

Exchanging Homes for an (Almost) Free Vacation By Allen Polk Hemphill



View from Our "Second Home" on Kauai

Vacation Home Exchange -- 2003

Introduction

Anyone with unlimited funds can live well - the trick is to live well without spending a lot of money.

It certainly can be done, and hundreds of thousands of people do it every year, by exchanging their homes and cars with like-minded people who also like to travel well but cheaply, and live like a "native" instead of a "tourist". In fact, an estimated 250,000 exchanges take place annually throughout the world.

Who does this? How do they do it? What are the risks, and the rewards? That is the subject of this article. I know you are concerned about a stranger living in your home. (So is the person with whom you are exchanging!) You are worried that Aunt Eva's heirloom lamp will get broken, your car will have a dented fender, and the people will film a porno movie in your back yard.

The people with whom you are exchanging have similar concerns, but they have decided to "go with the flow" - and they have probably done everything possible to mitigate the potential problems. In this booklet we will advise you how to stop worrying and save a ton of money.

If after hearing all the details, you simply cannot bear having a stranger sleeping in your bed, driving your car, and cooking in your kitchen, then perhaps home exchanging is not for you. Exchanging is for adventurous people who can adapt to changing circumstances. It is not for the timid. Schedules change; emergencies can arise on either end, plans change.

The waterfall on "our" Kauai property



But if you can live with a little uncertainty and relax about the care your kitchen is getting, then the rewards - both financial and psychological - are great. When you think of the places you can visit, places that might normally be far beyond your budget, the experience can be a rush.

I begin writing this in the home of my exchange host on the North Coast of Kauai - on 10 acres overlooking the ocean. A gardener maintains the property, so we are care-free except for minding their dog and cat - both of whom we love. We have two vehicles available for our use. We were

there for 28 days on that occasion, without any additional cost to our living in San Diego - except that the food and gas cost a few pennies more. Our 28-day vacation cost less than \$900 that time, with all the expenses allocated to the flight expenses! Subsequently, we have exchanged to Kauai more than a dozen times for periods of as long as 75 days at a time.

And this great benefit is one of the reasons that your home is well protected - we don't want to do anything to mess this situation up, and most exchangers want to continue their relationship with their hosts.

Even though we enjoy saving an absolute ton of money, that is not the primary value of this exchange to Kauai. There are no stop lights on the north coast of Kauai, and so it is a retreat, completely unlike the tourist Kauai on the South side of the Island. The Marriott resort on the South of the island is magnificent, but it is just like a Marriott Resort in San Diego, or Miami, or (fill in the blank).

On Kauai, we are Kama'ina - locals. We shop at the farmer's market in Kilauea, and instead of driving my hosts new Camry, I drive the old stick-shift Jeep truck, so I look just like many other locals. I don't think a local has washed a car of its famous Kauai red dirt in the past 50 years, so it is pretty easy to spot the shiny new rental cars. When we go to Kapa'a to shop, you can spot the tourists a mile away, but we blend into the local crowd. No one gives us a second look, much less the common sneer. The only disadvantage is that Jean still has to cook and clean, and I still work many hours a day on the computer or the Internet doing my real estate work, but we try to make the vacations as calm and work-free as possible. We live "aloha" on Kauai. The resorts are fine, but just not for us.

Just to give you an example of living as a local, several years ago (and before 9/11) I had occasion to go to the Lehu Airport to pick up a friend flying in from the Mainland. We like to share our "second home in Hawaii" with our friends. I decided to drive the old Jeep, because the friend was bringing a surfboard. As I arrived at the airport, there was a long line of shiny new cars in front - tourists picking up their friends. I drove to the back of the line, to wait. A local policeman came down the line and told everyone to keep on driving around in a circle. He would not let people sit and wait.

When he arrived at my truck, I was sitting there, tan, hair tousled, barefoot, wearing shorts and a tank top, and driving this old rust-colored Jeep. I looked, and acted like a local. The policeman said, "Hey, Bro'. You park over unda' da tree. I no botha' you."

I said, “Thanks, Bro’, and Mahalo”

Being a Kama’ina just saved me time and money. Watching the “tourists” drive around and around put a smile on my face as I waited in the cool shade for my friend to arrive. My friends arrived to find me sleeping under Banyan tree, with a Panama hat over my face. One asked me, “How the hell do you rate parking here in the shade, all alone.” I just smiled through a three-day stubble.

Jean and I often refer to the “damn tourists”, laughingly, because, while we are one, we don’t have to act like one or be identified as one. We save a lot of money shopping also, because everyone assumes we are locals. We have been there so often, we practically are locals. When we are on some part of the island where we are not known, our car, dress and demeanor usually identify us as locals, but the residents have their own way of telling locals. They may ask, “Where you live?” “Kalihiwai,” I will answer – it is just a short road but it is a well known road.

“Oh, you know Pa?”

“Sure. Stanton is a Bro, and Inger, Stanton and me are kickin’ back at Anini polo.”

