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The Mail

AUGUST 23, 2015 £1.60

ON SUNDAY

SUNDAY NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

AUGUST 23 • 2015 The Mail on Sunday

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PROPERTY 77

Eighties pop star leads the way in home-swapping revolution

By Dominic Connolly

I traded my cardboard box for Trump Tower

HE FOUND fame with a song about 'living in a cardboard box', but musician Marcus Vere can now live in a variety of what he describes as 'grandiose and luxurious boxes' all around the world. Vere, who was keyboard player with 1980s pop trio Living In A Box, is a member of 3rd Home, one of a number of burgeoning property-sharing schemes that allow people to holiday in other people's second homes in exchange for letting others stay in theirs.

He and his family - wife Tisha and their three children, aged 15, 13 and 11 - have had holidays abroad, including one at New York's Trump Tower overlooking Central Park, at a fraction of their normal cost by welcoming other members of 3rd Home into their five-bedroom thatched cottage in the Cotswolds.

3rd Home (3rdhome.com) is part of the growing 'sharing economy' that includes home-swap facilities such as Home Exchange and Love Home Swap. Home Exchange concentrates on helping people swap homes for periods, while Love Home Swap has elements in which people can build up 'points' by having people stay at their home, with these 'points' then going towards holidays at a wider variety of properties.

3rd Home positions itself at the luxury end of the market: the average value of homes in the scheme is £1.6 million - and deals exclusively in second homes. By entering their home into the scheme, members can then choose from 3,600 properties across 73 countries for their holiday property.

THE Veres have, through 3rd Home, already stayed at an old plantation house in Barbados, as well as the Big Apple apartment. And they will soon be taking another break, to the Turks & Caicos Islands in the Caribbean. Other options offered by 3rd Home include properties on wine estates and game reserves in South Africa, and a Bahamas residence once lived in by Edward and Mrs Simpson. The five most requested swaps are to New York, Paris, Vail in Colorado, the South of France and Tuscany.

In 3rd Home, the Veres' chocolate-box-style cottage earns points - called 'keys' - for every week they make it available, and they can then 'spend' these on holidays in other properties.

Each home is rated, 'so a two-bedroom cottage in Yorkshire wouldn't be on the same level as a waterfront house in Miami', says Marcus. 'The Veres'

main home is in London, where Marcus still works in the music business. He has recently written songs for Tom Jones and Pixie Lott, and is currently writing with fellow Sheffield musician Martin Fry of ABC.

Fuelled, in part, by the ease of people being able to book time in other people's homes via the internet, the overall global 'sharing economy' is now valued at £9.6 billion, according to a recent report from PricewaterhouseCoopers. The report says that 72 per cent of people surveyed agreed with the statement: 'I could see myself being a consumer in the sharing economy in the next two years.'

The 'sharing economy' has also seeped into popular culture: the plot of the film *The Holiday* revolved around a home swap - two women with man-trouble (played by Kate Winslet and Cameron Diaz) swapped homes in each other's countries and fell for men on the other's home turf. More recently, the Airbnb phenomenon has taken off - more and more people are preferring to rent and stay in others' homes rather than hotels.

On average, Airbnb houses 425,000 guests per night.

The 3rd Home community rate and leave comments about homes they have stayed in, Trip Advi-

sor-style, Marcus says. But he adds that because people are staying in other people's homes, they are very respectful - more so than they would be in a hotel or rented home.

3rd Home properties are graded based on location, sale value, proximity to attractions, and amenities offered, such as a maid service, chef, access to restaurants, pools or sports facilities.

WHEN you apply for membership, a manager vets the property by looking at photographs and a description, and will call the owner to ask questions. The membership fee is currently waived so all that members have to pay is between £250 and £650 per exchange, depending on the rating of the property they want to stay in.

3rd Home was founded in 2008 by entrepreneur Giles Adams. With the collapse of financial markets, he saw a chance to offer a service to people who had invested in second homes and were now struggling to afford the upkeep.

Marcus agrees that staying in someone's home for a holiday has huge benefits. 'As a family it makes a great deal of sense. You get more space and owners pass on useful knowledge,' he explains.

His recent holidays are a far cry from the days when he was living in a small flat in Sheffield and a pal - living in an even smaller flat - declared: 'I feel like I'm living in a box.' That inspired the song *Living In A Box*, which in turn inspired the band's name.

DJ Tony Blackburn helped to make the song *Living In A Box* a hit by playing it three times in a row, and the band went on to have five more Top 40 hits and another hit album - enabling Marcus to move out of his Sheffield flat - before the band split in 1990.

'I suppose we all live in boxes of different shapes and sizes,' he concludes. 'And 3rd Home certainly have some grandiose and luxurious boxes...'



ALL THE FUN OF THE SHARE: Marcus with his wife Tisha, their Cotswold cottage and, left, the Trump International Tower and Hotel, where they stayed



HEYDAY: Marcus, left, poses with his Living In A Box bandmates in the 1980s