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Friday January 26, 2007

## There's no place like someone else's

by [The Detroit News](#)

At 60, Joseph Flack is an adventurous fellow who flies his own plane, golfs, skis and travels to warm climates as often as possible.

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Last summer, the Washtenaw Community College law professor spent five weeks in France in what he calls "a very nice house in suburban Versailles" and saved a bundle on lodging. And a young French couple with two kids spent five weeks in his three-bedroom, two-bath Ann Arbor, Mich., condominium, also saving money.

"It was my first trip through HomeExchange.com," said Flack, who's already planning a four-week trip to England this June with help from the Web site. "I can only say positive things about my experience with the exchange program."

Thanks to last year's romantic comedy, "The Holiday," which features Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet as brokenhearted singles who trade homes with each other via HomeExchange.com and find new loves, the online home-swap business is booming.

While browsing the HomeExchange Web site, the film's director, Nancy Meyers, got inspired and decided that two strangers who step into each other's worlds could be a clever plot device. HomeExchange is prominently featured in the film, although neither home -- a modern California manse and an English country cottage -- are real HomeExchange listings.

For a yearly fee, members of swap companies can post descriptions and photos of their houses, condos or apartments, browse listings in places they'd like to stay in the United States and abroad, and make arrangements directly with owners of the home they like.

The key to a successful home swap lies in the way owners promote their homes, neighborhood and nearby amenities.

"You are marketing yourself and your lifestyle," said HomeExchange.com president Ed Kushins.

"It's personal. It's not just what the house is like, but what you are like."

In Flack's online description, for example, he notes that his condo is fully furnished (including washer and dryer) with a screened porch, air conditioning, cable TV and computer, plus it's close to public transportation, Detroit Metropolitan Airport and Detroit's gambling casinos, Lansing, Windsor, Chicago, Indiana and Ohio. A four-hour drive to the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island is a perk. He lists his hobbies and profession. He also notes that a car exchange is possible, but smokers and pets are forbidden. Some sites even post user reviews of the domiciles.

While there is the possibility of damage or theft in home exchanges, it rarely occurs because users are swapping each other's home and treat it the way they would their own. Still, it's probably smart to lock up valuables (jewelry, art) and tell your guests what isn't acceptable (loud music, raucous parties).

Experienced home-swappers Donald Kenney and Beth Colaner-Kenney are self-described tennis freaks who follow matches, including Wimbledon in England.

"I recommend communicating a lot by e-mail and ask to see photos of the people and the house," said Donald Kennedy, a retired professor who also lives in Ann Arbor. "We've had good luck with our exchange parties and stayed in touch and made friends with some of them."

The only time a red flag came up, and Kenney and his wife did not accept an exchange, was when they met an Australian couple in Florida interested in swapping houses.

"The husband asked if we were liberals, and suddenly something just didn't feel right," Kenney said with a chuckle.

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