



## Strangers in the House

When we agreed to swap houses with complete strangers, what in heaven's name did we get ourselves into? As it turned out, a lesson in trust

BY AURELIA C. SCOTT

If you announce that you have just returned from a vacation that involved exchanging homes with perfect strangers, people say, "Wow!" and then they frown.

"You lived in their house and they lived in yours and you did not know them at all beforehand?"

"Yup," I say. "It was great."

Some people are persuaded by my good cheer. Others cut right to the chase.

"Did they leave their underwear?"

"I guess so."

"So you looked!"

"No! I just saw it was there and closed the drawer."

"How do you know that they didn't do the same thing?"

"I don't know," I say, remembering suddenly the lipstick-red push-up bra that I had left in my lingerie drawer. It was an impulse buy that I never wear and thus did not take with me.

"See?" crows my doubting Thomas. "I could never exchange houses. What if they went through my drawers?"

The "they" in question certainly used my drawers. I had emptied two of them and carted half of my section of the closet up to the attic so that they would have room to hang up their clothes. But I had forgotten about the red bra. And to think that since our return I have been nattering on about how well you get to know people by staying in their home. I meant books and music, not underwear. Mine or theirs.

But I get ahead of myself. Last year, Bob and I signed up with a home exchange organization. We had heard plaudits over the years about this inexpensive way (continued on p.130)

Illustration by Diane Bigda

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neighborhood superette. We chatted with Steve at Fairlight Quality Meats—"Well, hello! You're the Americans!" He had been waiting for us to appear.

We took the ferry to Sydney, walked the beach every day, and yes, we did visit many must-see sites. But having a house that was a real home instead of a rental gave us an excuse to putter ourselves into contentment. Watering the patio plants, sweeping up the eucalyptus leaves, even taking out the recycling on the correct night was fun. We got to know the neighbors and more nights than not, ate in, cooking whatever Steve recommended on the powerful backyard barbecue. Curled on the couch in the evening, reading a raft of Kieran and Tim's collection of Australian authors, I visualized them settled on the futon couch in our study. I wondered which books they were reading.

Our collection of Donna Leon's Venetian mysteries, as it turned out. And "your marvelous book on baseball," said Tim, frowning, "but I may have put it back in the wrong place on the shelf."

"No worries," said Bob, making them laugh with his use of Australia's most ubiquitous phrase.

Knowing that they would return home before we left Australia, we had planned this meeting from the start. Dinner at Ash's Table on Manly Beach. Over grand Australian red wine, one rack of lamb, one beef filet, and two grilled barramundi, we greeted each other like the old friends we had inadvertently become.

"People at the office won't believe me when I tell them it was great," Kieran was saying. "But those are the same people who insisted before we went that your address wouldn't exist."

"You don't know anything about them." "What if they wreck your house?" we chimed in.

"Too right!" Tim shook his head. "Of course, an exchanger does need to be a trusting kind of person."

"And not too private."

We all nodded, silent for a moment—although I did not then recollect that red bra. Then Kieran put down her knife and fork. "So, where are we each going next?" she asked, as we raised our glasses to trust.

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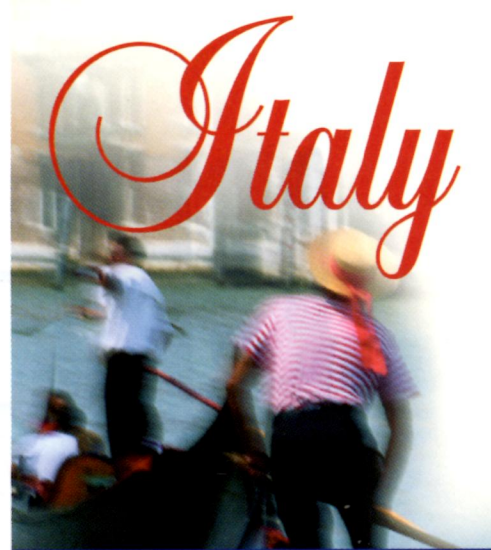
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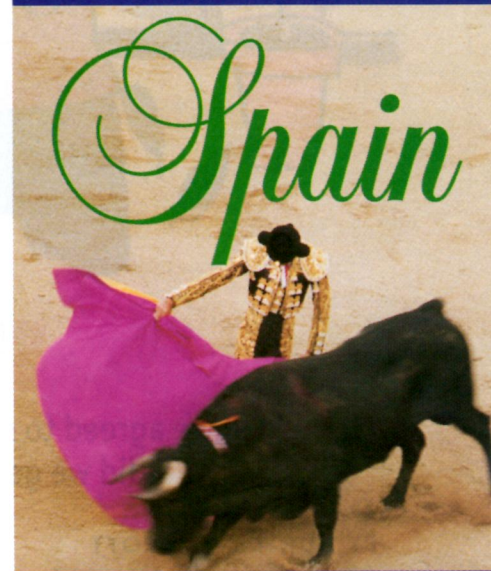
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## Reflections

