

# House swap, trimming your

Want to put a plug on the financial drain of accommodation costs, and enjoy living like a local? Consider a house swap, sit or stay, suggests *Kate Johnston*.

Travelling is exciting, but it can be hard work. Nothing is familiar, eating in restaurants for breakfast, lunch and dinner soon loses its novelty, and hotels can feel like they've had cultural Botox to take out local expression and charm. But imagine arriving in Tuscany or San Francisco to all the comforts of an established home, with a welcome note, some food in the fridge and possibly even a car to use?

All over the world, thousands of families, friends, couples and singles are house swapping, sitting or staying. You can choose what best suits you: to swap houses directly with another, to babysit someone's house for them while they're away, or to stay with the home-owners or have them to stay with you. Many people make this holiday choice to save on accommodation costs only to find the greatest benefit is meeting neighbours, getting insider tips on restaurants and places to visit, and making great friends



## House swap

Most house swaps are organised so the two parties directly exchange – they come to your house, you go to theirs. You can swap for as long or as short a time as you both decide. There are also 'non-synchronised' swaps; for example, you go to their house, but they won't necessarily go to yours – they'll stay elsewhere or in a second house.

The best place to access the house-swapping community is on the internet. Membership-based house-swap organisations (see MORE box) offer search facilities, a guide to exchanging and helpful customer support, such as providing you with a simple contract. Once your membership is paid, you can start to contact other members directly. Many people start planning six months or a year in advance, in order to get to know you and your house before choosing to commit.

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## Types of house swaps

You can swap your house, yacht or cruiser for similar accommodation or choose to look for a special interest house swap, such as near or on a golf course. There's no obligation to swap like properties; in fact, people often want to try something different. You could potentially swap your country house for their studio apartment in Manhattan, or your mountain shack for their yacht on the Aegean.

## House sit

House sitting offers free accommodation in exchange for minding a home while the owners or renters are away. The deal usually includes some domestic duties, such as looking after pets. There are internet organisations where sitters pay a fee but home-owners register their properties for free. Sitters may be required to pay a refundable bond and to pay appropriate

# sit or stay: travel budget

utility costs. Potential sitters must provide references and there's usually an interview process where both parties can find out if the specific arrangements suit them.

## Home or hospitality stays

Often used by international students who want to stay with a family, homestays can also be a great source of accommodation in countries where tourism and hotels aren't as developed or affordable, (see the box on page 80 for Philip Game's Russian experience).

Or maybe you're after something different: a windmill, a lighthouse or a luxury chateau? Anything's possible: a house as cheap or as extravagant, as adventurous or as much like home as you want.

Some house swap organisations recommend 'hospitality stays', when the two parties stay with each other first, as a way of finding out if a future swap will work. This could be great if over time you've come to feel truly simpatico with them, but of course, share and share alike is hard enough with your own friends and family, let alone with strangers.

## Getting started

With a house swap, sit or stay the key is research. Look at location, number of bedrooms, access to public transport, check security arrangements and make sure both parties are clear about expectations: the use of household goods, any responsibilities for pets or gardens, etc. The home-owner's

insurance is usually sufficient, but double check this with the relevant insurance company.

Other than that, it's just a matter of trawling the internet, joining up to the site you like, and starting to search the properties. You can often browse websites before becoming a member to get a feel for the type and range of properties they offer. Then it's up to you to make contact and get swapping.

## The advantages...

Many people feel secure knowing their house is occupied while they are away. Once you have established relationships with house swappers and have had a positive experience, you might find yourself hooked: house swapping is cheap (especially for families or groups), and gives you a direct, personal experience of a place and its people.

## ... and disadvantages

Naturally you have responsibility for the leaving the house in a good condition. There is always the chance that some aspect of the house or arrangement will disappoint. The only thing that can prevent this is doing more research.

It's in the interests of both parties to be up front about the limitations or realities of their properties. But if the house or apartment isn't what they said it was or isn't how you envisaged it, you can save it as a good story to tell your friends when you get home. [YL](#)

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