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Travel Tips

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Hollywood has discovered the home exchange

By **ARTHUR FROMMER**
King Features Syndicate

In *The Holiday*, four-time Academy Award-nominee Kate Winslet plays a single woman living in a cottage near London. Actress Cameron Diaz plays a single woman living in a suburb of Los Angeles. Both have broken up with cheating boyfriends and want a change of scenery. They meet on an Internet home-swapping service, each go to live in the other's home and instantly find the love of their lives (Jack Black and Jude Law, respectively).

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In a chick flick of bubbly romance that recently opened to big crowds, Hollywood has discovered that the home exchange is an awesomely effective method of going on vacation. And millions of moviegoers now will undoubtedly improve the efficiency and add to the size of that underappreciated travel tactic.

For years prior to the advent of the Internet, the home exchange suffered from a small audience of participants, which made it a hit-or-miss procedure. You joined a vacation-exchange club, received a thick catalog of people all over the world who were anxious to swap their residence for yours during the period of your respective vacations. You then wrote a letter to such a person, proposing a home exchange, only to learn that they had already arranged such a swap with another person. The laborious effort of an international correspondence too often was wasted.

The Internet sped things up. When a house or apartment was spoken for, it was immediately removed from the listings (such was the theory). And yet, too few Americans were aware of this logical, sensible and cost-conscious method of arranging free accommodations in another city. The largest of all home-exchange clubs has approximately 13,000 members, but this number is expected to grow in the wake of Hollywood's hit movie.

For most Americans, the biggest barrier to a home or apartment exchange is the fear that the swapee will damage the residence or its furnishings. But most would-be exchangers first prudently request references, assurances of responsibility, photos of the people involved and their homes. Some of them arrange for neighbors to periodically look in on the house and talk with the temporary residents. I have spoken with dozens of people who have engaged in home exchanges and never heard a critical word about the experience.

The three major U.S. home-exchange organizations all maintain colorful, elaborate Web sites whose text and testimonials are fun to read. All belong to worldwide organizations bearing the same name and convey their information in every conceivable language. And all of them claim that the events portrayed in *The Holiday* -- namely, romantic relationships emerging from the exchange -- aren't simply fictional but frequent occurrences. Jessica Jaffe of San Francisco's Intervac organization told me that one of her French clients who came to Colorado last year on an exchange of homes, met a Coloradan whom he will soon be marrying.

The exchange club featured in *The Holiday* is Home Exchange of Hermosa Beach, Calif. (www.homeexchange.com, 800-877-8723), in business since 1992 with 13,000 current members in 22 countries. Its membership fee is a modest \$59.95 for one year and \$99.95 for two years, but if you don't exchange during the first year, your second year is free. It does not offer a printed directory, but it displays all listings on its Web site.

An equally large but older club (founded in 1953) is Homelink International of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. (www.homelink.org, 800-638-3841), with 13,500 members in 22 countries. Its membership fee is \$80, plus an optional \$50 extra for a printed catalog containing names and offers of all members. Why a catalog? Many members are mature people who prefer getting their information from the printed page.

And finally, the lively Intervac of San Francisco (www.intervac.com, 800-756-4663), with 8,000 members in 50-plus countries, charges \$65 a year for its listings in the U.S., \$95 for all their complete listings throughout the world, and \$140 if you wish to supplement the \$95 membership with an optional printed catalog. As a remarkable bonus feature, Intervac will refund your membership fee if you do not obtain a home exchange during your first year of membership.

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