

# house swapping

Save money and see the world in the comfort of someone else's home.

By Stephanie Schroeder

Timing and flexibility are hallmarks of successful house swapping. When you are on a limited vacation schedule, date ranges are the most important consideration. However, if you are a lady of leisure, well, then dates (on a calendar at least) don't really matter. However, for most of us, paid vacation days are few and far between. And the dream vacation you have in mind may turn out to be a heavenly trip somewhere you never dreamed you'd end up.

When I first got the brilliant idea to swap my and my girlfriend's Jersey City apartment, it was because I could afford a plane ticket but I couldn't front the cost of lodging or eating every meal at a restaurant. My house-swapping experience began when I decided I just had to write in an olive grove in Tuscany for my birthday. I checked out farmhouses, villas, apartments, hotels and B&Bs. Weekend to weekend in a Tuscany farmhouse is not that expensive, but including airfare and dining plus shopping and additional expenses, it proved astronomical.

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House swappers can register—for free in some cases—at any of several Web sites, including lesbian- and gay-specific services like Mi Casa Su Casa's gayhometrader.com and the Lesbian and Gay Hospitality Exchange International, at lghei.org. But good ol' Craigslist.org is my destination of choice for pretty much all shopping. I met my girl there, found and furnished our apartment, and even secured my job through Craigslist.

I cruised the house-swap section and while I thought I wanted to visit Paris and sent several messages to potential swappers in the city of lights whose dates matched ours, it was a spare ad with the headline "House in Old Dutch Town" that caught my eye. "What town?" I queried the listing's anonymous poster. "Alkmaar, a historic town 20 minutes from Amsterdam." And there were photos attached. Wow, really nice.

So began a dialogue between me and Ken, an illustrator about my father's age. He sent links to his work, I googled him and found that he was a somewhat famous illustrator who had worked for Grove Press in New York in the '60s. Very impressive. I returned Ken's reply with photos of our apartment and placed it within the larger scheme of the city. Ken is a native New Yorker, so he wasn't afraid of being a bit off the beaten track. In fact, I think he wanted to steer clear of local relatives in Manhattan. After we agreed on the swap, we exchanged manifestos of our respective households and 'hoods—kind of like the *Wife Swap* "Bibles" the women write for each other on the show—to familiarize and orient each other with our respective destinations.

We took off for Schiphol Airport one early morning in April, made our way to Alkmaar on a train from the airport, and then walked, dragging our luggage behind us as we followed Ken's directions to Hofdijkstraat 3. I turned the key in the funky, blue-green front door, opening the narrow, inviting

Dutch rowhouse. Ken's partner, Dawn, had left us tulips and a bottle of wine. We looked around and made ourselves comfortable, read all the directions and centered ourselves on the maps Ken had left for us, then set out for a cappuccino and some Dutch apple pastry.

We hit the bed after scouting out the town, which was indeed a beautiful, quaint and historical seaside town. We made Alkmaar home for 10 days, shopping at what were basically top-tier bodegas, green markets, cheese markets and butchers. We drank coffee in the back garden and ate out only once a day, if that, preferring dinners made from fresh local food and produce. We cooked on a touchy old stove and washed dishes in a granite sink. We put our waste in a compost pile out back and took showers in a shower room. We spent an entire day in Amsterdam with a friend, going to head shops, eating toasties (grilled cheese served every which way) and touring the Red Light district, which was sad and pathetic rather than erotic and exciting.

Most Dutch speak English quite well, so language was not too much of a barrier. We found in Alkmaar and Amsterdam to be perfect places for R&R from my corporate gig and my girlfriend's teaching job. House swapping allows for the creature comforts of home, a place to retire at the end of the day that is more inviting than four square walls and a formal, sterile environment. And you usually get a fully equipped place stocked with kitchen supplies and appliances, a TV, a CD player, linens and whatever else you can imagine.

The day of our departure, our friend from Amsterdam picked us up and treated us to a boat tour of the city's canal system. We ate pancakes—which in Holland are one delicious giant thick doughy pie—then he dropped us at Schiphol for our return trip home.

We had such a fabulous time in Holland that we decided to swap again this year around the same time, spring break. Again, I wanted Paris. Well, really I wanted a spa week in Sedona, Ariz., but that would have been more expensive than what turned out to be an eight-day jaunt to Dublin.

