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Trading homes a new way to travel

by [Irina Mazursky](#)
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Imagine going on vacation and leaving your troubles behind. Imagine checking in to a single-family home on a quiet suburban street, with an SUV waiting for you to explore the city. Meanwhile back home, a perfect stranger is checking into your own residence.



Home exchange, the concept of trading homes with people around the world, allows for this economical and unique vacation experience.

"It's just like living in your own home, but you're in a different part of the world," said Douglas Gray, real estate author and frequent home exchanger.

For a \$99.95 per year fee, members can access a database full of people around the world who want to trade homes and post their own property on [www.homeexchange.com](#).

"The locations are everywhere. We have over 16,000 homes posted in over 100 countries," said Ed Kushins, president of Home Exchange.

He founded the predecessor company called Trading Homes in 1992, then purchased [homeexchange.com](#) and merged the two companies in 2002. The website was even featured in the 2006 film, *The Holiday*.

A house in Calgary can be an asset in the exchange market.

"If you live in Calgary, you're approximate to the Rockies. The Rockies are known throughout the world as a big magnet for a lot of people who want to see the real wilderness. So, because you're so close, your place in Calgary could be attractive for home exchanging," said Gray.

There are approximately 27 properties in Calgary currently listed. One of these is Alanna Johnson's Willow Park home.

"It's very cost-effective!" Johnson said. She is planning a two-week exchange in England this August. This will be the second exchange for the Johnsons. The first was in December 2006 with a family from Phoenix, Arizona.

The website guarantees that if within the first year of listing, a home exchange is not completed, they will extend the property listing for free. The listings provide such information as house size, car availability, child-friendliness, as well as information on the neighbourhood and city. Most Calgary listings boast proximity to the mountains and of course, the Calgary Stampede.

"Surprisingly, we get more requests for the winter months," Johnson said, which for the most part are made from ski enthusiasts.

Kushins suggests doing the first exchange with someone who is experienced.

"If you haven't done it, you may want to do an exchange with someone who has already done an exchange and by doing so, you can ask them for a referral of their prior exchange or exchanges," he said. Some questions to ask the references include: "How did they treat your home?" and "Was their home the way it was described in the listing?"

"We have very few people who won't get a good referral," Kushions said.

Johnson believes the best way to attract exchangers is to try and make the home look warm and inviting, tell potential traders about the neighbourhood and amenities and provide links to websites about Calgary.

"At first I was cautious and nervous," she said. "But I realized everyone felt the same way going in." She alleviated her concern by asking of photos of the family and getting to know as much as she could about their interests and personalities by phone and email.

"Probably the most important thing that you could do is feel comfortable. And that comes in a lot of different ways. Most people say they're concerned about having a stranger in their house if they haven't done a home exchange before. But what they find out is that the process really eliminates that as being a concern," Kushions reassured.

According to Kushins, the demographics for exchangers have changed in the last decade.

"It runs the gamut from young couples to young couples with young children to people with teenagers to empty-nesters to full-on retired people. That's a bit of a switch from what it used to be 10 years ago, when it was primarily retired people and teachers with or without kids. The market has really, really flattened out and covers this whole new demographic over the last 10 years."

He believes this market adjustment is due to increased awareness and people's desire to become a local when they travel.

A recent survey of Home Exchange members shows that half of exchangers go in with a specific destination in mind, while the other half are open to see what inquiries they get.

"One of the fun things about home exchange is you've got all those opportunities available," Kushins said.

Gray recently returned from an exchange in Australia, New Zealand and the Cook Islands. He believes the process allows a return on your home investment.

"The land costs were non-existent, and the costs I incurred, I probably would've incurred living at home anyway. You know, gas for the car, eating out and meals and buying food to make meals. The only difference is you're in a different part of the world. It's a hell of a lifestyle, and it's one I would highly recommend," Gray said.

To register for a membership or check listings, visit [www.homeexchange.com](#).

—*Irina Mazursky is the Calgary Real Estate News resident reporter.*

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