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Canada-Britain house swap gives close-up view of life in southeast Englad

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It was playing barman that did it for me.

Being invited 'round the bar by the friendly publican, Tony, so that I could pull my own pint of Harveys draught ale was when I became completely sold on the concept of a house-swap vacation.

There were plenty of other reasons, of course. As my wife, Lauraine, and I discovered on a recent 17-day stay in southeast England, home exchanges are a great way to not only see another part of the world, but to get temporarily into the heart of another community.

Some of the advantages of a home exchange would appeal to nearly any traveller. Spending nothing on accommodations for two or three weeks makes everything else - airfare, train tickets, even expensive restaurant meals - seem affordable.

We figure we saved at least \$3,500 in accommodation expenses, not to mention additional savings from preparing some of our own meals rather than eating out all the time.

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Although house swapping predates the present economic malaise, it's a vacation concept particularly well suited to a recession. An entry on the publicly edited website Wikipedia claims exchanges began around 1953 and grew in popularity in the 1970s.

Aside from cost, the accommodations themselves can be a major advantage. Unless you can afford a large suite, hotel rooms often start feeling cramped and confining after a few nights, whereas, with exchanges, you're staying in someone's actual home.

We moved into a modern two-storey, four-bedroom house with everything we could possibly need: two bathrooms, wireless Internet, digital TV service, a private backyard, even access to a couple of bicycles.

The town we stayed in, Burgess Hill, isn't a tourist destination, but its location was ideal for sightseeing: 55 minutes to London and 15 minutes to Brighton by rail, and short drives to scads of history and scenery, from 600-year-old castles to gorgeous rolling hills to mysterious chalk formations such as the Long Man of Wilmington.

But what really made our exchange memorable, and left us eager to swap again, was the feeling of belonging and connection that we got from living in an actual community rather than a tourist destination.

If you mostly want to flake out on a beach or wander through museums, a house exchange may not be for you. But if you want to find out what life is really like somewhere else, an exchange can be a real window into another world.

For a little over two weeks, we felt right at home in our new town. Many evenings we ended up in the local pub, where we befriended nearly a dozen local residents.

To them, we were something of a curiosity - the Canadians who were doing the sort of house exchange they'd seen in the Cameron Diaz-Kate Winslet film "The Holiday."

(The film's exchange was improbably arranged and executed in less than 24 hours; ours was in the works for more than a year. But the scene where the Californian, played by Diaz, shrieks as she tries to navigate one of England's impossibly narrow, winding country lanes while driving on the left side sure rang true.)

Our new friends were an endless source of helpful ideas about things to do and see in London and the southeast.

One night in the pub, a chatty local suggested we take a train to Hove to see a cricket match. Keen to experience British sporting culture, we took up the suggestion, had a wonderful time chanting and cheering in the cheap seats, and made acquaintances with folks who helped us understand the finer points of the game. (As a bonus, the match we saw was a new cricket derivation called Twenty20, so it lasted less than three hours, not five days.)

Other suggestions also proved fruitful, such as a 10-minute drive to the charming village of Lindfield, where we marvelled at still-inhabited, 600-year-old thatched-roof cottages and had our first experience eating black pudding - a dark brown patty that tasted vaguely like sausage and was made (as the pub owner admitted - after making me eat it first) out of blood.

Our adventure had its genesis about 18 months ago, when some friends sang the praises of a house exchange vacation to Australia. They had arranged it through a website, homeforexchange.com.

Lauraine registered with the site. For \$99 Cdn, we got access to home listings around the world and the ability to list our own home, for two years.

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We perused the listings, dreaming of places we'd like to go and looking for potential matches.

After a few early nibbles that didn't pan out because we couldn't match vacation dates, Lauraine began focusing on homes in England. She found a listing in Burgess Hill, south of London in West Sussex.

Canada was not on the owners' wish list, but their writeup was chatty enough that Lauraine felt compelled to send off a complimentary email, mentioning our location. In short order, she received a reply along the lines of, "We have relatives near Toronto, would you like to swap in May 2009?"

Lauraine struck up an online friendship with her Burgess Hill counterpart, Viola Snell, and soon plans were being made for an exchange. We would live in Alan and Viola's home for two weeks while they lived at our place.

We felt comfortable enough with our counterparts that the idea of drawing up a written contract, which some sites recommend, was dismissed. We needed to trust the Snells, and vice versa, and it just seemed natural to do so.

As the months passed, I made the odd joke about this all being a dark conspiracy to put us out of house and home but, inside, I was confident it would all work out. Sure enough, it did. Everything worked in their place - I even found the necessary tools to do a minor repair on one of the bikes - and we arrived home to find our house not only still in one piece, but spotless.

And now whenever I pass a pub, I can't help thinking back to our own local in Burgess Hill, the Windmill, and the new friends who made us feel right at home while we were an ocean away from real life.

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How to swap . . .

On the web: homeforexchange.com, homelink.ca, homeexchange.com, intervac.com. Intervac claims more than 20,000 listings in its database, homeexchange.com claims 27,000.

How it's arranged: Usually, through websites like these. Paying a membership fee allows you to list your home and your desired location and dates and get access to listings. Members contact each other directly and arrange exchanges directly with each other.

What's needed: Sufficient lead time to work out all the details with your exchange partners. Some exchangers create written contracts, but doing so is not essential. Swappers should agree in advance on things like whether to mow the lawn and what to do about bedding and towels at the end of the visit. Written instructions on how to work appliances, electronic gadgets and so on are essential.

Advantages: Free accommodation, with kitchen and laundry facilities, often much more spacious than hotel rooms. The chance to set down temporarily in a real community rather than a tourist area, and maybe even make new friends. Your home will not sit vacant for a few weeks because someone will be living in it while you are away.

Disadvantages: You might not want to spend so much time in a single place. A stranger will sleep in your bed and might break something precious or look in your underwear drawer.

Challenges: It can be tricky to find a good match - someone who wants to visit your area, lives in an area you want to visit, and can travel at the same time as you. Because of insurance issues, swapping vehicles can be difficult or impossible.

Essential ingredient: Trust. You are going to be giving someone you don't know unfettered access to your home while you are far away. Exchanges are built on a foundation of trust - but you might want to let your neighbours know so they can keep an eye on things, just in case.

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