

## Wish you were here?

**You'd be amazed how far your ordinary British house can take you. Thai villas and Caribbean cottages are just some of the options for holiday home swaps**

Caroline Scott Published: 19 July 2015



Modern Thai pad: Overlooking Surin Beach, on the island of Phuket, this contemporary villa has four bedrooms. [homeexchange.com](http://homeexchange.com)

Once you start thinking of your house as a hot date, you will never again have to suffer the agony of coughing up thousands of pounds to stay in rental properties that turn out to be far less comfortable than your own home. As with online dating, you select your most flattering photos — the ones where the wisteria is in bloom and the grass not yet worn out by children's feet, pimp up its assets and location — and post them on [lovehomeswap.com](http://lovehomeswap.com) (Tinder for houses).

Then you await interest from all over the world in your original beams and midcentury furniture. Before you know it, Victorian terrace in northwest London has met beachside LA condo and found they have much in common.

Although the sharing economy is relatively new, the concept of swapping your house for another without handing over any money has been around for generations. One of the first home-swap services, HomeLink, began in 1953 as a New York high-school teacher's typed list of colleagues'

homes, and now operates in 80 countries. But the trend is accelerating, and not just among cash-strapped families.

The super-rich have cottoned on: [3rdhome.com](http://3rdhome.com) and [exclusiveexchanges.com](http://exclusiveexchanges.com) specialise in high-end properties, many of them second homes that would normally be empty and draining resources. The founder of Exclusive Exchanges, Margaret Carr, says many of her clients suffer from “luxury hotel fatigue” and enjoy the chance to build relationships with other high-end home- and yacht-owners, while “at the same time leveraging their assets”.

Love Home Swap, the largest global site, was founded by mother-of-two Debbie Wosskow after a “particularly disastrous” hotel break when her son Noah, now 6, was tiny. When she got back, she watched the film *The Holiday*. If you haven’t seen it, Kate Winslet swaps her picturesque but tiny home-counties country cottage, with its log store, crocheted patchwork blankets and faulty plumbing, with Cameron Diaz’s sleek LA mansion, where even the curtains are electronically operated. Wosskow, 41, thought — and let’s face it, who hasn’t? — “I just wish I could swap my life with someone else for a bit.”

An Oxford-educated executive from a long line of female entrepreneurs, she has since written a government report, *Unlocking the Sharing Economy*. She says that, after Uber and Airbnb, we are used to the idea that we can trust strangers with our homes. “They have become our ultimate point of self-expression. I’ve spent nearly all the money I’ve ever earned on mine [a four-bedroom villa in Little Venice, west London]. It’s taken over from buying clothes by a long way. When I go away, I want to stay in a home that’s just as nice.

“People are starting to see their homes as this huge asset. It’s a socioeconomic behavioural shift — an extension of the ‘an Englishman’s home is his castle’ mentality, but embedded in culture on a local scale.”

Just like online dating, home swapping is a visual affair. The better your photos, the more likely you are to land a swap. More than 60% of the traffic on Love Home Swaps is via mobile. “People do what they do with Tinder,” Wosskow says. “They’re sitting on buses and trains, scrolling through images.”

Like dating, home swapping involves putting the work in. “You have to present yourself in the best light, make lots of approaches and, when the right one comes along, invest in the relationship. People repeat home swaps year after year. They recommend them to their friends and they stay in touch. This is a special community.”

It certainly sounds tempting. I have four children and, realistically, the only way we are ever going to make our dream trip to California is to swap our home in leafy southwest London (“A short train ride to Waterloo”) with an American family who want to come here.

Americans are fabulously boastful. They know you’re going to be as crazy about their “furniture from New Zealand, handmade to our specifications” as they are, and they’ll post 1,000 artfully curated pictures showing the minutiae of their lives. Which means you get to snoop round the bathroom, the kitchen and even the neighbourhood before you commit. Don’t be put off by the

grandiosity of such homes. They'll think your cramped semi with a handkerchief-sized garden is cute.

