

Home and away

A new life abroad may sound like a dream, but you don't have to uproot entirely to get a change of scene, says Sandra Harris. A three-month Australian house swap does just nicely

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Home from home ... Sandra Harris and husband Jafar outside their new house in Melbourne. Photograph: Sandra Harris

We'd been meaning to do it for ages. Then Val and Gordon, friends of friends in Melbourne, had this hankering to spend winter in England. Strange but true. The idea was that we leave our London home in the dreaded January - my least favourite month - and take over their house in Melbourne precisely when the Australian summer moved into gear.

What's more, they would throw in their holiday home with the best ocean view you can imagine in Apollo Bay, just three hours' drive out of Melbourne. Both of us were to leave similar cars, and both couples would have the comfort of knowing someone was giving everything that lived-in look that insurers like if you choose to go away for three months. As far as I could see it was a win-win situation. Extremely cheerful and very cheap. In fact free, apart from the travel.

It was about a month before the off when I realised I would have to actually make preparations for this adventure. We've lived in this house for 27 years; it is stacked with stuff. The first foray into drawers that hadn't been opened for decades revealed bedraggled garments belonging to another era, including an ancient maternity bra that was close to hammock proportions. "My God," I imagined Val and Gordon exclaiming to each other, "what does she do with this? Carry her groceries?" By the end of the afternoon I had eight black plastic bags of junk bound for the tip.

The master bedroom mattress was the next thing to go. Not only had it seen three children grow up, it had also withstood four dogs, a rabbit, not to mention cups of tea, coffee, cornflakes, chicken soup and the (very occasional) glass of champagne. The thing was looking and feeling its age. Its replacement arrived the next morning.

But where do you stop? Caroline Connolly at Home Link International, a Winchester-based home exchange network which is now the world's biggest, was reassuring. "You don't have to clear away everything," she said. "The last thing people want is a house that looks like a hotel room. Pictures, personal things, are all fine. Just make sure your guests have plenty of wardrobe space and drawers. If you want, take one room as a dumping ground and just put everything in it, from family heirlooms to clothes you don't want to take with you."

This worked splendidly. I bought clothes rails from one of those wholesale places near Oxford Circus, covered everything in plastic bags from the drycleaners (50 for 25p) and felt wonderfully organised. As for kitchen and bathroom stuff, I'd lost interest in doing anything dramatic by this time and left them as they were. Alcohol was to be replaced, I suggested, and it would be nice to come home to some fresh fruit and



vegetables when the time came, but, as for the contents of the larder and various half-used bottles of shampoo, it seemed easier and more practical to suggest that our guests took what they wanted. We would, I assumed, do the same.

Of course we felt nervous when we flew off, heading to spend three months somewhere we'd only seen via emailed photos, in a city we didn't know. We'd be unable to change our minds.

The reality, however, was almost better than the dream. What we'd forgotten in all the last-minute apprehension is that no one would do a swap with people they didn't like. There'd been so much emailing and last-minute telephoning that Val and I were starting to become friends and recognise each other's approach to life. So, along with discovering on arrival a welcoming bottle of a lovely Australian red, we found a list - every bit as detailed as the one I had left behind - on how to work the central heating, about the quirks with the washing machine, the way the alarm flashed and, when we got to Apollo Bay, what to do if there were bush fires or someone was bitten by a snake.

Both of us had also left suggestions about the best local restaurants, where we did our shopping, how the buses worked, how to sign on at the local doctor's, and provided telephone numbers of friends and neighbours who were every bit as curious as we were to see how the new people got on. Like almost everything else about house swapping, friends have a double role. On the one hand, they provide visitors with a bit of local social contact; on the other, they can keep an eye on what's happening. And then everyone relaxes. We newcomers find our way around, join the local health club, get to know which bakery has the best croissants, what butcher can cut a proper steak and start behaving like proper locals.

Which is what a house swap is really about. It's not merely a holiday, at least not if you're staying an appreciable length of time. You don't feel the need to see as much as possible because, what the hell, you're a local - you'll come across Federation Square on a walk, discover the beauty of the Yarra Valley when you're out hunting for local wine or get on a tram because you want to go somewhere.

So it was, too, in Apollo Bay, along the wilder, rugged west coast of Victoria. In this place, which even Melbournians are only just discovering, the community is small, tightly knit and wonderfully welcoming. Within a couple of weeks I became Val's proxy at the cinema group, joined the pony club and helped on a stall at the local Saturday market. We got used to timing the cocktail hour to coincide with the arrival of a family of vividly coloured rosellas each evening. After a few excited sightings we even became complacent about the koalas that snoozed in the forks of our eucalypt trees. Nearly.

If we'd been trying to cram in the local sights we could have missed all this, along with the peace and tranquillity of the place - which was present not least because we were staying in someone's home. Everything we could possibly want was there, from the best potato peeler I have ever found (brought one back with me) to hot water bottles and stacks of firewood for those cold nights that Melbourne can throw at you in any season.

Staying in becomes an adventure, allowing you to try out someone else's books, someone else's CDs and DVDs, all the stuff someone else uses every day. Again it struck me that we were almost interchangeable. A tablecloth I found (Provençal print, olives and yellow flowers) was exactly the same as one I had at home in London, right down to the hole we'd both cut out of the middle for the umbrella.

Driving 14km each morning along the Great Ocean Road to pick up the papers, I found myself - a strictly jazz and classical girl - listening to rock ballads. And liking them. Later I found that Val and Gordon, driving to Bristol to visit old friends, found our taste in music equally intriguing.

And now we're all home. Arriving back on one of those perfect spring days that England does so well, with daffodils in the park, forsythia by the roadside and the last of the crocuses scattered across the grass. It feels good. So does home. We've been away long enough to miss it and, although we know that other people have slept in our bed (thank God we changed the mattress) eaten off our tables, used our sheets and towels, it still feels like home.

Yes, there were a couple of mishaps. I broke a glass bowl which I instantly replaced. Val and Gordon found

a scratch on a wardrobe door they were sure hadn't been there before and offered to pay for its repair. We are waiting to see if any adjustments will need to be made with phone bills and so on, but I doubt it. People just don't take advantage in a house swap. Why would they? We're all in the same position. In fact, Ed Kushins, who set up Home Exchange International, a US based network, told me that over nine years and thousands and thousands of home swaps no one had ever reported a theft or abuse of property.

It works. And not because it's cheaper, but because it is an entirely new experience. Not just a house swap, but a car swap, a friend swap - in fact a life swap. We'll do it again.

Way to go

Sandra Harris used friends' contacts to do her house swap, but reliable and helpful websites such as HomeLink can do the job equally well. For the price of a membership fee you get access to the directory, either on the internet or use the print versions, published three times a year.

Another helpful website is Home Exchange, based in the US but with thoroughly international listings and a hands-on president, Ed Kushins, who is one of his own best customers.