

## Home Exchange - Stay in Europe for Free!

*Laura Byrne Paquet, August 2009*

The idea of strangers prowling around our homes while we're not there spurred humankind to invent the lock, not to mention alarm systems and nanny cams. So for some of us, the idea of inviting people we've never met to live in our home while we're on vacation seems a bit unnatural, to say the least.

But for a growing number of savvy travelers, that very concept - known as "home exchanging" or "house swapping" - is not only natural, but an excellent way to enrich their holidays without breaking the bank.

In the most informal circumstances, friends or acquaintances just work out a swap between each other. But many swappers make their arrangements through a more formal home exchange organization.

The concept traces its roots back to the 1950s, when several organizations sprang up to help teachers and professors arrange economical summer vacations. Once other people learned of the concept, it spread beyond the education industry.

Now, as then, members pay an annual fee to advertise their wish to swap, promote their house to other members, and list the dates they'd like to travel and the places they'd like to go.

In the early days, organizations published yearly paper catalogues of available houses, which they mailed to each member. Due to the expense of long-distance calls, potential swappers usually contacted each other by postal mail to arrange an exchange, a long process that took patience and organizational skills. As a result, home swapping remained on the fringes of the travel industry for decades.

Then came the Internet.

The home swapping industry blossomed, with dozens of new web-based organizations emerging. And while it still doesn't have the reach of the hotel industry, house swapping is moving into the mainstream.