

**Between Low Cost and Environmental Concern.
A Research on Italian Home Swappers' profile and motivation**

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary societies have observed the expansion of alternative, non-institutionalized travel trends, which oppose mainstream tourism by providing consumers with a broader range of alternatives. Between alternative forms of tourism, very few studies have focused on home-exchange and this is in spite of its rapid growth, which has recently been observed even in countries where it has long remained a niche phenomenon. With this formula, tourists have the opportunity to organize custom tailored trips without seeking the services of travel mediators and with the only cost of the loan of their own home. This paper presents the results of a survey on Italian house-swappers and discusses their socio-economic profile, motivations and lifestyles

Key words: Tourism, home-exchange, alternative tourism, DIY tourism, Italy.

INTRODUCTION

If you've seen the movie "The Holiday," you can understand the appeal in trading homes, and lives, with someone else a half a world away. And though there is no guarantee of falling in love with one's exchange partner's brother, for folks who have always wanted to travel to another country and see the local culture from within it, the idea of home exchange can be the perfect way to accomplish this. Sometimes the attraction of a faraway place is dampened by the cost of trying to find accommodation on top of expensive airfare. But for those who participate in home exchange vacations, the expense of staying in costly lodging is eliminated – all it costs is the loan of your own home. For people who are concerned about the environment, a home exchange also eliminates the need for draining the resources of a local culture to accommodate foreign travellers. [Published by Buzzle Staff and Agencies on 10/3/2007]

Tourism is the fastest growing industry in the world. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) tourism in 2009 has generated 9% of the global gross national product and 7.6% of total employment (WTTC 2010). In spite of global recession, in 2008 there were over 922 million international tourist arrivals, with a growth of 1.9% as compared to 2007. It has been estimated that tourism in the 21st century will be the biggest industry of the world and its contribution to global employment will rise to 8.4% by 2019.

Tourism, globally, is not only increasing quantitatively but also qualitatively, with the appearance of new forms. Recent years have been marked by strong differentiation in what has been traditionally called “mass tourism” as well as by the appearance of new ways of travelling (Cohen 1988, 1995; Sharpley 2003).

Overall, research on those travelling and visiting places for the purpose of entertainment, knowledge and education often highlights the development of a new type of tourist who is always looking for original and quality solutions. Among studies focusing on new forms of tourism, little attention has been dedicated to those people who decide to take a vacation by exchanging their homes. This paper presents and analyses the first data gathered through a pilot study, which aims to portray the profile of "home swappers" in Italy. The research is a joint project between the University of Bergamo and the Italian branch of HomeLink International, one of the better established and more widespread networks for home exchange.

TYPES OF TOURISM

Scholars in tourism studies tend to divide tourism into mass and alternative tourism. Mass tourism usually refers to large numbers of people seeking to spend their holidays in popular resort destinations. Alternative tourism is instead commonly referred to as "special interest tourism" and it is usually taken to mean alternative forms of tourism which give emphasis on the contact and understanding of inhabitants' way of living and the local natural environment (Smith and Eadington 1992; Douglas and Darrett 2001).

Although a distinction largely still in use, dichotomizing tourism into mass and alternative tourism seems today to be fairly incorrect and, on the whole, misleading; this is because mass tourism has differentiated a great deal. In this regard, empirical research has demonstrated that the most recognizable trend in tourism is today *segmentation* (Macchiavelli 2008): almost all tourists search nowadays for "alternative" holidays. For these reasons, in the present context, all tourism can somehow be defined as "alternative". Behind this shift there are different factors, such as the increase in people's level of wealth and education. The improvement in the means of transport and communication has also played an important role. The western tourist is now mature, he has travelled a great deal and can identify good value for money; he is no longer interested in his destination, but in the different experiences he can have; what is important for the modern tourist is not simply to be in a specific place, but how to experience it in the best possible way.

Thanks to the rapid expansion of information technologies, tourists can easily find what they want, choosing between different options even without the intermediation of traditional operators. In this regard, literature sometimes talks of an "empowered tourist", a tourist who is able to independently search and find what he/she wants. Last, but not least, some alternative forms of tourism – such as sustainable or eco tourism - have also emerged as a result of an increase in environmental concerns among the population.