That should settle the local issue, if you can say the words with the right pronunciation – and that takes practice.

Many of us exchange to some place to which we wish to return and we want to establish a relationship that will continue. It is in no ones best interest to take an unfair advantage, or to cause damage. That does not mean it is not possible for there to be disputes, and I will cover that later, but they are rare. Very rare.

Home Exchanging History

Home exchanging as an organized effort began several decades ago by a couple in New York. Their purpose was to permit school teachers to exchange with each other during summer months. Some existing home exchange services have been in continuous operation since 1952! Teachers, in those days of low salaries and set teaching schedules, had little money but predictable summers off. That made it ideal for exchanging their homes with other teachers. The concept was so successful that it grew to include friends and family and eventually, everyone.

I subscribed to the New York published catalog in the early 70s, which, as I recall, came out 2 or three times a year and was affiliated with HomeLink International.

It was almost 30 years ago that I began my interest in the subject. Subsequently, in the early 80’s the couple who ran the exchange service moved to Youngtown, Arizona, where my wife and I visited with them. I had thoughts about buying their business. We decided not to buy it because of the propriety way the database of information was kept, but we did arrange for one of my favorite college students to write programs for them.

By 1995 it was apparent the World Wide Web was going to be a great success, I decided to contact the owners of the exchange business again to see if he was going to sell his database or go on the Web, and found that he was no longer in business.

I looked at the Web and found Linda Allen of Florida had developed a fledgling but promising home exchange site, and it was GOOD. Rather than compete with her, I e-mailed her some of my thoughts and plans and wished her well. I was more interested in exchanging my home than running another

business. Linda and I have corresponded many times since then. I think she runs a GREAT Website, and I hope to meet her some day.

Our Personal History

When we first discovered home exchanging we were very excited, but we were not realistic about our ability to exchange. We had three teenagers, and exchanging when you have a large and active family may not work. We did not know that, and placed a description of our home in one of the magazines. We were deluged with proposals to exchange - including one proposal from an Englishman who sent us drawings of the castle he was willing to exchange for our home!

We had a problem, pre-computer, with just answering our mail. It was obvious that we were simply not ready to exchange, so we reluctantly declined every invitation.

But we suggested to many of the English people who made proposals that, if they could effectuate a satisfactory exchange to the Southern California region, we would like to host them for dinner at our home. Our object in making this suggestion was purely selfish. We wanted to examine the quality of the exchangers, to make certain that we were dealing with real people.

We were! Several families came to our home, and we would have been pleased to have each of them as our neighbors. One family owned three textile mills in Great Britain and was looking to relocate them to the United States because of labor problems in the U.K. Another family was composed of a father who was Headmaster of a private school, a mother who was Headmistress of another private school, and three beautiful children. We invited one family to stay with us for a weekend, and they accepted.

We had no further doubts regarding the quality of the people with whom we would be dealing, and our subsequent experiences have supported and reinforced our first impression.

Our initial problem with home exchanging was our personal family situation - three children living at home who had no interest in going anywhere. Eventually, however, that problem solved itself, and in early 1982, we corresponded with our current host family in Kauai. They were looking for a San Diego home in which to spend some time so they could see their daughter. They were first going to travel, so they offered us their home for two weeks while living in our home for only a week, and we accepted.

As you will see in future examples, "same for same" exchanging is not at all necessary, in either quality or quantity. All that is necessary is that each party is satisfied with the arrangements.

We then exchanged photos of homes and people by snail-mail, and eventually spoke on the phone several times. Those pre-computer



Tahoe skimobile in 1996

days were difficult for exchangers, because questions, answers, photographs, and general communication sometimes crossed in the mail. Now, with e-mail, and photos attached to the e-mail, everything is much simpler - or it will be when everyone is computer capable.

On our first exchange, Jean and I flew into Lehu Airport, and our hosts met us for about five minutes before they had to rush for their plane. That five minutes over the years has extended to total perhaps 25 minutes that we have actually seen our Kauai hosts. We have now spent many months in their home. Our hosts have only spent a month in one of our homes. My wife and I would barely recognize our frequent hosts if one of them stepped on our toes! We correspond now almost exclusively by e-mail. We are absolutely familiar with each other not because we have physically spent time together but because we have read the books in each others library, driven each others cars, tended each others pets, seen the contents of each others closets, and met each others neighbors.

When we return home from an exchange, our home is clean, our pets are well fed and serene, and our plants are watered. We hope that the people we exchange with are as happy with our care of their home as we are happy with their care.

We have made other exchanges, and have still more planned for next year. Jean and I ski. We advertise our home primarily for ski exchanges because I am still in business as a Real Estate Broker. I have retired from teaching graduate level computer science at National University where I was Core Adjunct Professor of Computer Science because that teaching was constraining my exchanging.

