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SOUTH AFRICA'S
AFFORDABLE
AIRLINE

Juice

DECEMBER 2010



Hats off to the festive season

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Great gifts,
perfect pools,
house-swapping,
Harleys and
holiday fun



Your place or mine?

Feeling the financial pinch but still want to go away these holidays? Or perhaps you just love the idea of home comforts at your holiday destination? House-swapping is now a big thing in global travel, and South Africa's not trailing too far behind.

Summer holidays have long been a staple end-of-year diet of the South African family. The annual pilgrimage to our beautiful coastline is one of the best ways to reward yourself for getting through another year of traffic, school, work and the daily grind. It's a time to kick back, forget about life's little niggles and put your feet up in front of a sparkling ocean, a beautiful vista, or simply different surroundings.

Unfortunately, the reality is that travelling during peak seasons, even within South Africa, has moved from being an untouchable fixture on fridge calendars to a nice-to-have suggestion pencilled in beneath 'Pay off the car' on the to-do list. As travel-related costs skyrocket over the peak holiday periods, budding holiday-makers around the country have begun to feel the financial pinch, with many people opting to stay home.

SO HOW DOES HOUSE-SWAPPING WORK?

House-swapping, fairly obviously, is the practice of trading houses with another homeowner for a predetermined period of time, usually as part of holiday plans. The trend, which has been around since the mid-1950s, has had seen a steady increase over the years, particularly as holiday-goers around the world have collectively tightened their financial belts.

Serious swappers, however, will tell you that they're not only in it for the financial benefits – the appeal of arriving in a lived-in home, rather than a sterile hotel or guesthouse, is many people's motivation for switching abodes for a few weeks. In most cases house-swappers are encouraged to leave comforts in place for the visitors; chilled wine in the fridge and a fruit basket are nice touches that many people expect; an overflowing laundry basket and uncut lawn are usually frowned upon.

WHAT ABOUT THE NOSY PARKERS?

Of course, the opposite can also ring true – an overly sterile environment is often preferable to unwashed sheets or having a stranger snooping through your underwear drawer, paging through your family albums or prancing around naked for your neighbours to see. In some cases, everything down to cars and pets is included in the deal. Most swappers will argue that this is all part of the experience, and it's assumed that people approach the situation with just a little bit of integrity.

So it's safe to say that the process is not without risks and potential drawbacks. Apart from the possibility of returning to, at best, a slightly soiled home, and at worst a totally cleaned-out one, there's also a chance that you'll end up trading your luxurious seaside villa for an industrial-estate hovel.

IS IT WORTH IT?

The recent mushrooming of travel websites that facilitate the process makes such issues slightly easier to predict, so it's critical that you make use of a credible and respected source to do your switch-a-roo. One of the better-known resources for budding house-swappers is HomeExchange (www.homexchange.com), where you can browse available homes both within South Africa and around the world, all of varying size and stature. For a small fee, they will also facilitate the process.

The website allows you to view a selection of properties and their details (including number of rooms and bathrooms) according to their location. Alongside each house is the owner's own travel requirements and personal information, down to smoking habits, pets and children.

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Each listing on HomeExchange is accompanied by user-submitted pictures and comprehensive details. These are, of course, open to manipulation, but the \$10-a-month membership fee, on a one-year contract, should take care of most bogus entries.

According to the website, it has facilitated more than 10 000 exchanges in its 14 years of existence, and has yet to receive a report of theft or vandalism. The folks at HomeExchange are also fairly confident that having strangers waltzing around your house doesn't need to be a stressful experience, and they liken their online house-swap service to an internet-dating hook-up:

'Think of home exchange as internet dating for your home,' says Ed Kushins, president of HomeExchange. 'Before you actually went on a

date with someone you met on the internet, you would exchange some emails, talk on the phone a few times and swap recent photos. By the time you agreed to meet, it hopefully wouldn't be with a "stranger". You wouldn't go on a date if you didn't feel a connection, and the same goes for a home exchange.'

The big benefit of HomeExchange is its international reach, and you could find yourself switching your spacious Sea Point apartment for a glamorous Manhattan penthouse suite for your two-week vacation.

IS LOCAL LEKKER?

Because most house-swapping facilities deal mainly with locals looking to participate in international exchanges, options for house-swapping on a purely local front are a bit limited. There are approximately 200 houses listed on HomeExchange across most major South African cities, with a skew in favour of holiday destinations and more populous regions. This means that if you're looking to move temporarily between Jo'burg, Durbs and Bloem for the holidays, you'll have to look a little harder and be a bit more cautious.

Online classifieds sites such as Gumtree feature a small number of interested swappers, but these come with little credibility or reassurances – it's particularly important to contact references and do FBI-style background checks before you hand over your keys. There are also a few local websites poised to get in on the action, but for now, apart from the international sites, one of the best ways to house-swap within South Africa is still with friends, colleagues and their families, or through direct referrals.

If you want to do the switch, check out these sites:
www.homeexchange.com
www.digsville.com
www.homelink.org
www.gumtree.co.za

