

HOMES

Mansion Swap: Luxury Vacationers Are Trading Places

Luxury-home swappers say mansion exchanges save them money and give them the experience of staying in otherwise inaccessible homes.

By ART PATNAUDE [CONNECT](#)

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A growing band of travelers are swapping homes with strangers, saving money and gaining access to a world of otherwise inaccessible mansions. Leonie Nanassy swaps three of her homes. Photo: Vanessa Berberian for The Wall Street Journal.

Gaelle Deschamps struck out for Vietnam from France in August with her family of five in tow. Upon arrival, they spent two weeks at a private beachfront villa staffed by cooks, housekeepers, a driver and personal concierge. The cost: \$495 a week.

The bargain stems from the fact that she and her husband, Marc, open the doors of their 18th-century, 10,700-square-foot chateau in France's Loire Valley to similarly well-heeled vacationers—who also pay a greatly reduced rate to stay in a luxury home.

"You're not going to a hotel. You're going to a person's home. It makes it a lot more luxurious," said Ms. Deschamps, who works in marketing while her husband is in mergers-and-acquisition finance.

The Deschamps are part of a growing band of luxury travelers who trade their million-dollar homes with strangers. Swappers say the advantages abound: It saves money; they join a community of like-minded people; and a world of otherwise inaccessible mansions, villas and penthouses are at their disposal. Opening grand estates to strangers comes with risks—mainly theft and property damage—but most home-swappers say these instances are rare.

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Vanessa Berdeman for The Wall Street Journal

Brokering these exchanges are members-only websites that cater specifically to the luxury market. The Deschamps belong to 3rd Home Ltd.; others include IVHE Ltd., Exclusive Exchanges, HomeExchangeGold and Love Home Swap. The companies, based in the U.S. or United Kingdom, allow members not just to swap simultaneously, but accumulate credits that can be redeemed for luxury homes at a later date. This removes some of the potential scheduling problems that can hamper straight home swaps.

Membership costs vary between sites: 3rd Home has a one-time \$2,500 enrollment fee and charges \$395 to \$995 per week for each exchange. IVHE charges \$159 in annual dues and gets a 7% fee based on the rental value of an exchanged home. HomeExchangeGold, Exclusive Exchanges and Love Home Swap charge from \$240 to \$500 a year and have no additional charges.

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February 2009. The weather was unseasonably cold. There was no central heating, so Ms. Blundell resorted to lighting fires to keep warm. The bed was uncomfortable, and the furnishings "tired and rather basic." After that, "I said I'm never staying anywhere less comfortable than my home."

Since joining Love Home Swap in 2010, she's done five exchanges, including to New York, Cape Town—a base for exploring South Africa's Stellenbosch wine country—and an "amazing" house "set in pristine rain forest" one hour from Auckland, New Zealand. "Our experiences have been fabulous," she said.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Diana and Douglas Gray on vacation. "When I think back on the incredible properties we've stayed in, it's like winning the lottery. Money is no object," Mr. Gray said. *Douglas Gray*

The sites say they vet new members and evaluate properties to ensure they meet certain luxury standards. Phone calls, photos, and proof of identification are standard. "We do refuse membership to very few every year," said Margaret Carr, founder of Exclusive Exchanges.

Elaine Blundell, who lives in southwest France, decided to start swapping after a "disastrous experience at a villa in Spain" that she rented for two weeks in

Douglas Gray, a retired lawyer from Vancouver, has swapped his ski chalet in the Canadian resort town of Whistler more than 30 times since joining Exclusive Exchanges in 2007. On one swap to Paris, Mr. Gray showed up at a sprawling, centrally located apartment filled with what he estimated to be millions of dollars of fine art. "They didn't go and hide them away," Mr. Gray said. "It's like they went away into the ether, and we were simply there replacing them."

"When I think back on the incredible properties we've stayed in, it's like winning the lottery. Money is no object," he said.