This means that when the snow falls heavy in the Rockies, we ski. It happens that the winter months are the slow real estate sales months also. In our on-line listing we have restricted both our time to the winter months and our sites to ski destinations in the Rockies, so we do not get too many suggestions for general exchanges. We had two weeks of exchange to Lake Tahoe for a great ski trip in 1996, and we have had a great three week exchange to Whistler, British Columbia in 1998.

Most of the time in our Kauai exchange history, it has not been an exchange at all.

Our relationship is such that they have invited us to stay at their home for a three-month period while they traveled to China. Each year our Kauai hosts travel for several months, and they do this several times a year – when they are gone from their home, we are there to keep the home occupied! And all of this after meeting for less than twenty five minutes over the years.

Jean and I change whatever plans we have in order to accommodate the schedule of our hosts. They know they can count on us.

Reliability is a strong factor in a continuing relationship. Our Kauai hosts have had exchanges with other families over the years, but several times they have had a family cancel on short notice. When that happened, they contacted us and we filled in instantly. Consequently, they no longer do many exchanges – they just e-mail us and we drop everything and go – often for months at a time.

We read of one family in Mexico who rarely came home from exchanges. They just left their villa with maid and gardener in charge while they went from home to home in Europe and the United States. Many people only exchange once, to spend a week or so in a University town to attend their children's graduation, while others are less restrictive as to time or place. There is every combination available, and we have been offered a weekend in a San Francisco apartment, three months in Sun Valley Idaho for a lifetime of ski adventure, and there are many offers of a year (or more) exchange available on the web.

Time and place are up to you and some agreeable party. We have seen houseboats for exchange in Seattle and in the Bahamas; castles and apartments, villas and cold-water flats. The world is yours if you have the inclination.

Are there potential problems?

Certainly.

In our own experience, plans have changed at the last minute and exchanges have had to be called off. Illness has caused dates of an exchange to be changed. On our very first exchange to Kauai, Hurricane Iwa struck just two weeks before our scheduled arrival. We asked the hosts if they needed to reschedule, but they said they were not much bothered by the winds and rain. We could reschedule if we wished because there was major damage on the island, but we elected to go anyway. We will let nothing get in the way of our obligation to the party with whom we have made an arrangement.

At the time, I was the CEO of a TV station in Los Angeles, and I needed a vacation, so we went on schedule - but it was an experience. Electricity was up, but there was no TV, so there was no watching the Super Bowl, and even the radio was not working on the island. We had to get the news by waiting until the sun set so we could get radio broadcasts from the island of Oahu. Great seashore restaurants were only a slab with a few pipes remaining. Low-lying condos looked like drive-through car washes. Roads were covered with sand dunes. Still, it was a great experience and we longed to return under better circumstances. We have determined never to sweat the small things – including hurricane damage.

We have heard stories of the host's entire frozen meat stash being eaten from the freezer, vases broken, higher than normal utility bills, a chipped dish. The main problem we have heard about is that there are different standards of cleanliness. The problems we have experienced are too minor to mention.

Very minor indeed.

Alternatives

Are there low cost alternatives to exchanging? Certainly. Elderhostel has a program for seniors that finds homes into which seniors may find "hospitality" with a family. Elderhostel is a fine organization with a long history of educational programs, and some of those educational programs include "cultural exchanges" where you may live in a home with family. This particular program of hospitality is called "homestays" and in the most recent catalog are available in Mexico, Australia, and Switzerland. Elderhostel information is available at 75 Federal Street, Boston, MA 02110.

Alert!

First, make absolutely certain that you have the right temperament to exchange!

If you react to problems with any attitude other than dispassionately solving them, you may find exchanging beyond your emotional capability. If your possessions are more important than your freedom, you may have problems leaving them in the hands of a stranger. If you are a germ-free clean freak, you might find the other party's cleanliness habits beyond your ability to cope.

We have not run into any problems at all, but there is anecdotal evidence that it can happen. With luck, it won't happen to you, and the people with whom you exchange will be as happy with the exchange as you are. That is our experience, but we realize that as we venture further and further into this activity we increase our odds of finding a problem.

It would have be a HUGE problem to offset the value we have accumulated.

Setting Goals

Examine your goals in detail, and devise a “Best Case Scenario” for fulfilling those goals. Then draw a circle around that goal to determine what is still an acceptable alternative. If your goal is Atlanta, would Chattanooga, an hour away, satisfy your needs? If you want to see San Francisco, could you be satisfied with an exchange in nearby San Jose? Must the exchange be for two weeks or would 10 days - or 21, be satisfactory? You are leaving your brand new Lexus, but can you live with driving a stick-shift sports car? Are you leaving pets that need to be cared for, and do you have alternate plans if the incoming guests don't like pets or wish to use your home as a base camp for traveling and can't take care of the pets?

You will be living in a home, with all the care considerations that entails. The advantages to exchangers goes far beyond the money saved: Living among the “natives”, shopping in the local stores, learning the customs. Perhaps even learning the language. If the language and customs of the area do not appeal to you, you are better off in a mega-hotel where you will be insulated from the reality of the area.

