

# Home swap a cheaper way to travel, West Michigan families discover

By The Grand Rapids Press\*

How do you manage a 22-day vacation covering four international locations, including London and the Netherlands, without paying a penny for lodging?

The answer is house swapping, and West Michigan's Jeff and Tracy Jansma have perfected the art they have been practicing for about six years, often with their four children.

The Jansmas, who lived in Europe for three years when he was head of Herman Miller Inc.'s international finance group, have swapped homes in Europe, Thailand and China.

"We had friends here in Holland, and we were going to Thailand for a trade. They came to our home in England and the trade was when we moved back to the U.S. we got to use their cottage on Beaver Island about three years later."

The trades make extended family travel possible, but they're about more than the money.

One of the major lures of working internationally was the opportunity to introduce the Jansma children, now 11, 12, 14 and 16, to life outside of West Michigan.

"House trades (provide) a much different (better) experience living as a part of a community vs. a tourist staying in a hotel," Jeff Jansma said. "You are able to experience a different way of life vs. just observe and snap photos." (Other cost savers: frequent flier miles and booking ground transportation way ahead.)

## Learn from them

Their experiences can guide those of us who have never left Fantasy Camp when it comes to the idea of swapping houses.

Linda Milanowski finally did last year when she and her family swapped homes with an English family. The Milanowskis headed to Europe, and a home in an English village six miles outside of Bath, while the English homeowners spent almost two weeks in their Holland, Mich., home. Milanowskis also had access to a London flat.

The Milanowskis also used the other family's car, and the two families also traded a cell phone so each could make local calls without additional costs and hassles.

The link was Jeff Jansma, proving Rule No. 1 of successful house swapping: It is all about whom you know ... and who knows you want to trade.

A co-worker of Milanowski's at Herman Miller, and former neighbor to the English couple who contacted him interested in a home swap, Jansma contacted Milanowski with the opportunity first.

Milanowski, who leads the materials group in research and development for Herman Miller, loves travel, from backpacking in Europe, China and the Greek Islands, to traveling to all-inclusives in Mexico and Jamaica with her husband.

They had decided it was time to expose their children, ages 14, 13 and 9, to life outside this country, but the terrible exchange rate put that out of reach -- until Jansma's house-swap inquiry.

### **Even more benefits**

The Milanowskis traded way more than houses. "They flew into Chicago, and we flew out of Chicago. We met them for lunch at their hotel, where we exchanged keys to each other's lives," Linda Milanowski said. "They drove our van back to Michigan and used our van and car while they were here, and we didn't have to pay for three weeks parking in Chicago."

### **Some tips**

When trading spaces, Jeff Jansma said they also:

Put together "welcome packages" with wine, local sweets and tips for things to do. "We discuss this beforehand with people we are trading with and they always reciprocate."

Agree to stock each other's fridge and offer advice on best places to shop for groceries and favorite restaurants.

Organize "experiences" for people staying in their home. Friends enjoy having people from another country over for dinner.

"Providing a good experience for the traders opens up future opportunities as they fly back with a positive experience -- allowing you to tap into their relationships for future trades," Jansma said.

And a side benefit: You clean and organize your house better, he said.

So, how can the rest of us swap space if we don't work down the hall from Jeff Jansma, and if we aren't wild about opening our private spaces to strangers online?

"My theory is you're always one phone call away from somebody who knows somebody," Jansma said.

"You step back and think, 'Who do I know?' The Netherlands house trade started at Butch's in Holland ... you gotta have it in your mind and tell the right people. Even if you've never been out of the U.S., you know somebody who has," he said.

"People who relocate or travel a lot find a network who are every bit as much of a community -- they just don't live in the same town," Milanowski said.

"It's a totally different model than many of us think of when we've lived in one place. Even if I never get to take kids out of the country again, they definitely took on a broader view.

"You can't show your kids everything, but show them big highlights and get their curiosity going."

For "more ideas on how to travel for free ... sort of" check out FoxNews's posting, which touches on house swapping, cross-country car delivery, international air couriers and voluntourism at [www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,530462,00.html](http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,530462,00.html).

E-mail Sue Schroder: [sschroder@grpress.com](mailto:sschroder@grpress.com)

\*Excerpt from *The Grand Rapids Press*