

Swapping homes helps people see faraway places

Heather Boerner, Special to The Chronicle

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When Kate Pavao and Aaron Lazenby moved into their three-bedroom condo in Bernal Heights two years ago, they knew they were making sacrifices. One of them was that there would be no long Hawaiian vacations anytime in the near future.

But then the couple found themselves vacationing in Oahu for three weeks with their 4-year-old daughter, Coco.

They didn't hit the lottery. No rich relative died and left them money. Instead, Pavao and Lazenby discovered what hundreds of Bay Area residents already know. To take your dream vacation, you don't have to pay an arm and a leg. You just have to be willing to share your home.

Thanks to the Internet, home exchange programs have proliferated over the past decade, offering Bay Area residents a way to leverage their biggest investment into dream vacations. And, because they live in one of the post popular places on Earth, they can easily swap their homes for the best locales. Potrero Hill for Paris anyone?

"It really speaks to the pragmatist in me," said Pavao, 33. "You don't have to leave your house empty, you don't have to pay for a cat-sitter. We're paying a lot of money for this place every month. It's silly for it not to be used."

A home abroad

Home exchange programs started in the 1950s as a way for teachers to travel on a shoestring during their summer vacations, said Ed Kushins, president and owner of HomeExchange.com, which has 20,000 listings around the world. But the Internet has changed the number and type of home exchangers.

"We still have quite a few teachers, but it's not just teachers," he said. "If you go randomly to any city in our database, you can find professionals, retired people, teachers, gay couples - pretty much every kind of person. If you're a retired couple and you want to exchange with a retired couple, it's very easy to do. If you're a young family, you can exchange with another family."

It's not just that the type of people who do exchanges has changed. Niche home exchange companies are popping up, too. New clubs seek to match home exchangers interested exclusively in golf or who want to swap motor homes or sailboats, said Leslie Nicodemus of Tiburon, a self-proclaimed "exchange diva" of

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KnowYourTrade.com. Know Your Trade is a kind of Yelp for home exchange clubs. It connects prospective home exchangers with clubs and encourages members to rate and review clubs.

It's hard to know how many Bay Area residents have done home exchanges, but it's clear that the Bay Area is a hotbed of activity. Kushins said about 400 of his listings come from the Bay Area. The directors of the U.S. chapter of another home exchange company, InterVac, are based in the Bay Area.

Another Bay Area couple run a home exchange directory and rating Web site as well as a trade group for home exchange companies, complete with ethics rules and mediation for groups that feel their clients have been poached by upstart clubs.

Why is the Bay Area so popular? Simple, said Nicodemus. San Francisco is a world city.

"New York City, San Francisco and Paris are the three huge, huge areas for home exchange," she estimated. "Wherever you want to go, you can get an exchange if you live in the Bay Area. That's how we got to Paris and Mexico. It wasn't because we were looking to go. It's because people approached us. We get 10 to 20 home exchangers a week writing to us."

Live like a local

With the Bay Area's emphasis on local culture, it should be no surprise that when San Franciscans travel, they don't always want a hotel or tourist trap. "Authentic" is the word Bay Area residents use most often when explaining the home exchange advantage.

Alec and Sharry Bash wanted to avoid the tourist herd. The Noe Valley couple had always stayed with far-flung family members or backpacked when they traveled. So when they retired six years ago, home exchange was an obvious choice.

"The ideal is if we can stay in a home, share hospitality and information about the vicinity, we have a head start on living there," said Alec Bash. "You also get to stay longer and appreciate on a finer scale what it's like to live there. You don't want to go to a concierge and ask what the tourists are doing. You want to see what the people who live there do."

In the exchanges, the pair have done in the past few years, they've stayed in a stone Victorian in Edinburgh, Scotland, in a Parisian flat across from the Luxembourg Gardens, at a farmhouse in southwestern France, in a penthouse in Sardinia and in a flat across from the film festival venue in Cannes, France.

They've also met every one of the families they've exchanged with. They've had dinner with their exchange partners' children and picked their exchangers up at the airport. It's the easiest form of cultural exchange, said Alec Bash.

And of course, the couple couldn't have had many of the experiences - or stayed as long - if they were to go the hotel-and-restaurant route. "I don't think we would choose to spend that much money on three weeks in Paris," said Sharry Bash. "In a nice hotel in a nice location? We wouldn't do that. We wouldn't feel comfortable doing it as much as we do exchanges now."

The odd exchange

The interesting thing about home exchange is that it is so personal.

"It's amazing that you just end up turning your house over," said Sharry Bash. "It's a very intimate experience."

But sometimes it gets a little too personal. While both Kushins and Nicodemus said no one has reported theft or serious crimes during exchanges, they do sometimes hear about houses left messy. Lazenby and Pavao, for instance, came home from Hawaii to discover their house left the way one might leave a hotel room: sheets on the floor and ready for the cleaner - them - to launder.

And then there are the stranger experiences that come from having such a personal connection with fellow home swappers. There was the time the Bashes arrived at a Barcelona, Spain, flat to discover a parrot they didn't know they'd be watching. There were the people who drove the couple's 20-year-old car to Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon during their swap. The Bashes knew they'd be swapping cars, but they didn't realize they'd have to set limits on mileage.

Then there was the couple that approached the Bashes about exchanging not just their home but their child. The parents wanted to travel without their 13-year-old. Would the Bashes like to stay with him and help him practice his English? They declined.

"Without meeting us, they offered to exchange their son," Sharry Bash deadpanned. "We thought that perhaps they were not the most responsible."

Exchange etiquette

And then there are the surprises for first-time exchangers like Lazenby and Pavao. They didn't know, for instance, that they should leave out a list of places for their exchange partner to visit, along with a map and other directions.

They didn't realize how thorough they needed to be about their home's idiosyncrasies. And they probably won't again force the issue of leaving their cats at the house for their exchange partner to watch.

"You have to be honest about anything that could be a problem with your house or you'll hear about it on your vacation," said Pavao.

"We live in a condo and city people will know that you'll hear the neighbor sometimes. But we should have said that we share walls. I'd also say that if there are problems, get on the phone. Don't do it over e-mail. (Our home exchange partner) had some problem where a cleaning service way overcharged her and she sent us a scathing e-mail. But as soon as we talked it was no big deal."

Still, Pavao and Lazenby are already fantasizing about their next exchange. "Aaron's totally intrigued with going to Iceland," said Pavao, laughing. "We found an Icelandic family that comes to America every other year. It's a situation where you build up a long-lasting connection with someone else. You have to enter it with

an open heart."

On the web

Interested in home exchange? Check out these popular sites:

Know Your Trade www.knowyourtrade.com

Home Exchange

www.homeexchange.com

InterVac

www.intervac.com

International Home

Exchange Network

www.ihen.com

Seniors Home Exchange www.seniorshomeexchange.com

Digsville Home Exchange Club www.digsville.com

E-mail Heather Boerner at heather@heatherboerner.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/03/23/REASVM2PC.DTL>

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