Getting an Exchange Started

First, try to arrange an exchange instantly without paying a dime. This will be particularly easy if you have an oceanfront home in La Jolla, Honolulu, or the French Rivera. The rest of us have to make a significant effort, but anyone, anyplace can exchange. Every year there are many class reunions at Boise State University – so people in Boise can arrange exchanges almost as easy as can anywhere else.

Sign on the Internet to www.iHEN.com and search for a potential exchange in the geographic area in which you have a primary interest. E-mail everyone who MIGHT be a potential exchange with what you have and when and how long you want, and wait a few days for a reply. If this works, smile, because it is not always going to be that easy!

You are likely to fail at your first attempt, and you must continue to check other people on-line and in printed form AND list your home for others to examine and make you an offer. If exchanging homes was easy, everyone would do it and no one would need this booklet!

Remember, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Even if a home you find looks just perfect, except they state they are looking for an exchange to France, it does not necessarily mean they will not consider an exchange to where you live. Certainly, it would be better if they stated a preference for your community, or said they were “open” to offers anywhere, but if you see a home that meets your needs - make an offer. All they can say is “no”, which puts you no worse off than when you started.

Further, “No” just means “No, for now”. It does not preclude an exchange next month, or next year, or five years from today. You need to keep track of all your correspondence so you can remember to whom you proposed what, so you can remember what, exactly, they said “No” to, and why. Persistence pays.

Offering Your Home

There are many alternative means of exchanging. You can offer your home through affinity groups, printed catalogs, directly through a newspaper ad, or on the Net. Or, you can do all of the above. It is always nice to have several alternative offers from which you can choose.

There are competing newspapers, competing paper catalogs, and competing sites on the WWW. Offering in each medium has its advantages, and disadvantages.

Let's examine them:

Affinity Organizations

If you are a member of a Service Club, like Rotary or Kiwanis, or some other organization with national or international reach, you have a good opportunity to exchange with someone with whom you have something in common. Simply write a letter to the service club you are affiliated with in a place you are interested, and ask them to read your letter to the organization. This is the easiest and cheapest method of exchange, and gives you the greatest sense of security about your possessions.

Community Newspaper

If immediacy is more important than money, placing a display ad in a community newspaper will likely bring quick results. Community newspapers are read by a varied audience, including people who might never consider exchanging because they simply never thought of it, or no one had made it easy for them by making them an offer.

This a particularly effective means of exchanging into a small community. It is also useful in finding an exchange in a particular part of a city. If you are fond of a small section of a city, find a community newspaper that serves that local section. There are many small community newspapers, usually published weekly or even monthly, that are inexpensive to advertise and much more targeted than metropolitan newspapers.

My wife and I often travel to the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. There would be no other way to effect an exchange to that tiny community without the use of a community newspaper.

Printed Catalog

Although this method is arcane and becoming more so each day, not everyone is on the WWW, and that may be particularly true of retired people - who may be your best bet for an exchange. Many countries are lagging the United States in getting their population on the Internet.

For those who are not yet into the technology, printed catalogs are a practical and cheap method of communications. Thousands of people worldwide have their homes in these catalogs. In the beginning, you can subscribe to one of the several listed at the end of the book and see if there is anyone whose home you might want to do an exchange. That will cost you less than placing your home in the publication. To generate more activity, you can place a listing of your home and perhaps someone who is simply browsing the publication will respond to your offered home.

Some of these catalogs are universal, some are exclusive to special properties. One of the best is the Vacation Exchange Club. (Karl & Debbie Costabel, P. O. Box 650, Key West, FL, 33041.) Their phone number is (800) 638-3841.

At first glance, these catalogs are intimidating, because they are in code and abbreviations. And, they have small black and white photos. This is necessary because there is a limit to space in printed publications. This is not true on the Web, but if you are limited to printed format because you don't yet use the Internet, you will get accustomed to deciphering the abbreviations.



You can go to www.homelink.org Website, and there you can register for the paper catalogs published for their 16,000 members, worldwide. They have some information on-line, but withhold the name and address so that you must be a member to actually contact anyone. They contend that is for the security of their members, but I suspect it is a business decision. Still, their size alone makes it a good reason to join, particularly if you are looking for an international exchange.

The Internet

The present and the future belong to the World Wide Web. Most educated people worldwide have access to the Internet, and they are the ones you most wish to address for an exchange.

Placing your home on the Web is cheaper, faster, can accommodate color photographs, and will generate a rapid exchange of correspondence by e-mail - certainly preferable to waiting a week for a reply to proposals and the making of final arrangements. Nevertheless, not everyone is yet on the Web. If you are not, this would be a good reason to venture forward into technology. (This gives me a chance to shamelessly plug my book on purchasing a new computer! It is available on-line, free, at www.allenhemphill.com.)

