



Home Exchange Fans See the World From a Local's Perspective

Travel Gets Cheaper if Your House Is My House

by Alexandra Armstrong, CFP

Every month I write a column about some aspect of your financial life. Since this is for the summer issue when many people are vacationing, I thought I'd do something a bit different. This article is about exchanging homes, an economical approach to travel.

I have a retired couple as clients who've been telling me over the past few years about how they've exchanged their two relatively small homes (both in major cities, one on the East Coast and one on the West Coast) for homes around the world. I also know a couple with teenage children who've exchanged their apartment in San Francisco over the past few years. Both couples are enthusiastic about it.

Please understand that I'm not recommending you exchange your home, as I realize it wouldn't work for everyone. But I thought that if you've considered exchanging homes, you might be interested in learning more. I know I was curious. Therefore, I asked the wife of our retired couple (who prefers that I not use her name) to share their experiences for my article this month. Here's their story:

"For me, travel has always been a valued avocation. So, when we retired, figuring out how to continue traveling was a priority. Our goal was flexible, satisfying and affordable travel. For us, home exchange has been the answer.

"Currently, we take two to five trips a year ranging from long weekends to a month or more. There is virtually no place on the planet we cannot visit this way. Last year we spent two weeks at a premier U.S. tennis tournament, a month in Barcelona, visited old friends (and the beach) in San Diego for 10 days and treated our daughter and her family (and ourselves) to what's become an annual summer vacation. Using frequent-flyer miles, we've visited friends, traveled to several continents and attended iconic music and film festivals at rock-bottom costs — especially considering our terrific accommodations. We couldn't enjoy this new and rich dimension of our lives without exchanging homes (and sometimes cars).

"It's truly puzzling to us that we've found so few people who travel this way. Typically people are surprised — sometimes aghast — that we happily open our home to strangers. They fear damage or theft, are uncomfortable about breaches of privacy or can't fathom a stranger sleeping in their bed or using their kitchen, books or CDs. Our advice: Forget about it and enjoy yourselves! Remember, you'll be staying in their home as well.

"Our homes are attractive but emphasize comfort, amenities, personal photography and artifacts from travel. We have no exceptionally valuable art or other material

possessions. If we had such items, I'm sure we could safeguard them to make home exchanges carefree. Our only nod to security is a locked file that contains personal or financial information that could potentially lead to identity theft!

"There are several home exchange sites online. The one we use, homeexchange.com, has 41,000-plus listings in 144 countries. Each listing includes pictures, detailed information about neighborhoods and homes, travel preferences and, often, a profile of the lister. People contact each other through the exchange website and can stay anonymous for as long as they like. We used Skype video calling to 'meet' one potential international exchanger but typically communicate by email only.

"Our home exchange 'club' utilizes a template in which members can describe themselves and their home. The pictures and descriptions you include are important in attracting people to your home. We include photos of our entire home or building to give a general sense of structure and surroundings, along with all the rooms. We try to capture the ambiance, comfort, views, light, outdoor areas, etc. We use a wide-angle lens that shows the interior of the home to its best advantage. A convincing narrative is also important. Beyond a relatively detailed description of the layout, it's helpful to include any unique features of your home, all amenities, a meaningful portrait of your neighborhood and why it's a good choice, its location in the city, local and regional activities that might interest them, transportation issues and distances to places they may want to visit. Finally, I recommend including a personal profile to give potential exchanges a feeling for who you are, why you participate in home exchanges and your expectations for their care of your home.

"We've never had the slightest problem in our close to 20 exchanges. We often arrive to a bottle of wine and a snack left for us in an immaculate house, which we leave in the same condition. Usually there's a memo about the house, special requests (plants, mail, etc.) and information on restaurants, local sights and cultural events. The comfort and flexibility of staying in a home (where you can prepare meals, do laundry and sleep late) rather than a hotel is incalculable. It affords a travel experience somewhere between being a local and a tourist. Many people do repeat exchanges because they have friends, family, professional interests or just a love for a place or recurring event.

"What has our experience taught us about selecting a particular home? For us, it's about location. If visiting a city for a specific event, we want to be near it and/or on a mass transit line very convenient to it. If visiting an

auto-centric area, we try for a car exchange (with parking space) to save car rental expenses. No matter the lure of the home itself, we want to be in a safe, centrally located neighborhood, near mass transit, restaurants, shops and other venues we enjoy.

“After location, we like comfort and certain amenities. We treasure a comfortable couch, Internet access, DVD player, music, a nice patio, washer/dryer and dishwasher. A hot tub, outdoor eating or a pool is a bonus. Bikes, beach gear and other items suited to your needs and interests are often available.

“We don’t feel that strict reciprocity is key to an attractive exchange. We just want an exchange that works for everyone. We prioritize access to a chosen destination at a time of our choosing, a good location and comfort and will pass up bells and whistles to get them. Nor are we sticklers for parity in type or size of home, amenities, days spent or

auto exchange. It’s important to think through what’s important to you, to be honest about your offering and discuss your needs openly and realistically. Because we have two homes, we often do nonsimultaneous exchanges — ‘banking’ an exchange for the future or permitting others to do so. We have never had a problem nor created one in this process, but it is something to focus on and make sure all parties are clear on what the commitment is.

“The more flexible you are on travel times and the earlier you seek to arrange an exchange, the better. We get our plane tickets after locking in an exchange, not before!

“People use the home exchange site in various ways. We tend to initiate exchanges, not merely respond to them. Not only does this meet our current needs better, but it also gives us a much fuller picture of what is available in a destination and increases the odds that we’ll actually do an exchange we’ve ‘banked.’ Depend-

ing on the time of year, we may get up to 10 requests per week.

“Our greatest concern about exchanging was that we’d make plans, buy airplane and event tickets, and then have someone back out. It’s never happened to us, but we have heard from people shut out of exchanges at the last minute, usually due to an emergency. All you can do is try to assess the sincerity and enthusiasm of your exchange partner and then trust them. So far, we’ve batted 100 percent.”

As I said, this isn’t an endorsement for home exchange, but it might be something you might consider. It certainly enables people to save travel dollars and see other parts of the country/world in a comfortable way. **B**

Websites of Interest

HomeExchange.com

www.homeexchange.com/index.html

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