

Fallbrook family exchanging houses for summer vacation

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For the Fieri family, all the lights are green for a much-anticipated family vacation to Europe, but their house won't be empty while they're gone. Instead, the Fieris are participating in a home swap and will be exchanging houses with two international families who have made Fallbrook their summer vacation destination. The Fieris used the website www.homeexchange.com (the same site Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet use in the movie "The Holiday") to locate two families to swap houses with for their six-week-long vacation.

"Staying in hotels all that time would just be prohibitive," said Danni Fieri, a sixth grade teacher at Iowa St. School. "So I thought about the home exchange thing."

Users pay just \$100 to list their house on the Web site for a year, but the actual swap is free. Fieri said she started the process last summer, and that it took about six months to finalize the details for their trip.

The Fieris and their two daughters will fly into Paris, spend two and a half weeks in Switzerland, and then three weeks in England. Their son will be joining them from his job in Tokyo for part of the vacation. They are also swapping cars with each family, so they have transportation while they are there.

"You can go anywhere in the world," Fieri said, adding that she hadn't even thought about going to Switzerland before she started searching destinations on the Web site. The Web site allows users to search by the place they want to go, as well as perform reverse searches for people who are looking to come to their area.

Fieri said the challenge was finding people who wanted to swap at the same time and for the same place.

"I found a lot of people really wanted to be right next to the beach," she said. "But [Fallbrook is] good for people who want to get out and be active and also have a homey place to settle into and go on excursions."

Fallbrook residents of 20 years, the Fieris listed outdoor activities such as tennis and bike riding and local events including the farmer's market among the town's attractions. Fieri said the outdoor experience appealed to both families coming, who have children in their teens.

"They're going to get to know Fallbrook too," said her husband Dale.

Fieri said she plans to put together a list of her favorite places in Fallbrook and leave directions for day trips to the beach and cities such as San Diego and Los Angeles. Family in the area will pick up the international visitors from the airport and settle them into the Fieris' house.

"A lot of people seem to be surprised that I'm comfortable having strangers come stay in my home," Fieri said. "I think it's going to be great."

Fieri said she felt very safe with the process, as names and addresses are kept private on the Web site until users choose to exchange them with their contacts. The Web site also provided a contract, which each family signed and mailed to the other.

In addition to email communication, they were also able to do a Skype video chat with the family in England. The Fieris said they have no concerns about the swap.

"I think these are really sweet people," Fieri said. "The Swiss family sent the contract back with a box of chocolates in the mail. And we're going to be at their home, so it's kind of an inherent agreement that you will care for things the way you would want things cared for at your house."

"I'm hopeful," her husband Dale said. "It seems like a great idea. It sounds like the way to go there and spend a little time and see the culture."

The swap gives them the "living like a local" experience the family was looking for, and the opportunity to spend more time exploring local attractions. A resort in the Alps recommended by the Swiss family, a hike on a chocolate and cheese trail, and a picturesque castle made their short list. In England, Fieri looks forward to getting inspiration for her teaching with a trip to the British Museum and a visit to a neighboring town where author Jane Austen was born.

Fieri said she fielded hundreds of responses and made many offers of her own before finally working out the itinerary for the swap, but everyone is looking forward to enjoying the final product.

"It was a very, very time consuming process, but it wasn't difficult," she said. "It was just a matter of putting the time in, and it was a labor of love."

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Courtesy photo. Photos like this one of the inside of the Fieris' Fallbrook home were posted on the Web site they used to exchange homes with couples internationally.

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