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Home sweet someone else's home

By Special to The Oregonian
January 09, 2010, 11:55AM

A decade ago on a cold night in Bend, Evan Julber couldn't fall asleep.

At 2 a.m., he began to surf the Web and stumbled on a home exchange site.

"There was a listing for a house in the French West Indies, and the owners wanted to trade for a vacation home in the Northwest," he says. "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be great? It sounds warm.'"

Julber didn't even know where to find the French West Indies, but he sent an e-mail expressing interest. Then he went to bed and forgot the whole thing.

A month later, he received a reply from a family on the island of Guadeloupe. It began, "Dear Evan ... when would you like to trade homes?"

Julber and his wife, Patti, had the time of their lives on their trip to the French West Indies -- turns out it's in the Caribbean. They also got so hooked on home swaps they bought an oceanfront condo in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, to trade in addition to their home in Bend.

Thousands of Americans like the Julbers do home exchanges each year, trading their primary residence or second home for rent-free housing in the U.S. or abroad.

The state of the economy is swelling those numbers, says Ed Kushins, president of [HomeExchange.com](#), a popular home-swap Web site.

"Home exchange is a way you don't have to give up vacations," he says. "Except for getting there, it doesn't cost any more than staying home. You can shop in a local market, eat at home and have fun doing it all."

Home exchanges take several forms. People often do simultaneous trades -- staying in each other's homes at the same time. There are also hospitality exchanges, when one party visits the other and vice versa at a later date. Some people welcome exchangers as housesitters while they travel.

Ann Kopel enjoys trading her Portland home in simultaneous swaps -- she and her husband have had memorable stays everywhere from New York City to Reading, England. But they also like to keep their home occupied if they go camping or travel abroad.

"We have cats, and I prefer that someone stay in the house," Kopel says.

The housesitting is free -- and it has produced wonderful results, Kopel says.

On the Web

Here's a sampling of home exchange Web sites. Most sites include U.S. and international listings and are aimed at general audiences. A few target specialized groups such as academics.

- [homeexchange.com](#)
- [homelink.org](#)
- [ihen.com](#)
- [intervacus.com](#)
- [fractionalexchange.com](#)
- [sabbaticalhomes.com](#)

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"The people who've stayed here are extremely responsible. When I come back, the house is spotless, the garden is taken care of and the animals are happy.

"A couple from California came, and I left instructions on how to care for the roses -- instructions I rarely follow myself. They followed the steps to the letter, and my roses were so gorgeous."

Feeling at home

Participants enjoy exchanging because they get to stay in a real neighborhood and meet local people. "It's very exciting not to be in a hotel where you have a sterile experience," says Julber, who swapped homes five times in 2008.

Cindi Carrell and Jeff Ramsey of Portland have exchanged to England, Mexico and Sweden. They like introducing their two sons to different cultures.

"It's fun to go to the stores and eat new foods," Carrell says. "In Sweden, my husband and sons tried reindeer meat we bought in a store. They said it tasted like rare roast beef."

Carrell also appreciates exchanging because it provides a comfortable home base where a family can relax.

"It's so wonderful with kids because we don't feel any pressure to see all the sights," she says. During an exchange in Virginia, for instance, her family would "spend a day swimming in a natural-spring pool at the exchange home, then make a big push into D.C., and then take another day off."

Lifelong friends

Home exchanges often start as practical transactions but by the end, they can end up as something more personal. Many exchangers get to know and like each other over the phone, through e-mail and in person. They may meet when they trade keys, during a hospitality swap and so on.

The Julbers became fast friends with their fellow exchangers in the French West Indies -- they've traded homes again, stayed with each other and arranged to meet on vacations.

Kopel met a young woman in Bellingham, Wash., through an exchange site. "She has ended up like my daughter," Kopel says. "We travel together and have a great time."

Make it secure and successful

Home exchanges may sound great -- except that you're opening your home to complete strangers.

"First-timers are extremely concerned about security, but security risks are virtually nil," says Dan Rubin, president of the International Home Exchange Network. Out of thousands of exchanges, Rubin says he can count the bad experiences on one hand.

"The main thing is to do your homework," he says. "Make sure you have a very good feel for the people you exchange with. You want both parties to be comfortable."

Here are tips on making a safe, successful home exchange:

Read about potential exchangers on home-swap Web sites. You'll find photographs and basic information about homes and their owners.

"You start to get a pretty good feel for them and what their house and neighborhood are like," says Ed Kushins, president of homeexchange.com. "Just looking at the listing gives you the feeling these are real people, not strangers."

Many sites charge fees to list your home and to contact other listers. You also can use free Web sites such as craigslist, but the information and choices may not be as plentiful.

Make contact via e-mail and telephone. Ask questions about what's important to you and listen carefully to the answers. "Mostly, trust your judgment," Kushins says. If something doesn't feel right, politely withdraw from the proposed exchange.

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By LeeAnn Neal, community blogger

- [Counting down to the Oregon Coast Instant Haiku Slam Classic](#) 4:32 p.m. PT

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- [Dave Sweeney has a new home on OregonLive.com](#) 11:00 a.m. PT

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HOME AND OFFICE



When you've decided on an exchange, draw up an agreement with essential elements such as dates, use of a car, cleaning arrangements, etc. Some Web sites provide templates for this kind of agreement.

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Use common sense when you prepare your house for your guests, Rubin says. Put away breakable items and valuables.

Leave notes about anything quirky in your house -- for example, if your entertainment system is complicated, or the deadbolt sticks on your front door.

Leave a list of emergency numbers such as the handyman, plumber and electrician. Include your contact information, and a neighbor's name and phone number. While you're at it, write a list recommending some good local restaurants, grocery stores, etc., to help your guests feel at home.

Ask a friend or neighbor to drop by to meet your exchangers. That gives your guests a chance to ask questions about your home and neighborhood.

-- Barbara Dunlap

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