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A home away from home



Would you hand over your keys to complete strangers in order to stay in an exotic locale for free? Tess talks to house swappers about their travels.

Tess Vigeland: How'd you like to go to London this holiday season? Maybe Sydney? Or Paris? Now, how'd you like to stay there for free? You can, but there's a catch. You have to let somebody stay at your house for free. It's called home swapping and it's an increasingly popular way to vacation on the cheap.

I wondered why people would be willing to invite strangers into their homes, so I first payed a visit to Gordon Schaye and his wife Carmen. They've lived on their seven-acre ranch south of Los Angeles for 10 years.

Gordon Schaye:...Show you our animals over here in the corrals. We have six geese, we have two goats and two sheep.

Vigeland: And this is something that anyone who stays at your home needs to deal with?

Schaye: No, nobody has to deal with it. No, no, we have somebody who comes in and takes care of the animals every day. Unless they want to...

The house on a hill boasts a spectacular view of Pacific coastline from the island of Catalina to Malibu. There's a pool in back and a porch swing hanging from a tree in front.

The Schaye's primary residence might as well be a vacation retreat. And for numerous U.S. and European visitors, it is.

The Schayes are part of a growing vacation phenomenon called home swapping. You go online, offer your home, decide where you want to go, figure out the dates, then swap.

Schaye: We had an apartment on the upper east side of Manhattan, four bedrooms with a doorman and a car. We exchanged for a home in the Berkeley hills and the people stayed here. We've gotten offers in the last month from Paris, from London, from Rome.

Often home swappers will care for one another's pets. They'll use each others' cars. Many leave a detailed book for their guests. They'll provide information about local sights and menus from nearby restaurants. They arrange beforehand who's responsible for paying for things like plumbing emergencies.

Gordon and Carmen say there are all kinds of benefits to vacationing in someone else's house.

Carmen Schaye: One of the things that is very, very attractive about it is that you really get a sense of the culture and the lifestyle of a community as opposed to being a tourist.

Gordon Schaye: I think one of the big upsides is financial, you \$200-\$300 a day on a hotel. You save on restaurants, you can cook at home and one thing about being at home, the kitchen's always open.

They've only had one troubling incident in the dozens of swaps they've conducted.

Schaye: We had a person who represented herself as owning a villa in Europe and I don't think she ever owned anything and she stayed in our guest house and then she started annoying the neighbors so much we had to ask her to leave and that was our only bad experience. And it was well worth all the pleasure that we've gotten out of all the other trades.

The Schayes use an online service called HomeExchange.com. Last year, the site got the kind of publicity most companies only dream about: it was featured in "The Holiday," a movie starring Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet.

[Clip from "The Holiday":] Home exchange ... we switch houses, cars, everything ... bingo!

Ed Kushins founded the company in 1992. He says the business has changed since then.

Ed Kushins: Ten years ago, it was primarily teachers and retired people. But over the last 10 years we've seen a steady equalization of the demographics and now it's young singles, young families...

And, still, retired couples, especially boomers with second homes. It costs \$60 a year to join HomeExchange.com. And after that there's basically no cost except transportation to your swapped home.

There is one requirement that home swappers say is a must for any participants: flexibility, both in when you want to vacation and in how you want to vacation, especially when going abroad.

Jessica Jaffe is with Intervac.com, the first-ever home exchange company, founded in 1953.

Jessica Jaffe: In Europe a lot of these homes and apartments are maybe 500 years old, so you're going to be dealing with homes that have a lot of charm, but the facilities might be a little different, so you should keep that in mind.

But the biggest hurdle -- and the first thing people tend ask about -- is how to get over concerns about letting strangers stay in your home.

Doris Sundly and her husband Jerry have been handing over the keys to their Craftsman house in Long Beach since 2001. It's three and a half blocks from the sand.

Doris Sundly: We just last week had a couple stay here in our home from Toronto. You just have to have this kind of trust thing. The quality of people that do this, they're just great people.

Exchange Web sites do provide contracts to sign saying each party is responsible for paying, say, if somebody breaks a dish. There's no money exchanged so most home insurance companies consider home swappers just guests. Still, you should check with your insurer.

And then, start swapping.