There are several excellent sites on the Web, but International Home Exchange Network (www.ihen.com) is the best in my opinion and is the one I have personally used for several years with excellent results. You can view its contents for free and make an exchange with anyone on the service without paying a cent, but it will cost you a modest amount to place a listing for your home. (IHEN can also be reached at P. O. Box 915253, Longwood, FL, 32791. (407)-862-7211.) While you must subscribe to the printed catalogs, the Website is free, and even the listing is less than just viewing the printed copy. Everything is better on the Web.

Other Websites may not permit you to write directly to the people advertising a home unless you send e-mail to the Webmaster and pay to join the site! This is unacceptable to my way of thinking, and so I just stay with those who charge nothing for browsing. These are so-called "open sites." I have no financial arrangement with anyone, and I pay full price for my listing on the International Home Exchange Network (www.ihen.com), because I think they are the best. It has been an excellent investment.

Another interesting site that permits searching and communication without charge is www.homeexchange.com. Their site looks good also, and I have used the opportunity today to propose three exchanges on their site. (No wasted time, here. I had my first rejection within hours. Oh, well!)



On each of these two Websites, there is a search capability. If there is a specific activity you seek, rather than a specific geographic destination, you should certainly use the search engine. In my case, I use the keyword “ski”. In a few seconds, the search engine gives me 20 or 30 homes and locations. I then do a quick analysis: If the location is Maui, I know it is not a ski destination but rather someone seeking a ski destination. I mentally eliminate all those sites, and the ones on the East Coast and in Europe, leaving me with, perhaps 10 potential ski exchange listings.

I write the same e-mail proposal to all potential sites and await the return e-mail. On average, I will get 6 replies - four rejections, one “I am interested. Let’s keep in communication” and one “Sounds good to me. What dates are you interested in?”

The chances of either of these positive replies actually working out, either because I flake out or they do, is about 50/50. It is like dating - you have to kiss a lot of frogs to find a Prince, but if you find one Prince, it is really worth the effort. One of the sites to whom I just wrote a request has a notation on their site saying they had participated in more than 40 exchanges!

There is even a site for people who are “environmentally friendly” to exchange homes. Called the Stayfree Holiday Club (www.green-theme.zb.net), the exchange program encourages those who are “green” to exchange with others who share the same philosophy.

The Internet is so huge, and growing so fast, that there is no way to keep this information current. You need to use a search engine and try to find all the relevant sites. I prefer to use the Google search engine (www.google.com) or the Alta Vista search engine for multi-word searches. (www.altavista.digital.com) Make certain that you place the words “home exchange” in quotations to limit the search, otherwise you will get every site that has the word “home” AND every site that has “exchange” in it. That would be a good way to test the claim that there are more than 900 million Websites!

Even with search limitations, you should get more than 6,000 “hits,” and that will keep you busy for some time. Most of those are not clubs but individual Websites from people who place their homes directly on the web. I try to avoid individual homes in favor of organized websites because organized websites are listed by geographic location – although future “peer-to-peer” Internet software will provide opportunities to deal directly.

Just to shortcut the search, let me give you a few sites that might help. The search engines pick up each listing as a “site” if those listings are done in a certain “paragraph” format. If you will look at the address at

the bottom of the listing, you will notice that all of them refer to just a very few organized sites:

www.ihen.com
www.homeexchange.com
www.ihxc.com
www.vacation-homes.com
www.seniorshomeexchange.com
www.intervac.com
www.webhomeexchange.com

There are others, but most are restricted to Austria, or Israel, or particular interests like environmental or handicapped or sexual orientation.

Additionally, there are private homes for exchange that are listed on private Websites. In addition to my home on the International Home Exchange Network (IHEN), I reference my willingness to exchange and give details about my home - as well as printing this entire document - on my personal Website, www.allenhemphill.com. I believe that my best chance for an exchange will come through IHEN, but from those inquiries I can reference my Website for more information.

It is possible for someone using a broad search engine to find my Website without looking in IHEN, but more likely IHEN will bring the best results because IHEN will be high on the search list of some 7,000 sites while my personal site will likely be near the bottom.

Advanced Searching

When you first go to a site like www.ihen.com, you should place your home on the site so that you can receive proposals from the other geographic areas in which you are interested. If you stop there you are missing a bet, because home exchanging is not a good passive sport. You need to take some active steps by searching all the places you wish to visit to see if there might be people already on the system interested in your neighborhood.

For example, if you live in San Diego area, as I do, go to the search area in IHEN and place “San Diego” in quotes. You will get many “hits” and most will be in the San Diego area – but some will be in France, and England, or Australia – and those will be the people looking to exchange to San Diego. (I just did it a few seconds ago to test the system)

Then expand your search to “Southern California” (again in quotes so that both words are included in the search), and you will find many more people who are interested in exchanging for your home. Then try California, and “West Coast”. Not everyone will use San Diego as a specific destination in their preferred destinations, so use each of the alternative terms they may have used.

