



Home Away From Home: San Diegans Discover the Secrets (and Savings!) of Home-Exchange Vacations

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

In pondering what new adventures the New Year will bring, why not consider doing a home exchange? San Diegans have an ace in their pockets when it comes to this increasingly popular way to make themselves at home away from home.

With its gorgeous weather, myriad attractions and prime location, San Diego draws visitors from around the world year-round. That fact lets you spin the globe and contemplate; where would you like to go? Italy? Iceland? Indonesia?

Live Like a Local

Doing a home exchange means living like a local. No sterile hotel rooms. You'll be finding your way to the grocery store so you can have your new neighbors over for cake and coffee. You'll be listening to someone else's music collection and learning how to use their appliances.

Two things are certain: You'll discover things that aren't in the tourist brochures, and your family will grow together in the process.

Last summer, we exchanged our home with relatives in Germany. We so thoroughly enjoyed our experience, even with the many challenges that came with traveling with our 2- and 4-year-old sons, that we are determined to plan another home exchange as soon as we can. As my family and I returned from our 6-week stay, I was eager to hear stories from other families about their home-exchange vacations.

The Notos

James and Patricia Noto of Point Loma have done close to 20 home exchanges. As veterans of the process they have valuable insights.

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“There are thousands of advantages to this type of travel,” James says. “For one, you don’t have to worry about going out to restaurants all the time. We went on one house exchange for three weeks and only ate out twice.

“Our daughter Natalie was about four on our first house exchange. We usually had places with a yard. A lot of the exchanges were in places that were near a playground and convenient to community pools. Some had their own pools,” he says.

Other advantages come to James’ mind when comparing a home exchange to a hotel stay: “You’re not at a hotel with other Americans. You get to meet the local people and see how they live. You look out your window and you watch the neighbors and you see how they wash their cars and little things like that.

“So you get to see a part of the culture. A big advantage is going to the grocery store. You get to see what their groceries are and what the prices are.”

He recalls a few of his favorite exchanges: “The most memorable one was probably Calgary, Canada. The neighbors came over and invited us to parties and we went to the Stampede. There was a park nearby and we were able to take our two little dogs. Natalie remembers that one, even as young as she was. I don’t think we’ve ever had a bad exchange.”

While home exchanges often include the use of cars, as ours did, the Notos opt not to. “Twice we’ve exchanged cars,” James says. “It didn’t work out well for me. I’m so persnickety.”

Why does he prefer not to have his exchange guests use his car? “When people come to San Diego, they often think Mexico, San Francisco, Death Valley, Grand Canyon, Las Vegas. Not that everyone’s going to drive to all those places. But a friend of ours had a brand new minivan with 800 miles on it and when they came back it had 4,000 miles on it.”

James advises families with young children to ask whether the house is safe for them. He also warns that some people won’t accept children in their home, which limits the available exchanges. Others have small children themselves and welcome kids. He also recommends looking for an exchange home with a backyard.

Easier Than Ever

Arranging home exchanges has become dramatically easier. “Since the internet sprung loose, we’ve exchanged with people I’ve never even talked to. It’s all through email,” James says.

“The kids at school would tell Natalie, ‘Your parents must be rich. You’re always going somewhere.’ She’d tell them that we’d go live in a house and that we didn’t have to pay any rent. The only reason we were able to travel so often is because of the house exchange.”

International Perspective

The experience of home-exchange travel can have ripple effects on children for many years. “From the day she started thinking about college, Natalie thought about studying abroad. Her whole perspective on life has been influenced by our home-exchange experience,” James says.

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Natalie is currently studying in Spain, so the Notos recently spent a month traveling there. “We didn’t want to do a house exchange because we wanted to do a lot of traveling on this trip,” James says.

“Well, we had a rude awakening about how much it costs to lodge every night and to eat out all the time. Even in Spain we were spending an average of \$100 a night.”

Doing a home exchange is certainly not for everyone. “You have to accept the fact that people are going to be in your kitchen, using your utensils. If you’re squeamish about that or if you’re worried about people breaking this and that, then don’t do it,” James says.

I can hear his smile through the phone when he says, “It’s also been very positive in terms of our house being cleaner than when we left. We never came home to a dirty house.”

He describes another memorable trip: “We did a double exchange one time where the couple had an apartment in Vienna and a lake cabin in Salzburg, the most beautiful Austrian city. We went to the cabin first and then to Vienna for four or five days in the city, and then right back to Salzburg. That worked really well.”

Home exchange may be the solution for people who have no interest in whirlwind tours, but are content to experience one corner of the world at a time.

“I water plants,” James says. “It makes you feel more at home. One place had a garden that the grandfather would tend. The grandfather would come by and we’d be picking beans and chatting with him. I guess I just don’t like hotels.”

The Boskins

Goldie and Warren Boskin live near San Diego State University and have done seven home exchanges, mostly through HomeLink, a home-exchange organization. They were referred to HomeLink by the Notos.

Goldie Boskin says, “The advantage is that you have free room and board. Sometimes the family asks friends and family to call you and they end up taking you around and wining and dining you.”

