

There's no buzz kill quite like getting a friend request on Facebook from your parents

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## TRAVEL

### Trading (Vacation) Places.

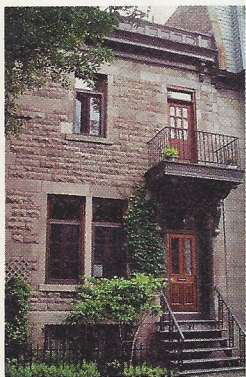
More families are swapping homes with strangers

BY HILLARY CHURA

AS THE ECONOMY CONTINUES to flounder, many families are forgoing summer vacations in favor of staying at home. But there's a more interesting option that is just as cheap: vacationing in someone else's home. Growing numbers of people here and abroad are seeking a thrifty change of scenery by skipping all the hotels and looking instead to swap houses with strangers. Agree to use each other's cars, and you can save big bucks on rentals too.

Home exchanges are not new. At least one group, Intervac, has been facilitating such arrangements since 1953. But traffic online is particularly brisk these days, with several sites, including HomeExchange.com—which was founded in 1992 and, with some 28,000 listings, bills itself as the world's largest home-exchange club—reporting that membership has increased 30% or more this year.

## The Price Is Right. These places are all free, if the owners can find good swapping partners



### MONTREAL TOWNHOUSE

This graystone is located in the city's trendy Plateau Mont-Royal district

#### WILL SWAP FOR

A three-week stay in Argentina

#### WHERE IT'S LISTED

1stHomeExchange.com, where it's free to list a home but costs \$75 a year to contact members



### SEASIDE CONDO IN BRAZIL

This multisuite condo near São Paulo has an infinity pool and a dry sauna

#### WILL SWAP FOR

A house in Jackson Hole, Wyo., or Hawaii

#### WHERE IT'S LISTED

HomeExchange.com, a 17-year-old site whose membership (at \$99.95 annually) is up 34% this year



### ENGLISH COUNTRY HOUSE

This five-bedroom in Derbyshire includes use of the family car

#### WILL SWAP FOR

A house in Europe, the U.S. or the Caribbean

#### WHERE IT'S LISTED

HomeForExchange.com, which offers members (who pay \$88 for two years) special cancellation insurance

For an annual fee that is usually less than \$100, members can access thousands of listings for apartments, condos, villas, suburban homes and farms around the world. Initial contact is made through the sites via e-mail, with subsequent communication usually by phone. Before a match is made, potential swappers tend to talk a lot as part of a scoping-out phase that one exchange site likens to online dating.

It's hard to beat free access to a washer and dryer and fully equipped kitchen, but swaps entail more planning than simply whipping out a credit card for a vacation package. Exchange seekers often contact dozens of people before they find someone willing and appropriate. For starters, location really matters. Kathleen Dwyer, a retired assistant principal who has been exchanging for six years, says she fielded lots of offers

to swap when she posted her apartment in Manhattan. Now that she exchanges only her vacation home—an old sea captain's house in a fishing village in Nova Scotia—swapping inquiries have slowed to a trickle.

She has swapped with people as far away as Hawaii and New Zealand, and once she exchanged her one-bedroom co-op (with an alley view) for a large, upscale home on a lagoon (with a view of the ocean) in California. "I burst out laughing. I could not get over it," she said of the fine-artwork-filled home that the Marin County couple

**Swappers tend to have a scoping-out phase that one exchange site likens to online dating**

swapped with her so they could visit their daughter and her new baby. "They got this little, small apartment, and I got this million-dollar home. I laughed at the trade, but they were happy to be near their daughter in Manhattan, so it worked out fine."

Although home swappers often become such fans of the practice that they have a hard time paying for a hotel, the concept may sound dicey to the uninitiated. What about theft? Damage? Reasonable causes for concern, but equally unlikely. "Nobody is going to fly across the ocean or drive 600 miles to come steal your flat-screen TV," says Tony DiCaprio, president of 1stHomeExchange.com, a four-year-old site that has seen membership increase 30% this year. Remember, he notes, "at the same time they're staying in your home, you are staying in their home."

Some swappers use a padlock to keep their jewelry and tax returns safely out of sight. But Ed Kushins, founder of HomeExchange.com, said that in 17 years in the business, he has never received a report of theft or malicious damage. If there are issues such as wine stains and other mishaps, they are handled privately, though he has been asked to intervene about the occasional scratched car, for example.

Exchange sites recommend that swappers discuss such matters ahead of time. Randle Griggs, a retired financial planner in Tempe, Ariz., who has participated in more than 20 domestic and international home exchanges since 1996, always asks swappers to fill out an agreement spelling out who shoulders which responsibilities should a problem arise. "I'm not sure if the agreement would hold up in court, but at least it gives you a little satisfaction," he said.

Generally, the biggest complaint among home exchangers has to do with different standards of cleanliness. Swappers are supposed to make sure their home is in order before they depart, but one person's idea of clean may be more, shall we say, forgiving than another's. And homeowners say that if they come back to a less-than-sparkling kitchen, well, that may be inconvenient but not sufficient to sour them on exchanges.

While New York, London and San Francisco are some of the most popular destinations, swappers need not live in major metropolitan areas or palatial splendor to luck out with great swaps. Exhausted urban residents who need a break from the hubbub may be more than willing to swap their fabulous condo for a lakeside cabin in the middle of nowhere. "It may be a little bit tougher to find someone if you live in Nebraska than if you live in France," DiCaprio said. But it can be done. "Sell its virtues: kayaking, hiking over trails, trout fishing, some festival in summer. Why do you enjoy living there?" ■