In May, we were chatting with Maurizio, who has a beautiful home in LA and two musically gifted children. We discussed dates — admittedly, mine were hazy — but it was difficult not to feel dumped when, after a worrying silence (is he still interested? Should I message him again, or would that be pushy?), he wrote: “Sorry not to have been in touch. We have decided to go for a house on the coast of Mexico.”

It was a crushing blow. Was it the half-finished DIY projects? The absence of an outdoor kitchen? Or were my children not gifted enough? Then Rachel from Dubai wrote: “I love your home! We have a beautiful large house full of art and books. All bedrooms have ensuites and most have dressing rooms. As a fellow knackered working mother, I can recommend coming here for R&R and a maid.” I would have gone like a shot for the staff, but my husband won't countenance Dubai, so back to the drawing board.

Sara got in touch to offer her small, homely flat in Tel Aviv, minutes from the beach and with a panoramic view of the ocean: “The best location in Tel Aviv city and a cleaner comes once a week to fold your laundry.” I'm sold — what I really want is a home that involves less hard work — but Tel Aviv isn't on our list of dream destinations, so we press on, approaching several homeowners in the States and getting numerous cheery rebuffs. “Hello, Caroline! Your home looks cute! But we have all our swaps organised for this year already.”

In the meantime, families on the Costa Brava, in Perth, Western Australia and in Komiza, Croatia, have snooped round our house online — the site reveals who has viewed you in the past month — but not been in touch. I've begun to wonder if our home is unlovable. On the plus side, I've had lovely email exchanges with Sienna in Barbados, Laura in Ireland, Zara in the Czech Republic, Bertrand in Paris and Christian in Norway. They would all like to come, but not on dates when we can travel.

Once you've let go of the fear (what if they tramp mud all over the carpet, drop food on the new Loaf sofa and steal the Lego — my youngest son's deepest dread?), the possibilities are endless. Trust me, there's someone out there who will love your toy-crammed corners and underwhelming cupboard space because it means they don't have to travel with 257 pieces of child paraphernalia or order room service every night. I loved the New York family whose bio read: “We have three boys. What can I say? Our house isn't designery. It's a home. It's lived in.” Now that's a house I had a chance with.

We didn't get our dream date in California, but we do have a firm invite from the owner of a Napa Valley vineyard for next year. This summer, we're off to a farmhouse in the Pays de la Loire, with powder-blue shutters, a heated pool and an award-winning boulangerie nearby. We feel overwhelmed by our good luck and, as a bonus, ahead of our swappee's visit, we've been inspired to complete those DIY projects, too.

## **The do's and don'ts**

- For long-haul swaps such as Australia and America, as well as popular ski and beach destinations, approach homeowners six months in advance, especially if you want to go at peak times. Summer is generally the busiest time (Christmas for Australian swaps).
- Be proactive: if you want to swap with Paris, approach a lot of homeowners and be as flexible as possible with dates.
- Be open to offers to stay in interesting homes off the beaten track in places you may not have thought of.
- Use email and Skype to build up a relationship with your fellow swappers.
- You don't need to go mad cleaning and clearing: your house is a home, not a hotel. Nor do you need to depersonalise — people have chosen you because they love the look of your home — but do lock away jewellery, personal documents and the family silver.
- Clear enough cupboard space to give your guests room to hang their clothes, and clean out bathroom cabinets completely. No one wants to turn up to find someone else's soap and razor on the side of the basin.
- Empty the fridge. Debbie Woskow leaves “juice, milk and a bottle of fizz”.
- If you don't have one, consider employing a cleaner both sides of a swap to make up a cleaner both sides of a swap to make up beds and lay out clean towels, then strip and remake the beds before you get back. It's a small expense when you're saving an average of £3,000 for a two-week swap.
- Fees are usually for an annual membership. Lovehomeswap.com, with 70,000 members, has three tiers, £144, £192 and £240, which buys you a matchmaking service and a featured listing; prices are reduced until the end of July. Homeexchange.com, with 65,000 members, costs £100 a year, homelink.org.uk £115.
- The annual fee for high-end swapping via exclusiveexchanges.com is £255 for primary properties and £319 for second homes. Its rival, 3rdhome.com, is offering free membership.

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