

Swap, travel, and save

Home-exchange websites' business booms as vacationers look for a way to dodge hotel costs

By Katie Johnston Chase*, Globe Staff | August 5, 2009

Dan Gadish and Shai Nathanson have souvenirs from their travels all over their four-story South End town house: a mask from Bali in the guest room, figurines from Peru on top of the piano, a Moroccan rug in the front hallway.

Mixed with those worldly possessions are signs: "Damper is closed" on the fireplace, "This is heat" on a thermostat, "Please do not remove towel (or else shower door will bang into sink)" stapled to a towel and translated into French.

As home-swap veterans, the retired couple keeps these notes up for the steady stream of strangers who stay in the house while they're staying in theirs. Gadish, 57, and Nathanson, 62, have exchanged homes with people almost 100 times in a dozen years.

As the economy scrapes bottom and travelers look for ways to take affordable trips, vacationers are switching houses with other people - and reducing their lodging costs to nothing.

The option can also cut other travel costs: People often exchange things like cars and museum passes as part of the home swap.

Swapping is becoming so popular that home-exchange services across the country are seeing increased numbers of people signing up to have their properties listed online, while many hotels have had double-digit declines in revenue recently.

Susan Jacobs of Swampscott is finding house swapping to be an economical way to vacation. She did her second home swap through the classifieds website Craigslist in October, for a weekend trip to Manhattan - and saving money was definitely on her mind. She traded her four-bedroom home for an apartment on East 80th Street that had room for her partner, her two children, and her mother-in-law.

"I figured it would cost me \$500 to stay in New York for two or three nights," said Jacobs, 51, who recently took a pay cut at her job at the Jewish Journal in Salem.

Even with the cost savings, some people shudder at the thought of having strangers stay in their home. The inevitable questions: Will they break anything? Will they take anything? South End residents Nathanson and Gadish say they have had a single broken \$1.99 wine glass in their 100 exchanges - which was immediately replaced with a 16-piece set of wine glasses by the woman who broke it.

Theft isn't a problem either, said George Stergios, a 49-year-old business consultant who regularly swaps his apartment with soaring ceilings near Boston Medical Center. "I have nothing to steal," he said. "Nothing that anybody from Barcelona is going to take back with them."

Stergios has even found an unexpected benefit of swapping homes - getting a glimpse into someone else's life. He's exchanged a number of times with a woman from Washington, D.C., who comes to Boston every fall while Stergios goes to visit a friend, and he says he knows her intimately although the two have never met. He's even created an imaginary life for her in his mind, based on the books about Judaism he's seen on her shelves and the "I only sleep with Republicans" T-shirt his girlfriend found in her closet.

Staying in someone's home also allows travelers to immerse themselves in the area's culture.

Peter and Cindy Olotka, who live on a one-acre wooded lot in Centerville on Cape Cod, once swapped their home for a stay in Holland, and they used their hosts' bicycles to pedal to the grocery store every day.

"You live like a local," said Raymond Elman, who recommended to a London couple who stayed in his Truro home that they float down the Pamet River to the bay in Truro - something most tourists wouldn't know about. Indeed, swappers often have the same responsibilities as they would in their own home. They wind up watering plants, feeding cats, and sometimes even saving the homeowners' car from being towed. Karen Dahlman and her husband, who live in Manhattan, did just that while staying at Gadish and Nathanson's South End home.

The couples swapped about eight times while Dahlman's son attended Brandeis University - and a few times since then - which allowed Dahlman to cook big meals for their son and his friends. She always tried to save the leftovers for Gadish and Nathanson to eat when they returned from a weekend at their Upper West Side apartment.

"We came to feel," Dahlman said, "that it was our home away from home."

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*excerpt from article