

# Good rate of exchange

Karen Reyment and her family will spend a year living overseas without spending a cent on accommodation. Here's how she's going to do it...

The landing gear hadn't cooled after the plane's touchdown from our trip to Europe and my head was already swimming with dreams of faraway lands, and of life punctuated with the beauty and excitement of further travel.

My dream began with a throwaway line. "Why don't we all just take off for a year?" I said to hubby. From the moment those words left my lips, our lives were set on an exciting course, and we began to live life a little less ordinary.

To spend a year living in Europe is out of most people's financial reach, it certainly was for us, especially in today's climate of economic uncertainty. It takes us a year to save for a *six-week* international holiday, so 365 days of hotel rooms and restaurants could only be funded by a lotto win or the discovery of a money tree. If we were going to transform our dream into reality, we had to be inventive, to think outside the box. And there was our answer...home-exchange.

Our entry into the world of home-exchange was like horse-riding, bare-back at breakneck speed. Within 24 hours we had paid our US\$140 subscription, allowing us to join the online home-exchange community for two years, we created a profile showing off Brisbane and our much-loved home, and we



Our 'home' in Luxembourg's wine country

sent friendly emails to home-exchangers all over Europe. Our laptop chimed away into the night as the recipients woke and responded to our tempting offer. Ding, ding, ding...Paris, Provence, Brussels, Barcelona! Some replies were negative; we thanked them for their email and asked them to keep us on file if they ever wished to visit Australia. It was the positive responses that got our pulses

racing. Bleary-eyed in the dead of night, we huddled around the computer like excited children, talking with complete strangers about the possibility of swapping homes. Our dream was coming to life.

Home-exchange is not for everyone. If you are uncomfortable having people you have never met live in your home, then forget it. But the homes we will be living in show

photos just like ours, of well-kept family homes equipped with everything needed for our stay. No calls to reception for connection to the internet, or for use of an iron, or exorbitant rates for the privilege. We will have it all for free. And there's the bonus of car-swapping: you have ours, we'll take yours! We will be tootling around each other's countries, discovering towns and villages we might never have visited. We will list our exchangers as authorised drivers of our car to guarantee their coverage by our insurance.

Many European exchanges include the use of bikes. I'm not so sure about blending in as a local while riding a bike! Parisians cycle around their *arrondissements*, looking super-chic and nonchalant. But I fear I will be quite the opposite, I'm sure. I have visions of my cotton dress entwined in bicycle spokes, sprawling me across the footpaths Hemingway once walked, the morning's croissants and baguettes spilling from my basket.

We have allowed fate to dictate many of our home-exchange destinations. When we received an offer, we researched the cuisine and climate, and if the people sounded genuine, we simply said 'yes'. Easy as that. Emails would then be sent back and forth allowing us to get to know one another. This

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