(continued from p.132) to vacation, and after meeting the delightful English couple with whom our next-door neighbor had exchanged homes, we decided to list our house. I wrote a description—a gracious Victorian with a beautiful backyard, deck, and ocean views—sent in the annual dues, and waited to see what would happen.

It was like being the popular girl at the dance. Within two weeks, we had offers from Scotland, Ireland, and France. A home in Oxford, England, followed. Now, I have wanted to visit Oxford ever since reading the scene in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* where Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane finally kiss. But the timing was wrong, so I sent an agonized "no thank you."

And then we heard from Kieran and Tim in Australia. "Hi! My husband and I have recently joined the home exchange service and saw your listing. Your place sounds wonderful—just what we are looking for." As it turned out, they, too, were just who we were looking for.

They had a house in Manly, a seaside town with a famously beautiful beach a short ferry ride from Sydney. They could come in January, which meant that they would visit New England in the midst of winter ski season and we would visit New South Wales in the midst of summer beach season. They would drive our Honda; we would drive their Nissan. It sounded like a dream come true. Our friends and family thought that it sounded certifiable.

"But you don't know anything about them." "What if they wreck your house?" "It could be a scam—when you get back, they'll have taken everything."

"But such an expensive scam," said Bob. "How would they know whether we have anything worth taking?"

"Well then, how do you know they really have a house? By the time you find out it's not there, it'll be too late." And, in a tone of dire prediction, "The whole street might not exist."

"Road," I corrected. "The address is Augusta Road."

"Well, how do you know there even is an Augusta Road?" This was said with some asperity, as if we didn't get it.

We didn't. We were too busy getting ready. I took to walking around the house with my hands on my hips looking for flaws—the paint colors in the bedroom and kitchen, for instance, which had bothered me since we had moved in. Bob addressed more significant issues, such as the back door, which let in drifts of snow after every winter storm. Autumn passed in a blur of weekend projects.

"They won't know the difference," warned a friend. No matter. One month before our exchange, we were exhausted yet reveling in three newly painted rooms, new baseboard in the bedroom, a reorganized kitchen, a cleaned-up basement, and a weather-tight back door.

It was time to sign the exchange agreement that Kieran had developed, and to mail each other the house keys. Our agreement covered everything from taking out the trash and cleaning the house to emergency contacts and liability in case of a car accident, but "any tough lawyer could break it," said a son-in-law.

"True," we agreed. "But isn't the last line nice?" It read, *We will respect your home and belongings and are looking forward to a wonderful holiday. Kind regards.*

There may have been a moment when the taxi turned left onto Augusta Road and the driver began to count off the house numbers that we held our breath. I know that we looked at each other, that we held hands in sudden, belated anxiety. What in heaven's name had we gotten ourselves into?

A long, narrow, bright house. White walls. Wide polished Australian pine floors. A few choice pieces of furniture—sideboard, armoire, chest, table, chairs—all of them the honey color of the floor. Wooden blinds through which the hot sun shadowed across the bed's puffy white duvet, the navy blue couch. French doors opening onto a deck with a eucalyptus-shaded patio beyond. A bottle of Australian champagne in the fridge. Three vases filled with fresh flowers by Kieran's sister.

Within a day, it was home. We bought milk at the corner Blue Store, so named for its sky-blue paint job. We found Bega Australian cheese, fresh-baked bread, and Australian Rainforest Honey at the