Of course, most people who own luxury homes don't want to go just anywhere. Germaine Fritz of Boston owns a villa in the British Virgin Islands that costs about \$200,000 a year to maintain. "My house is an estate. It's an oceanfront property, a full acre. It's private. We have maid service seven days a week. I'm not going to stay somewhere that's not equal value," she said. "A condo in Florida is not an equal exchange."



The British Virgin Islands vacation home that Germaine Fritz both swaps and rents. *Jim Schiener*

Ms. Fritz took her family on her first swap in 1990 after seeing an ad in their local newspaper. Since then she has been swapping properties, with Breckenridge, Colo., and Italy pegged as the next destinations. She also rents her Caribbean villa for up to \$13,500 a week.

In fact, it's common for swappers to rent their properties as well. Ms. Deschamps rents her Loire Valley château for about €7,000, or \$9,200, per week. "If you're a billionaire, you probably don't care. If you're a millionaire, you're still working. It's a great way to get more out of the same budget. In times of economic crisis, it's a great way to hedge your risk," she said.

Alexander Batchvarov has swapped his six-bedroom, 18th-century vacation home in Bulgaria for luxury lodgings in the Galápagos Islands. But he also rents out the mountain lodge, advertised on multiple websites, for about \$12,000 per week. Swapping "is just a great way to utilize the asset on those weeks when we're not there," said Mr. Batchvarov, who works in finance.

The rental market has its risks as well. Vacation rental site Airbnb, for example, has come under government and hotel-industry scrutiny for potential safety, insurance and tax revenue issues. So far, these issues haven't been major issues for luxury swap sites, owners said.

Taxes would be difficult to impose, because swapping homes "is not deemed by anybody we know to be a commercial transaction, because no value is established. It's just an exchange of hospitality between people," said Ed Kushins, who launched HomeExchangeGold for luxury-minded swappers after seeing a rise in demand for high-quality trades on HomeExchange, of which he is president.

A few years ago, Mr. Kushins took out an insurance policy through Lloyd's of London that covered all his members for things like theft, damage and litigation. After spending over \$100,000 for a policy with a \$50,000 deductible, "at the end of the year, we had no claims, so we decided to cancel it," he said.

Small disputes do arise, owners said. Giles Adams, president at 3rd Home, where the average listed home value is about \$2.5 million, said his firm once paid \$200 to get a curtain rail refitted when the homeowner and lodger disagreed on when it was broken and by whom. It paid another homeowner \$150 after a "member's child ran into an antique armoire on a tricycle." But in most cases—even when visiting members drank specially delivered wine they mistakenly thought the homeowner had provided for them—"they sort it amongst themselves. There's a kind of code. Members are very diligent about each other's properties," Mr. Adams said.

Leonie Nanassy, who swaps and rents out three of her homes—two in England and one in the French Alps—ran into a different kind of snag. She and her partner wanted to stick around their home in the county of Devon for a literary festival, but Ms. Nanassy had already rented out her home there for the week. As a solution, they organized to swap for another Devon home, just an hour away, that normally rents for about \$5,000 per week. "Even if you just go an hour up the road, you get to see things you never usually get to see," said Ms. Nanassy, who also runs a local pub.



Enlarge Image

The eight-bedroom, 16th-century manor in Normandy, France, owned by Dorothée de Panisse-Passis and her husband. *Dorothée de Panisse Passis*

Dorothée de Panisse-Passis works as a judge at the Conseil d'État, France's highest administrative court. She and her husband have an eight-bedroom, 16th-century manor in Normandy. The property sits on 27 acres, has a tennis court, ponies and is near Omaha Beach, popular among World War II history buffs.

Ms. Panisse-Passis doesn't rent it out, but has swapped with people from Bali, Madagascar, Quebec, New York City, the Hamptons, California and British Columbia. The couple is planning a swap to South Africa in the winter. She hunts out luxury properties with space, a view, and charm.

"I'll never rent it out, but swapping it is amazing," she said. "When you accept that you will leave all of your personal belongings, you can enter into the life of another family. It's a totally different way of traveling."

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