To summarize, the considerable development in specialized tourism depends on:

- the increase in wealth and level of education;
- the travel experiences of tourists;
- the improvement in means of transport and decrease in their cost;
- rapid expansion of the Internet, making it easier to obtain information about new opportunities;
- increased environmental concern

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND FREE HOSPITALITY

Between the many new forms of "alternative" tourism, finding sustainable ways of travelling is an area that has seen interesting growth in recent years (Holden 2000). People who more often opt for this kind of holiday usually have a particular profile. They are often better

educated than the average tourist, not very young and usually employed in the service sector (white collar/civil sector).

Sustainable tourism has grown in response to the several damages caused to the environment by the rapid development of the tourist industry, and also to the attention drawn on these issues by environmental movements since the 80s. As is often claimed, not only the increase in the number of tourists travelling the world each year has a negative impact on the environment. Becoming a place of attraction for tourists does not necessarily mean there will be much in economic returns for local communities. As it is well known, chain resorts very often import goods, food, and even workers to serve tourists needs. With many world resorts offering all-inclusive packages, some areas fail to benefit from the growth of tourism.

One of the most often underlined characteristics of sustainable tourism is its small scale and its consideration for host peoples. As Cater and Lowman (1994) note in their book, sustainable tourism radically contrasts with mass tourism, which is often characterized by large-scale multinational concerns that repatriate the profits to offshore countries. This kind of tourism not only aims not to exploit and degrade the environment but benefits those who are on the receiving end by fostering the involvement of local people in the tourism development process (Krippendorf 1997; Wall 1992). Thus, sustainable tourism exceed purely a concern for the physical environment that typifies what has also been called “green tourism”, to include economic, social and cultural aspects. Some operators can currently be defined as sustainable tour operators because they propose innovative destinations, looking at the same time for accommodation and means of transport that have the least possible impact on the local ecosystem. Their engagement in this field seems to be very important as it involves local inhabitants in the supply of tourist services, enabling them to develop professional skills in this area.

Seen from this perspective, home exchanging can be seen as a form of sustainable tourism. In many ways, swappers correspond to the standard profile of sustainable tourist: they live among the inhabitants, buy their products, share their culture and get to know all typical aspects of the destination they reach. Their presence in the region does not produce any negative effects on local community, which, on the contrary, can gain economic and cultural advantages from their stay. Besides this aspect, home exchange allows tourists to travel while making savings in the cost of accommodation, which for some people may mean travelling to a destination that might not otherwise be affordable.

Table 1: Alternative ways of travelling by level of economic and environmental concern

		Environment	
Cost		+	-
	-	House Exchange	Budget Hotels and resort living
	+	Green tourism, bio-tourism and ecologically responsible tourism	Luxury resort living

But how much does the economic aspect weight upon the choice to swap home for holidays reasons? How environmentally friendly are swappers? And how much does their decision to swap their home depend on a concern for the environment? The following section of this paper will be dedicated to describing the house exchange system as well as answering these questions.

THE BIRTH OF HOME EXCHANGE

The modern phenomenon of home exchange originated in the Fifties between Great Britain and the United States, even if this practice was quite popular during the Middle Ages. In 1953 David Ostroff, a New York teacher and Jan Ryder, a young woman from Great Britain, unaware of each other, had the same idea: they decided to exchange their homes among friends during the summer vacation; David Ostroff asked a group of colleagues, while Jan Ryder proposed the exchange to members of the armed forces, who her husband worked for. A short time later, after they got to know of each other, Ostroff and Ryder understood that their idea could have spread worldwide. Together they gave birth to one of the most important organizations for home exchange, today known as HomeLink International.

From the Fifties until now, HomeLink and other international organizations specialized in home exchange, such as Intervac – also founded in 1953 -, rapidly grew, reaching numerous countries and thousands of members all around the world. During the Nineties these companies improved their services thanks to the growth in popularity of the World Wide Web and the Internet, which allow *swappers* to communicate easier than in the past decades.

Free Hospitality Main Networks

One of the main tools that has fostered the spread of the home exchange phenomenon is the Internet, which currently offers many websites specifically created to promote this kind of vacation. Everyone can enter these sites, even if most of them require the payment of a fee for membership, which allows people to view and, eventually, exchange homes. This fee varies between the different websites. Websites for home exchange clearly explain that their aim is to propose a new and cheaper way of travelling. Swappers can decide to exchange not only their home but also their cars and even their pets, who live for a period of time with new owners.

