



DITCH THE HOTEL

Frugal Lodging Options from Airbnb to House Swapping

by Avery Mack

Travel is changing as vacationers increasingly value unique experiences over standard tourist fare. In addition to the option of couch surfing (Tinyurl.com/CouchsurfingAdventure), more people are making the most of house rentals, swapping and sitting, plus various home stays via Airbnb (Airbnb.com). All expand options for affordable journeys tailored to their needs.

AIRBNB accommodations range from private studios to family-sized homey spaces, encompassing tiny houses, treehouses, geodesic domes, yurts, container cars, caves, light-houses, working ranches, castles and luxury carriage houses. With 2 million listings for 34,000 cities in 190 countries, 600 million people have found their ideal getaway through the San Francisco-based company since it launched in 2008. Published feedback, including comment books at the rental sites, provides assurance for visitors. When hosts aren't on the premises, they are available as needed by guests.

Mary Bartnikowski, publisher and

photographer at *Vagabond Travel Photography Magazine* (VagabondTravelMag.com), has visited 32 countries so far, staying in homes, ashrams, temples, boats and apartments. "My best Airbnb rental was camping for two weeks in a Hawaii home garden next to a big tree; my host forgot to mention the big, friendly dog," she says, recalling an unexpected wake-up greeting.

Hosts find providing rentals a way to monetize unused space, meet new people and showcase their area. Beth Everett, an Oregon author, offers an Airbnb detached backyard studio space. "We moved from New Jersey to Portland two years ago, and the extra income lets me stay home to write," she says.

HOUSE SWAPPING is another option for soaking in local color. Preparation is key and includes a notebook's worth of helpful details shared in advance, as well as onsite. Most exchanges involve a series of Skype sessions for questions and answers. Leasa Sanders McIntosh, an executive recruiter, swapped her Denver home for a month in Kona, Hawaii. "We

traded cars and joked that we even traded cats. We swapped three times before they moved to the mainland." This summer, she'll swap to be at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

Susan May, an established advocate of organ donation from Cartersville, Georgia, traded homes and cars to take her four teens to Europe. "We visited 13 countries, spending two weeks in Wales and three in Germany. We saw fireworks in Paris on Bastille Day and joined the Highland Games, in Scotland," she says. "I want our family to be more than just tourists passing through Westernized hotels with no real contact with local folks. Exchanging homes is an ideal way for a family to travel inexpensively."

HOUSESITTING fan and senior technical recruiter Rachel Burke, of Santa Monica, California, has stayed for free in London, Cape Cod and Palm Springs, California, using *TrustedHouseSitters.com*. "This way, homeowners can travel without leaving pets in a kennel while unpaid housesitters avoid hotel expenses and gain a chance to be a native in a different location," she says. "Last year, I watched a five-story home in a London suburb while the owners visited Portugal for three weeks." She shares shots of her favorite spots at Tinyurl.com/FunLondonPhotos.

Burke combines housesitting with Airbnb by renting her apartment when she travels. "A couple of years ago, I paid \$1,800 for a two-week trip to Thailand and charged \$125 a night for my apartment, making my trip to Thailand free," she relates. Burke lives near the Santa Monica Pier, Venice Beach and Hollywood, all prime destinations.

With 50,000 listings in 150 countries, *Homestay.com* tweaks the Airbnb experience in that hosts are more involved in their guests' local adventures. Cuba currently tops desired destinations for U.S. travelers, with most rentals in the capital, Havana, the nearby artistic enclave of Trinidad or rural Vinales. Many hosts arrange airport transfers, tours, visits to attractions, bicycle rentals, restaurant reservations and transportation to other Cuban locales. Hosts usually speak several languages, including English, and



BUDGET TRAVEL TIPS

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Rick Steves, host of the long-running Public Television series *Rick Steves' Europe* and Edmonds, Washington, bestselling author of 40 European travel books, encourages Americans to travel as "temporary locals". Here's some of his helpful advice.

- Start by searching HomeExchange.com, HomeLink.org and Intervac-HomeExchange.com for listings, tips and assistance.
- Contact the host well before the trip. Be clear about what's expected and what to do if there's a hiccup. Triple check the key's location and how to open the door, including any alarm system. Agree on phone and Internet charges.
- Share information on where to shop and instructions for appliances and maintenance services. Ask about any quirks a loaned car might have and make sure insurance covers another driver.
- Information about local sights and good restaurants is appreciated.

Source: Adapted from RickSteves.com

may even teach guests to play Cuban-style dominoes.

ECO-FRIENDLY HOMESTAYS are available, too, ranging from a private Nicaraguan island independently powered by solar panels and a Spanish farmhouse off the grid to an organic farm in Thailand or eco-lodge in South Africa. An Austin, Texas, listing notes, "Everything is reclaimed, recycled or repurposed. We have an infused honey business. We're laid-back and practice good karma and a healthy, drama-free lifestyle."

Homestay's average nightly rental is \$46. While some guests are students, the majority are 35 and older, vacationing on substantial salaries; they simply prefer the local color.

Vacations needn't be expensive, but they should be memorable. The biggest challenge may be deciding where to go first.

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