

Ins and outs of home swaps

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Ins and Outs of Home Swaps Can be Hellish

A new film glamorises holiday exchanges. Cassandra Jardine has her doubts
Exchanging homes with someone on the other side of the world is about to look like the glamorous solution to life's problems. Having boyfriend trouble? Hit a bad patch at work? Arrange a refreshing transplant to another person's world and, hey presto, you can find romance, just like Kate Winslet and Cameron Diaz in *The Holiday*.

Iris, Winslet's character, is the weddings correspondent of *The Daily Telegraph* - a sinecure that unfortunately does not exist. When her life hits the skids, she gets on to the internet and trades her charming cottage in Sussex with Amanda, played by Diaz, who is equally fed up with her sunny Californian pad.

Tempting, indeed, even without the added bonus of Jude Law or Rufus Sewell waiting to flirt with the newcomer. *The Holiday* provides a major image uplift for an activity which, until now, appeared rather more mundanely to be a practical solution to a financial problem.

It was one I wanted to try myself, because I couldn't think of any other way my family could spend two or three weeks in a heavenly villa in some sunny spot without going broke. I signed up with HomeLink UK (£115 for a year), stuck a photograph of my south London house on its web page and waited for the offers to pour in.

My sister-in-law had swapped her Sussex home for a Virginian clapboard number and said it was a huge success. My own sister was rather less bullish, having had the most expensive holiday of her life when she allowed a family to occupy her Worcestershire home.

"The odd-job man was on call non-stop," she recalls. "At one point he was asked to dig up the back garden for what turned out to be a simple leak. He also had to put a new fence around the back garden because the dog, who had been left in the strangers' care, was so terrified that she tried to tunnel out."

I was not to be put off. After all, about 100,000 people in Britain play this game and a number of agencies exist to make it work, of which HomeLink is the largest one based in Britain. Intervac is also popular, as is the US-based Home Exchange.

Caroline Connolly, who runs HomeLink, says disaster stories are rare. "We get four or five complaints a year," she says. "Most are about cleanliness. What's a normal level of tidiness for people with children might strike a retired couple as messy, so we recommend that our members exchange with families of the same kind."

Members have access to homes in 69 countries; in 26 of those it has a rep to sort out any problems. Most of the hitches seem to result from swapping cars as well as houses (which 70 per cent of people do).

The Hagens from Nantwich, Cheshire, enthuse about the wonderful times they have had visiting North America and Europe. But it must have been a bad moment when, driving around Italy in their hosts' car, someone drove into the back of them. "The car was brand new, and the accident wasn't our fault," says Helen Hagan. "But we didn't speak any Italian and we didn't have the papers, so we had to ask the owners to sort it out."

When Gwen Cox and her husband, David Kemsley, swapped their home in Shrewsbury with one in Carmel, California, they were told that if any deer entered the garden they were to get rid of them before they ate the plants. "I was in the kitchen when I saw one," says Gwen. "And shouted out 'Oh, deer' so loudly that my husband came rushing in, thinking something had gone terribly wrong. We were a little nervous, too, when they told us about the black widow spiders in the garage, but we survived."

If that's as bad as it gets, I reckoned we would survive. But when I tried to fix something up, I realised that it is not the solution to everyone's holiday problems.

Before signing on I had a few worries. What if the home exchangers are kleptomaniacs who pinch our few

valuable worldly goods? I was reassured that insurance companies welcome this system of house sitting, so that can't happen very often.

We never got as far as finding out, because I began by emailing the houses in Mediterranean hotspots that I thought we'd like to stay in. There weren't very many and their owners, mysteriously, weren't tempted by an August break in Brixton. Going lower down my list of desirables I got to Florida, but the homes to fit a family of seven were rare and, when I looked them up on the map, in dreary suburban spots. I shouldn't have been surprised. These are real homes lived in by people who also don't have masses of money and need to get to work, so they are unlikely to be in Portofino or St Tropez. I did find one organisation - www.ivhe.com - that offers swaps to delectable spots, using a points system, but it caters for second-home owners with ski lodges in Gstaad to exchange for beach homes in the Caribbean.

Returning to reality, I emailed a few people in Australia but the Aussies all wanted to come for at least six weeks - way too long for us. By that stage the offers had begun to come in, and I found myself wondering how to tell the children that this summer we would be exploring Antwerp or Hamburg. It might have worked, but the real clincher that put me off was the organisation involved. I realised I would have to spend a fortune - or work myself to the bone - cleaning up our house and fixing all the broken machines if HomeLink wasn't going to suffer an unprecedented level of complaints. Worst of all, I would need to prepare an enormous dossier telling the visitors how to do everything from how to find the nearest A & E unit, to the knack (which it has taken years to acquire) of shutting the fridge door so that it doesn't leak.

It's no coincidence that many home exchangers are retired. Or that they're couples where only one person works, so the other has time to make sure that, when the new arrival opens the door, they have a pleasant surprise, not a heart attack.

One day, perhaps, like Iris and Amanda, we'll have an adventure. But for now we're sticking to b & bs.

D For further information, contact: Homelink (01962 886882, www.homelink.org.uk); Intervac (0845 260 5776, www.intervac.com); Home Exchange (001 310 798 3864, www.homeexchange.com).

D 'The Holiday' is out on general release on December 8.

Picture Caption: Changing places: Amanda (Cameron Diaz) isn't sure about the Sussex cottage while (right) Kate Winslet as Iris makes herself at home in California in 'The Holiday'

Picture Credit: Zade Rosenthal

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