

Hotels Too Pricey? Try A Swap.

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When the concept of home-swapping was portrayed in 2006 by Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet in the movie "The Holiday," it seemed fairly ambitious: Cross continents and trade out a Los Angeles mansion for a cottage in the British countryside for a few weeks. Oh -- and fall in love with Jude Law and Jack Black in the end.

But with the recent economic troubles, and the second year of "staycation" as a buzzword, Washington area residents are turning to home swaps as an affordable way to get away for the week or weekend. So far, at least, Jude Law and Jack Black have not been part of the trades.

Greg Kearley, an architect in the District, started swapping his Adams Morgan condo this summer to save money on vacations. He has swapped his way into a four-bedroom house on a sprawling property in the Teton mountains and a 1,200-square-foot loft in the SoHo neighborhood of New York City. He vacated his home over Labor Day weekend (borrowing the home of friends who were away for the weekend) so a mother and daughter could swap into his two-bedroom condo. In return, he'll get dibs on using their home in Lake Tahoe, Calif., for three days.

"With the economy sort of in the tank, it just was a great way to travel with not having to pay for a place to stay, which is typically the most expensive part of the trip," said Kearley, a longtime traveler.

Some home-swappers do simultaneous exchanges, like the characters in "The Holiday," while others make delayed-swap arrangements like Kearley's. In addition to the informal "credits" he's built up for three nights in Lake Tahoe, he expects to spend five nights in the Paris home of a family that used his condo this summer.

Kearley said his Washington listing gets more requests than he can entertain. He thinks his location in Adams Morgan is a draw. And, while the District may not be as popular as, say, New York City, he said, Washington home swaps draw a mix of tourists from the United States and abroad.

New home-swappers usually have some apprehension about leaving their homes in the hands of total strangers for a week or longer, he said. But he likened it to the feeling someone gets before bungee jumping the first time.

When preparing a home for guests, put away valuables and breakables, he suggested, and ask a neighbor to deliver the keys to your swap partners and show them how to "use" your house. That should include an introduction to your quirky washing machine and any other idiosyncrasies about your place.

People should agree to a swap only if they feel comfortable with the other party. Many swappers offer up references from their previous arrangements, and some of the Web sites offer comments sections, similar to those on eBay.

Hugh Gusterson, a professor of cultural studies at George Mason University, has swapped his six-bedroom home in Bethesda for homes in Santa Fe, N.M., and Montreal.

Because he and his wife have small children, they find staying in homes far preferable to staying in hotels. In a hotel, Gusterson said, "when the lights go out for them, the lights go out for you, too."

The first time they swapped, Gusterson said, they were nervous about the potential consequences.

"You can imagine scenarios -- you're in their house, and in the meantime you have a moving truck coming up to your house," he said.

But he added that they do take precautions, such as disabling their long-distance phone service.

Gusterson's family probably wouldn't have gone to the jazz festival in Montreal or been able to travel to Santa Fe for three weeks without doing home swaps, he said. Their next goal? To swap with someone in Britain so his family can accompany him to a conference in Oxford next summer.

Kearley said he won't entirely abandon hotels for future travels, since it doesn't always work out to home-swap, but that he's come to enjoy it.

And he likes saving money by using his host's laundry and kitchen facilities.

"You can spend more money on things that you would normally not have a chance to," he said.