

# It's a fair exchange

DOING A HOUSE-EXCHANGE OR USING A HOUSE-SITTER CAN BE A GOOD MOVE BUT MAKE SURE YOU DO YOUR HOMEWORK, SAYS VANESSA COUCHMAN

House-exchanging and house-sitting have taken off in the past few decades, especially with the advent of the internet. Dozens of online agencies bring house-exchangers, homeowners and house-sitters together. These are good ways to ensure your house in France is looked after without having to pay a fortune. As always, there are some tips to follow and pitfalls to avoid.

House-exchanging enables you to have a holiday for less than the normal cost. You swap your home and usually your car with people who live in a place where you want to stay. In addition to the financial benefits, you have the security of knowing that your home is lived in while you are away. House-exchange partners often become friends, too.

Exchanges can be simultaneous – you occupy each other's homes at the same time – or non-simultaneous – you stay with each other consecutively as guests. The latter works best where you each have an independent part of the house.

Exchanges are often arranged through friends or relatives. However, it is increasingly common to use specialist websites to find exchange partners. In that case, you pay a monthly or annual fee to the website, which posts photos of your home and a description of what is on offer.

Ruth and Ron Fosker own a flat in London, which they have exchanged for properties in Paris, Champagne and Lot. Ron says: "The more you pay, the more exchange opportunities are available so we use one of the biggest UK-based websites that features thousands of properties."

## SPECIFIED TASKS

If you have to go away for several weeks or months, or even just on holiday, a house-sitter is an alternative to leaving



House-exchanges and house-sitting are enjoying a rise in popularity

MANY PET-OWNERS GREATLY PREFER A HOUSE-SITTER TO USING EXPENSIVE KENNELS AND DISRUPTING THEIR ANIMALS' LIVES

your home empty. The sitter lives in your home while carrying out certain specified tasks, such as looking after your pets, gardening, pool maintenance and collecting and forwarding mail.

Many pet-owners greatly prefer this to using expensive kennels and disrupting their animals' lives. For the house-sitters themselves, it is a good way of getting to know an area prior to moving there.

As with house-exchange partners, you can find sitters

through personal recommendation, website listings or classified ads. Websites normally charge a fee to house-sitters and sometimes to homeowners, although this varies. Most individual house-sitters do not charge for their services unless the tasks involved are particularly onerous.

They pay their own travel expenses and enjoy rent-free accommodation in exchange for looking after the property. Agencies, on the other hand,

do charge a fee per day. While they provide vetted and police-checked sitters, they can work out expensive and you have less control over the choice of sitter.

## USEFUL TIPS

People who have exchanged properties or used house-sitters agree on some basic tips:

- Invest in a good quality write-up and photos of your property for house-exchange websites. This increases the chances of finding good exchange partners.
- Find out about exchange partners and build up a rapport beforehand. Ron Fosker says: "You are more likely to respect each other's property that way."
- Always take up references for house-sitters and interview them personally if possible.
- Draw up an agreement. Many websites offer a model version that you can adapt to your own circumstances. Be clear about issues such as who will pay the utilities bills and what duties house-sitters will perform. "You need to make it crystal clear up front what they are required to do," says Vikki Schofield, who had a mixed experience with house-sitters in Lot.
- Check with your property and car insurers. Most insurers are only too pleased if a property is occupied in its owners' absence and should not increase your premium.
- Leave clear instructions for appliances and other aspects of the property and provide contact details in case problems arise. ■

## USEFUL WEBSITES

**House-exchanging**  
[www.houseexchange.com](http://www.houseexchange.com)  
[www.homelinks.com](http://www.homelinks.com)  
**House sitting**  
[www.housecarers.com](http://www.housecarers.com)  
[www.mindmyhouse.com](http://www.mindmyhouse.com)

## CASE STUDY: Linda and David Hatfield

Linda and David are seasoned house-exchangers. Their immaculate modern house near Verfeil in Tarn-et-Garonne has a swimming pool and a separate guest suite. They have done two house-exchanges from their former property nearby: a simultaneous exchange with a family from Shropshire and a non-simultaneous swap with people in Cape Town. They have also used house-sitters.

The Hatfields use internet agencies to find exchanges. "You have to be prepared to do a lot of research," David says. "You need to be clear about the criteria for the property you want. The quality of the photos and the write-up also says a lot about the people exchanging."

"It's important to get to know the people before they come since the agencies can't vet them personally," Linda says. "We email, phone and Skype beforehand and have remained friends with our exchangers."

Linda adds: "An important benefit is that you get a rent-free home with all amenities, not an impersonal gîte. You get to know an area better than as a tourist. You also know that your home is secure in your absence. We are planning our next exchange using [houseexchange.com](http://houseexchange.com)."



*Above: Linda and David's home in Tarn-et-Garonne has a separate guest suite making it ideal for non-simultaneous house-exchanges*



*Right: Seasoned house-exchangers Linda and David Hatfield always make sure they get to know the people they are swapping with before they make a commitment*



*House-sitting proved the perfect solution when Per and Vanessa Edqvist went on holiday this year*

## CASE STUDY: Vanessa and Per Edqvist

The Edqvists live in a three-bedroom Quercy stone farmhouse. They used a house-sitter for the first time this year, having previously asked neighbours to feed their cat.

"Normally, we go away for less than a week," Per says. "This year we wanted a longer holiday, so we asked a friend to house-sit for us. She knows the area well and the timing was perfect for both of us."

Vanessa adds: "Our friend stayed for several days before we went so we could show her what to do. This was important because these old houses have their eccentricities. We felt relaxed on holiday because our cat was looked after by someone he knows and likes."

All went well except that the swimming pool pump stopped after a severe thunder storm. "Fortunately, a neighbour sorted it out," Per says. "This underlines the importance of leaving local contact details. We would certainly use a house-sitter again but we might find one via a website next time since it's not always possible to co-ordinate dates with friends."