Finally search on “open” for the hundreds upon hundreds of listings that are simply “open” to suggestions. They may be waiting for your proposal! Make them an offer.

Cementing the Relationship

As a courtesy, make certain that you reply to everyone who replies to you. Even a “No thank you” is much better than silence.

Finally, there are other courtesies. Leave fresh flowers, candy, and fresh fruit (or all three) for your guest at

your home, and leave fresh flowers, candy, and fresh fruit at the home you are staying in for the homeowners when they return. Consider having a cleaning service make the home shine!

Fresh flowers are a nice touch that many of us will not buy for ourselves. We have also left gift certificates to bookstores and to fine restaurants when we leave. We have a cleaning service often, and as we leave, just to make certain the hosts are happy. It is good marketing, and you are trying to set the stage for repeat exchanges.

A month in Kauai in similar accommodations to what we regularly enjoy could easily cost many thousands of dollars. Flowers and gift certificates are just a courtesy, not a payment.

Preparing to List Your Home

Before you decide to list, make a short paragraph of the advantages and disadvantages of your home. (Obviously, there are not many disadvantages or you would not live there!) Still, there are things about your home that, while pleasing to you are disadvantages to others. Pets are an example. We have two spoiled cats, and there are people who either hate cats or are allergic to them. For a decade, one of our cars was a “Full Race Family Car”, a stick shift Ford Taurus SHO. Some people do not like stick-shift cars.

Be realistic, not everyone shares your style and some may even consider it unsatisfactory for an exchange. You can have pets and a stick-shift car, but tell everyone up front if you have something that might be a problem. Anything that is not the “norm” could be a problem, and most of us participate in individual things that do not fit the “norm.” We express our individuality in many different ways, and where we deviate from what is usual, we should alert our potential exchange partners.

Exchangers are more than willing to be flexible, but they usually don’t like surprises where warnings could have eased the situation.

Of course, you want to “sell” your home as the perfect destination, but be careful not to oversell it, lest your guests become disenchanted and become careless in their behavior, or worse, won’t exchange with you again. You want the continued because you have a familiarity with their neighborhood, home, pets, and car. It is easier to exchange with someone you know than it is to develop a new relationship with a new exchange partner.



The ExchangeThe Exchange

You have made all the arrangements with the other family. You have confirmed your plane reservations, and made arrangements to get a vacation from work. You have told your friendly neighbors that you are exchanging, and asked them to greet your guests and perhaps even take them to dinner. Now what? Write a Residence and Area Guide

How are the people who are staying in your home going to know

what day the garbage is picked up, whom to call if the plumbing breaks, what Vet takes care of your cat, and where to take the car if the engine begins to miss? You are going to tell them. You must write a brief but detailed description about how to give the dog his heart pill, what to do when the sprinklers refuse to operate as scheduled, and how your home theatre works.

One guest in my home said that the home theatre was so complicated that it was unusable. In the future, I will color code the numerous buttons with the color dots you can buy at a stationery store and write a “cook book” on exactly what color and numbered button to push.

You will be exchanging with people of varying skills, knowledge, and from different cultures, many of whom know things you don’t know but also do not know what you have designed for your convenience. My stereo and home theatres are second nature to me, but a complete mystery to almost everyone else. It would take a Doctoral Thesis to explain the system, but most guests only want to know the basics.

We have a particularly powerful microwave. If a guest follows the instructions on the food label, they will incinerate the food, so they must be warned in writing and with a sign on the microwave.

What is the mystery in your home?

Is a neighbor going to pick up your mail for you or is your guest going to be requested to attend to the mail?

It would be nice to tell your guests where your favorite restaurants are located, and perhaps include a copy of the menus. I include turn-by-turn driving instructions from www.mapquest.com. This site can give instructions from any address to any other address in the world, and is invaluable in providing detail assistance to someone in a strange community.

Will you be meeting guests at the airport, or have a neighbor do it? Will you mail them a key to the car and leave your car at the airport for them? It would be very nice to have a relative or a neighbor meet the guests at the airport and take them to your home. The guests are probably unfamiliar with the airport, your car, the way to your neighborhood, and your house. They will appreciate being met at the airport by a friendly face who can answer a lot of questions. I like to have my son meet guests because there is hardly a question he cannot answer in detail.

You should collect the local Chamber of Commerce information about the area, with maps, and either leave them on the kitchen counter or send them to the guests home a couple of weeks before the exchange is consummated.

In effect, tell them what you would like to know if you were a “Stranger in a Strange Land”. With luck, they will have done the same for you. I have attached a checklist for you to copy at the end of the book.

FAQ (Internet talk for Frequently Asked Questions)FAQ (Internet talk for Frequently Asked Questions)

Q. What about my valuables?

A. If you have a house safe, or a safety deposit box at the bank, use them. If you have small but valuable items you are concerned about, take a closet and have a solid core door installed with a substantial dead bolt lock. These precautions will make you sleep better, but we have found them unnecessary. Still, a good night’s sleep is a worthy goal.

