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Consumer News: Home Exchanges

By Ric Romero

Mar. 19, 2007 - How would you like to stay in a beach home in Australia, a home on Egypt's Red Sea, or a chateau in France, all without spending a dime? Many travelers are ditching hotels for the comforts of home and saving a bundle.

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In a "home exchange," people swap their homes for a few days, a few weeks, or longer.

You move into someone else's home, and they move into yours.

We met some home exchangers from Southern

California who say it's a fantastic way to travel.

In "The Holiday," Kate Winslet is thrilled to find a stunning Southern California home through a home exchange website.

Companies like HomeLink International and Intervac allow their members to search for homes all across the world.

At HomeExchange.com, based in Hermosa Beach, you pay an annual fee of \$60, which allows members to list their homes and exchange them with other members for free.

The website lists some 15,000 homes around the world and includes pictures and detailed descriptions, dates the owners are available for an exchange, and the places members would like to travel.

"It's a great way to travel -- basically you stay at my house, I stay at yours, so there are no hotel bills -- you save a lot of money on your vacation," said Ed Kushins.

That's why Susana Parks is a big fan of home exchanges. She and her husband live in a beautiful Rodeo Drive home just a few blocks from Beverly Hills.

And the couple is willing to let fellow home exchangers, who they've never met, move in and have free use of their kitchen, library, swimming pool, even their 2007 Lexus.

"If we're doing an exchange, we're in their home too. So there is definitely a trust factor that we treat their home like our home and vice versa."

The couple has swapped their home to stay in a resort home on the shores of Lake Michigan, and for a three-story townhouse in San Francisco's trendy Mission District.

Southern California is a favorite destination for many home exchangers.

And living just across from the ocean and the Redondo Beach Pier doesn't hurt.

Maria Carlson says she gets e-mails all the time from people willing to swap their homes for hers.

Maria and her husband Robert were at first reluctant to exchange their home, so as a trial, they swapped their home over one weekend for a house in Carmel and on another weekend for a luxurious San Diego condo that was once the historic El Cortez hotel, where Elvis Presley stayed.

Maria Carlson: "We tried it out. He loved it, I loved it, and we've just been doing it ever since."

Now the Carlsons are willing to swap their beach home again for their next destination.

Like many home exchangers, Maria and Robert have become friends with people they never knew until just before the exchange.

Maria: "If you feel like strangers are staying in your home, then home exchange is not for you. If you're going to be nervous about it, it's not for you. It's not for everybody."

Now remember: Home exchanges are strictly voluntary between members. So it's always a good idea to talk with the person you're swapping homes with several times before you make the exchange.

www.homeexchange.com

www.homelink-usa.org

www.intervac.com

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