What about drawbacks? “If you want to go to Paris and be on the Seine, you can do that if you find a hotel but you might not be able to be that specific with a home exchange. You might find something in Paris, but it could be on the other end of town,” she says.

Location, Location, Location

When searching for a home exchange, the Boskins are drawn much more to the location of the home than the qualities of the home itself.

“We enjoyed British Columbia because it was beautiful, and Letterkenney, in Northern Ireland,” Goldie says. “I also really enjoyed St. Ives, a little town in England. Those were all good locations. Generally I judge by what’s interesting around me; how convenient it is. We don’t home-exchange to sit in their home. We home-exchange to enjoy the area.”

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“Kids have more room to roam around than they would in a hotel. They have more diversions. The homes we stayed in had a yard or a playroom. Some of the homes in Britain had tons of toys. The kids also had more privacy; most of the time they had their own room. Also there are other children in the neighborhood so sometimes there are opportunities to play with the local kids.”

It’s not always necessary to do a simultaneous exchange. One family might want to travel in August but the other can only travel in February. So each family makes plans to vacate their home and stay with relatives or friends for a week (or take another vacation). That way each family can travel when it best suits their schedule.

Leave Helpful Notes

Goldie says, “Sometimes people have left helpful notes for their next home exchange like, ‘Next time tell them that this is the switch for the garbage disposal.’ Or, ‘Tell them that going around Lake Murray is not a round trip – that you have to go out three miles and back three miles.’”

Misadventures and Risks

Though the Boskins have had no serious emergencies, they have had a few misadventures. “The English Hoovers must be much stronger than our vacuum cleaner. We ate up a two-foot square of linoleum in a very nice house,” Goldie recalls.

“We were very concerned but they didn’t answer our email about it, and when they finally did answer they said they wanted new linoleum anyway. We’ve also had a ticket on other people’s car; a very steep parking ticket. But people just take care of their own damage. If you get a ticket you pay it. If you break something you try to replace it. If you have an accident, you pay their deductible. But if they have an accident in your car your insurance rates might rise.

“There are inherent risks. But my attitude is, *I* could go out and have that accident. Somebody can hit me anytime. In the long run, the insurance rate increase wouldn’t make up for even a few days in hotels. Home exchange is a tremendous savings.”

Another risk that occurred once to the Boskins and the Notos, is that a family could back out. Fortunately, the Boskins’ would-be exchange family paid the airline reservation cancellation fee, and the Notos had enough advance warning to make other plans.

Memories of a Lifetime

The Boskins have had many memorable trips, including a two-month round of three back-to-back exchanges in England, Ireland and Scotland. On that trip, friends joined them and at one point they were a lively party of six. Other times they’ve traveled with their children and grandchildren.

Make Yourself at Home

Boskin says she and her husband find it easy to make themselves at home, perhaps an important trait for home exchangers: “Some of the houses have been very ordinary and some have been extraordinary. We’ve been comfortable in all of them.

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“They’ve all been clean. Well, one wasn’t super clean but there were 14 rooms so we understood; it was an old castle in Bristol. Some of the appliances are a little tricky to understand. And not everyone has a dryer. You just figure it out, just like they have to figure it out at your house.”

“Some people have left us food for the first night with a note because they knew we were going to be tired. Sometimes we hire a gardener because we don’t want them to be burdened with gardening. They don’t want to spend their time tending your house. I also leave them the name and number of a house-keeper in case they care to have one,” she says.

Entice Them to San Diego

Another tip: “I leave a list of some good websites on San Diego, too. When we first contact them we usually send them a link to a San Diego website to give them some idea of all there is to see here and to entice them and make them happy about coming,” she says.

Competition

San Diego is a beautiful place to be, and it’s not surprising that more and more people are trading in on the sunny appeal of our hometown through home exchanges. Of course, those of us with modest inland nests are in competition with beach-front gems.

But, as Goldie Boskin says, “The competition is not so severe because people have to match up the time they’re available. So let’s say there are 50 in San Diego but only 25 of them are available in August. Your chances will vary depending on a lot of factors.”

Don’t be disappointed if it takes months to find a good home-exchange match for your family. It requires persistence, often close to 100 emails and sometimes a thick skin; be prepared that some people will have no interest in Southern California.

“With the computer it’s so easy,” Goldie says. “I made up three letters; one for people with children, one for retired couples, one for people who are interested in sports. So that way it didn’t consume so much time in corresponding. Your basic spiel about yourself and about San Diego in general can remain the same.”

Where To Next?

The Boskins are already planning their next trip, this time to Portugal. Will the Notos choose a new destination or an old favorite? We are sure we have another home exchange in our future, too. But where? Greece? New Zealand? Spain? Japan?...

Online Home Exchange Resources

Please note: these organizations charge a membership fee.

www.HomeLink.org

www.HomeExchange.com

www.intervac-online.com

www.iHEN.com (International Home Exchange Network)

www.exchangehomesoi.com (Only In America Home Exchange)

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