Q. I have never met these people. How can I satisfy myself that they are not going to trash my home?

A. Have a family member meet your guests at the airport or when they arrive, and offer to explain the workings of the home. Someone representing you can “size-up” the guests and allay your fears. Have someone drop in, unannounced, and ask them to dinner. It will alert the guests that people are likely to “drop by.” Once you have established a working relationship with your guests, future exchanges can be made with increasing confidence and ease.

Q. Can I ask for references?

A. Certainly, and references from another successful exchange are particularly useful. References from friends are useless.

Q. Can I set specific restrictions, such as “No Smoking and No Pets, or “No Small Children”?”

A. You not only can, you should - and if you will notice among the existing properties listed, most people do so. Smoking, children and pet restrictions are reasonable and expected, but adding to that might get so restrictive that it becomes counterproductive. Come to think of it, I might include a restriction on attorneys, also. They are not a “protected class” under the law, and they are certainly not becoming extinct. I would also consider not exchanging with politicians, just on the general notion that most of them are professional liars..

Q. Does my car insurance cover my “guests”?

A. Probably. Mine does, but you must check with your carrier. Be warned: If you have a leased car, the terms of your lease may forbid you or your guests to take the car into Mexico or Canada! Check on this.

Q. Is it normal for my guests to invite others to stay with them for some or all of the time.

A. Yes, that is normal, but as a courtesy it should be cleared with the homeowner in advance. People tend to share their good fortune, and so long as your home can reasonably accommodate everyone, it should not be a problem. Nice people tend to have nice friends.

Q. How are utility bills and phone bills handled?

A. The norm is that each homeowner pays their respective utility bill, but each guest is responsible for their long distance phone bills. An informal but written agreement beforehand is useful, and anything that is agreed upon by both parties, even if unusual, will work well. If you have electric heat, or it costs a fortune to heat your swimming pool in the winter, it might be wise to suggest that the guest be particularly careful of running up high utility bills. Usually, everything works out about even, but if you have an isolated situation outside the norm you might want to reach a sharing accommodation. Nothing is ever “equal”, so I tend to not let it worry me. It is in the nature of things that whatever goes around, comes around and I refuse to let a few dollars ruin my day, or even an hour. So long as it is “not my wife or not my life” I can usually smile.

Q. How far in advance of a desired time period must we start looking?

A. I would concentrate my efforts three months early. It is possible to begin earlier, but life is unpredictable, and arrangements made a year in advance are subject to too many unexpected complications at both ends of the exchange. In our ski exchange case, it is hard to market warm San

Diego weather to people with a home or condo until they have experienced the first snow storm - but there is a lot of ski exchanging going on, so we dare not wait too long into the season. It is a delicate balance. Your circumstances will dictate the answer.

Q. My home is modest. Can I get an exchange?

The primary concern for exchangers is location, not accommodations. San Diego is an easy sell, Des Moines is not. Obviously, a home in Rancho Santa Fe or overlooking the ocean in La Jolla will attract lots of interest but usually only from others with luxury homes in the Catskills. Most people have modest homes. You are selling location. My home in San Diego is an easy sell. The same is true in Bermuda, and Hawaii, and London, Paris, and the French Riviera. Just be glad you do not live in Big Foot, Texas! That would be a harder, but not impossible trade location. There is a lot of cowboy lore interest in Germany.

Q. I have children. Can I find an exchange.

A. Certainly. Not everyone who exchanges is retired and has a home filled with breakables. Many retired people have grandchildren, and have made their home childproof, and many other exchangers have children themselves.

Q. I smoke. Can I find an exchange?

A. The answer is yes, but it is easier if you have not smoked in your home and will agree not to smoke in your host's home. If your home reeks of smoke you probably do not even smell it, but it will be hard to exchange with a nonsmoker - and that describes most exchangers.

Exchangers from other cultures where smoking is still an acceptable social activity may not be so difficult to exchange with, but in America where the activity is a distinct taboo and is diminishing rapidly, smokers are marginalized in most activities and that includes home exchanging.

Checklist Before Proposing an Exchange

- *Does my life-style, health, and family situation lend itself to an exchange if one is offered?*
- *Does my temperament permit me to remain flexible in schedule and accepting of last minute glitches?*
- *Is my home an easy care home, or can I arrange for outside help to make it easy care to my guests?*
- *Check the Internet or printed catalogs for people at your destination who want to exchange to your area. Include nearby communities within acceptable driving time.*
- *Write, call, or e-mail everyone who even slightly resembles an acceptable exchange. If you get several positive replies, you can take the best one.*
- *If you cannot find an exchange that is acceptable, advertise your home on the Internet and/or in printed catalogs, and await a proposal. Keep making proposals to those new opportunities that appear on the Net or in subsequent printed catalogs. Keep track, but make proposals even to those who have previously said "No."*

Arranging an Exchange

- Subscribe to Vacation Exchange Club, or go on-line and see if someone is looking for a place like yours, or if someone has a place in a geographic location that interests you.
- E-mail, call, or snail-mail every conceivable place that you might possibly consider a potential for exchange.
- Place your home on several Internet sites, and/or in the Vacation Exchange Club. Make your listing as broad as you possibly can, to attract as many proposals as possible.
- Talk directly with your potential exchangers when you are ready to make a final agreement. Agree to exchange photos, and references if necessary before a final agreement. If you have an ill mother whose needs may require you to cancel, alert the other exchange party early in the negotiation.

