna launched HouseSwap.co.za, a South African website geared primarily towards domestic swaps.

Like most people interested in house-swapping, the Curtis family need to do a simultaneous switch; that is, anyone they want to partner with must be able to go on holiday at the same time as them. For those with second homes, there is more

flexibility with scheduling: each family can travel when the other's holiday home is unoccupied.

Safe as houses

Is Ellie worried about strangers going through her personal items? 'Be my guest,' she laughs, adding that sensitive or valuable objects should be removed from the house or put in a safe. 'You must establish trust. Otherwise, you're not house-swapping material.'

Donald adds: 'Nobody's forcing you to stay with a particular person.' If it doesn't feel right, trust that instinct and move on. Some house-swapping companies offer an insurance policy for accidental damage, but also speak to your insurer, which may or may not cover exchanges. **LS**

SWAP SHOP

Follow this checklist before exchanging your home:
Tidy up No one wants to start their holiday cleaning up someone else's mess. Take note Leave a list of how appliances work, where items are stored and emergency phone numbers. Sensitive materials Lock any important, delicate or valuable items away if you are at all worried about them. Common ground Warn the neighbours before your out-of-town guests arrive.

