

HOMES

HOLIDAY SWAP SHOP



Home exchange is the growing trend around the world. Holidaymakers can become locals at a fraction of the price of expensive hotel rooms – and it couldn't be easier to organise

FANCY WINTERING IN CAPE TOWN FOR £19? How about six months in Sydney for £21? No, it's not a typing error, it's a system called home exchange, and it's the perfect way to enjoy life abroad at a bargain price.

"Home exchange enables you to parachute into a community and to experience life as a local," says Jon Connolly of HomeLink, one of the UK's home exchange agencies. "This is much more likely to provide you with genuine insights into a country than staying in a hotel where you are pampered, and surrounded by other tourists."

So how do you arrange an exchange? The first stage is to choose an agency. Check which has the best coverage of the country you want to visit. Houses are arranged by country, with a description, usually a photo, and an indication of where its owners would like to go, when, and for how long. It will also say whether pets, children or smokers are allowed, and a bit about the owners, including their professions.

Start browsing and you'll soon get into the swing of it. How about a four-bed home near Perth, Western Australia? Five minutes from the beach, with an outdoor spa and lovely gardens. It belongs to a retired couple who want to visit their daughter in London for three months. Or how about a holiday villa in the Mexican resort of Playa del Carmen? Its doctor owner is open to offers of homes anywhere, anytime.

Joining is straightforward. You pay a fee (most charge between £20 and £95) and submit a description and photos of your house, listing

facilities and local attractions. It's crucial to be honest: these people will be in your home for weeks, so they will soon know the difference between a 'cosy cottage with good transport links and a new-build off the M3. Trust – at every stage – is the key to making exchanges work.

Include as much information about yourself and your house as space permits. Experienced exchangers recommend preparing an extra information sheet to send people once they make contact. See one at www.homebase-hols.com/guidelines. The more information you give, the better your chance of finding a good match.

Meanwhile, your basic details will go on to a website and you're free to contact owners of homes you like the look of. Cast your net wide: home exchange is akin to a dating agency for houses – and it can take a bit of perseverance to find the perfect match.

The next step is contact with a swapper. "This stage is very important," says Lois Sealey. "Regular communication is vital so that you can get to know and trust each other,

and ensure you are compatible. If you are a retired couple with antiques and white carpets, it's not a good plan to swap with a family with three kids under five!"

Once you find a suitable partner, the next stage is to make a formal agreement, usually supplied by the agency. At this stage, you may start to worry about whether your home will be in safe hands but it's worth remembering that your exchange partner is probably thinking exactly the same thing.

This is the most common worry for first-time exchangers, says Lois Sealey. "But having someone in your home at the same time you are in theirs gives you both a great incentive to properly look after the property entrusted to you."

Despite the fact that exchangers are not 'vetted' or police-checked before they join (the costs and logistics would be prohibitive), the system does seem to work. Its basic principle – that you trust them while they trust you – seems to hold good.

Pictured The choice of properties available to swap is huge – and you don't have to swap like for like. Your three-bed semi could be just what the owners of a detached house in Florida are looking for



Address book

- > Home Base Holidays (membership £19); tel: 020 8886 8752; www.homebase-hols.com
- > HomeLink (membership £95); tel: 01962 886882; www.homelink.org.uk
- > Intervac (membership £65); tel: 01225 892011; www.intervac.co.uk
- > Green Theme International (membership £21); tel: 0033 555 084704; www.gti-home-exchange.com
- > Vacation Homes Unlimited (membership \$30); tel: 001 661 298 0376; www.exchangehomes.com
- > Home exchange (membership \$50); www.homeexchange.com
- > Dial an Exchange (for second homes - membership £69); tel: 01756 749966; www.dialanexchange.com