Making the Exchange Preparations

- Examine your home with a guest's eye:
- Is my stereo, TV, alarm system sufficiently standard that a visitor from another culture use it, or should I find and attach the operating instructions or special written instructions.
- Are my pets and houseplants arranged for with the guests, or must I make special arrangements? (Put your plants in one location where they can get watered automatically by a sprinkler, then move them back to their original place when you return. Plants are too expensive to be lost due to the guest not knowing how you treat your plants.)
- Have I written a booklet with instructions on what tradesmen to call in case of emergency, what shops I use, and my favorite restaurants? I even print out turn-by-turn instructions for driving to all my recommendations from the MapQuest site on the Internet. They are very accurate, and very good for people who do not know an area.
- Have I checked my insurance to make certain that my homeowner's policy and my automobile insurance are valid with a nonpaying guest?
- Have I made arrangements with my incoming guest as to how the pets, mail, houseplants, etc. will be handled?

Making the Exchange

- Regardless of your personal cleanliness standards, raise them a notch or two to keep the host home and car spotless.
- Keep your word in all the agreements you and the host have made. If necessary, go the extra mile.
- Make an effort to accommodate any plans your host may have made with their neighbors. If their neighbor invites you to dinner, try to accommodate that invitation – your hosts may be looking for the neighbors opinions of the people with whom they have exchanged. Your hosts may be nervous.
- If your host and you are both on-line, communicate with your host as often as possible. As I write this booklet, I have just received and returned an e-mail message from my host who wrote from a cyber cafe, in Krakow. Mostly, we discussed her kitten, but that is important to her. I often send her digital pictures of

her pets, and that makes her feel comfortable.

- When you leave, provide fresh flowers or candy or a gift certificate to Borders or Barnes and Noble - or all of the above if you have the inclination. Leave them a note describing any inadvertent damage you may have done, or any long-distance calls you may have put on their bill - and ask for an opportunity to pay all bills for which you are specifically responsible..
- Communicate with your host immediately upon your return home to thank them. Ask your host to keep you in mind if they should ever want another exchange into your geographic area.

Conclusion

House exchanging is a LOT OF FUN! It is fun making the proposals to see who might say “yes”. Your hopes go up, and down.

Will it actually happen?

I don't know, but the hard part is over.

Home exchanging is a much better deal than Timeshares! I remember going to only one Timeshare presentation, and I was impressed. For only \$15,000 I could get a week each year at this really fine resort, and I could trade the week for another destination in Cancun, or Kauai, or .

Then I remembered that I could do the same thing for NOTHING. I would not be limited to a week, or two weeks. I would have a free car available, perhaps two cars. I would not have to pay a monthly fee.

So I told the salesman, who was very good, what I could do with home exchanging, and asked him to match the price: ZERO!

We did not part on good terms, and I have a mental picture of the salesman trying to explain to his manager how he could not overcome my objection at the next sales meeting. I wonder if they ever devised a strategy to deal with people who exchange homes all around the world - free.

Cheap is good. Free is best, so I thought I would share it with you. I have placed a “printer friendly” copy of this on my website. The site is www.allenhemphill.com. The printer friendly version is in Adobe Acrobat.

If you have any questions, please e-mail them to me at allen@allenhemphill.com.



“Indeed the man is a walking Swiss Army knife:”

San Diego Union, 1992

This booklet was written by Allen Polk Hemphill. Copyrighted, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 by Allen Hemphill, Broker-Associate, **Dolphin** Realty. Other available booklets include:

- The Internet
- Living in **Hidden Meadows**
- Listing a home in **Hidden Meadows**
- Buying a Home in **Hidden Meadows**
- Computer Buying Guide for Small Office/Home Office

Allen has been a Real Estate Broker for more than 20 years. He was appointed as an Expert Witness on the Subject of Real Estate Values before the Superior Court of the State of California in 1979.

Allen is a graduate of the U. S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. After a career in the Navy, serving primarily in Submarines, he managed a real estate office in the Rancho Bernardo area; opened an Apple Computer dealership; became the CEO of a TV station in Los Angeles and the Chairman of a broadcast system – then retired to become a Professor of Computer Science at a local university for 15 years. Allen was honored by inclusion in the Who’s Who in the World publication by Macmillan’s Who’s Who in America Corporation for a decade.

This booklet and some of the more than 1,000 political columns he has published – are available free on his website:

www.allenhemphill.com