My girl and I hung out mostly in the trendy, artsy Temple Bar district of Dublin, doing a lot of shopping and sightseeing, and checking out the queer



Home share in the countryside

clubs. I was particularly interested in walking in the footsteps of James Joyce and Oscar Wilde. Unfortunately, since we went in April, many tourist attractions, such as the Irish Writers Museum, the Joyce Center and most castles in the Irish countryside, were closed. However, we did see Dublin Castle, the Guinness brewery and the Irish Museum of Modern Art—which had an extensive Georgia O’Keefe exhibition and a joint Calder-Miro retrospective—and took a day trip to the seaside town of Howth, where local fishmongers supply smoked salmon to the world.

This year we exchanged with a single woman who lives on the outskirts of Dublin in a modest but very modern apartment complex. One thing we noticed in Ireland, and in Holland, was the emphasis on conservation and moderation. For example, we never got water with our meals unless we asked, we received only one napkin at each meal, and we were served moderate portions of food, enough to fill but not overfill us. Symbols on groceries and restaurant menus to designate whether the food was suitable for vegetarians, vegans, diabetics and others. We came back much more conscious of how we eat and how wasteful and careless we are in the U.S. ■



# 10 ways to travel for \$50 a day

Forget Rachael Ray, we have advice that you can actually use. **By Jennifer Corday**

## 10 HOUSE SWAPPING TIPS

1. Be open. Every exchange is different. All are based on trust and proper planning. Make good acquaintance through phone calls and e-mails. If you have swapped before, you should give, and get, references.
2. Get personal. First, if you are not on a gay-home exchange site, come out first thing to potential swappers. I always wrote “lesbian couple interested in ...” in my first e-mail to a possible swap. In Europe particularly, queerness doesn’t rule out a swap with a straight person or family. And it’s better to be open and comfortable than dishonest and furtive.
3. Try to exchange with people from a similar background. They don’t have to be queer, but if they are single or coupled, or have children or animals, the familiar helps to make for a better swap experience for all.
4. Be honest. You don’t want to disappoint or be disappointed. Don’t exaggerate your accommodations, just provide the facts and let parties make their own decisions.
5. Leave your home clean and prepare space in drawers, closets, bathrooms and other areas. Change the linens and put out clean towels. And leave enough toilet paper!
6. Notify your landlords and insurance companies (home-owners’ or renters’ and, if you are swapping vehicles, your auto insurance company).
7. Leave an extra set of keys with a friend or neighbor.
8. Arrange for the care of gardens, swimming pools, animals and other home needs.
9. Leave all appliances in working condition and let your swap partner know whether you have a landline or if they should make other arrangements for telephone communications.
10. Give, and get, a list of all important contact numbers.

As a starving artist, I am an expert at pinching my pennies, especially while on the road. Here’s a nifty checklist of things you can do to make your money last and travel comfortably on \$50 a day.

- 1 **Book smart:** Myriad cheap airline ticket services are out there so do your research. From Cheap Tickets and Expedia, to Orbitz and Travelocity, there are tons of Web sites that can help you zero in on the least-expensive ticket to your destination. Don’t forget to check out sales and specials on new airlines, including my new favorite airline, Skybus. Everyone seemed to be gay, everything’s booked online, and they sell the first 10 seats for \$10 each, round trip! Get ‘em while you can.
- 2 **Pack light:** This may not seem like a cash saver, but some airlines, including the new Skybus, charge for extra bags and overweight bags. Less is more, ladies. You don’t need that many shoes.
- 3 **Prepare to bargain:** This may seem obvious, but sometimes all you have to do is ask. I landed in Columbus, Ohio, and headed over to the car-rental place only to find they were out of vehicles large enough to accommodate my cast and crew. The salesman tried to sell me a more expensive upgrade but I argued the fact (nicely) that it was their fault they were out of cars, so I should receive the larger vehicle at no additional charge. And guess what? It worked! We scored a very butch-looking Hummer. While bargaining, be friendly but assertive. Kindly ask for the supervisor if you think you have a good reason to save a buck or two, and if you are articulate and persuasive, you might just get what you ask for.
- 4 **Eat cheap:** Grab the free continental breakfast if there’s one available at your hotel, and try to cut back on your daily Starbucks intake. Grab a breakfast bar rather than going out to breakfast, and take the free fruit that’s always in the hotel lobby (even if you’re not staying there). Plan ahead so you’re not starving and don’t just wander into the first available restaurant; ask the locals where to eat. Split meals, and look for coupons and specials. It may be worth it to splurge on that one romantic dinner, which is why it’s even more important to watch your spending the rest of the week. Leftovers are difficult to preserve when you’re traveling, so don’t