There are many benefits for those who take a vacation in this unusual way: first of all it is cheaper than other accommodation and allows swappers to enjoy all the comforts of a real home; moreover people find themselves involved in the local context, they can have relationships with neighbours and can experience ordinary life in an extraordinary place. This is the most important element that induces people to exchange their home, because it meets the increasing need to have true experience and to forget traditional standardized holidays.

Once they come back home, swappers have the possibility to evaluate their experience on the official websites through which they have exchanged homes: they can judge home care, express their satisfaction and also any negative aspects of their holiday; very often these suggestions can be seen and read by all the members of the network, which is very helpful in order to have an objective opinion about the organization. Some example of home exchange websites are:

- Home Link International (www.homelink-usa.com) founded in 1953, is a site that is easy to find your way around, has many listings both in the continental U.S. and worldwide, and many photos. Their membership cost is \$90 for one year, the second year is free if no exchange is found.
- Intervac (www.intervac.com), founded in 1953, is one of the oldest organizations for home exchange in the world. The cost for a one-year membership depends on the country in which you live (e.g. U.S.A. \$99.99, Spain €145, that is about \$208)
- Green Theme International (www.gti-home-exchange.com), established in 1989. This site has an emphasis on environmentally conscious travel, it also offers many related articles about home exchange and links to other green travel websites. A one-year membership costs £25 (about 51 US dollars) and includes all member benefits.

- HomeExchange.com (www.homeexchange.com), founded in 1992. This website has a large number of listings, even for somewhat small, obscure locations (i.e. small towns in Michigan), and the site is easy to navigate– which not all of them are. There are several pictures of each available home. The cost for an unlimited one-year membership is \$99.95. The site offers a guarantee that if you don't find an exchange within that first year, a second year is free.

THE GROWTH OF HOME EXCHANGE IN ITALY: THE HOMELINK CASE

HomeLink International was founded in order to create "possibilities for low budget holiday and cultural exchanges in an effort to improve mutual understanding among peoples of the world". The organisation has grown steadily with this mission for over 50 years, largely – as also our data confirm - by “word of mouth”.

The Italian branch of Home Link was established in 1985, since then the Italian network has observed a consistent growth in its membership, rising from 142 members in 1995 to 789 in 2009 (Tab. 1).

Table 2: Number of members

Year	N. of members
1995	142
1996	149
1997	308
1998	319
1999	442
2000	441
2001	453
2002	375
2003	410
2004	454
2005	526
2006	598
2007	726
2008	739
2009	782

Source: Homelink Italia

As in all other countries, HomeLink Italia offers itself as a mediator in the home exchange holiday and it does this mainly through its website www.homelink.it. The person responsible for Italy is Annalisa Rossi Pujatti who manages the Italian portal of Homelink and responds personally to questions posed by people who want to start exchanging their homes for the first time or to questions posed by already registered members. The annual cost of registration is €120 for both new members and those who want to renew their registration. The cost of the registration rises to about €150 when it includes the Homelink book, which lists all houses offered by the HomeLink exchange system. The Italian regions with the highest number of members are Veneto, Lazio and Tuscany, while those with less members are Abruzzo and Molise. When compared with other nations, Italy is placed eighth in the Homelink ranking, after the United States, France, England, Australia, Germany, Canada and Holland.

Given the dimension that this phenomenon has assumed, also in our country, in 2009 we decided to conduct an in-depth investigation aimed at studying the characteristics of *homelinkers* in Italy in greater detail. We did this by means of an online survey which was

published on the University of Bergamo website. In agreement with Homelink Italia, the survey was announced at the beginning of September 2009 in the newsletter sent to all members by the HomeLink coordinator every month. By 1st October 2009 the number of respondents was 156, equal to almost the 20% of the total number of subscribers (the online survey is still on-going). The issues covered by the survey were several, and the questionnaire included questions on members' socio-economic characteristics (level of education, work, type of family, etc.), motivations, travelling and consumption styles, as well as a final part on the evaluation of the services offered by HomeLink Italia. In the following paragraphs of this paper we will concentrate mainly on two aspects, which are: the tourist profile of home-linkers and the motives of the home exchange tourist.

HOME EXCHANGE TOURIST PROFILE

As we already mentioned, the data discussed here refer to 156 Italian exchange families. The data collected evidence that swappers are generally well educated, not necessarily young, more often coming from bigger towns and metropolitan areas. With regard to their jobs, our research confirms what has already emerged in studies conducted in countries other than Italy (De Groote and Nicasi 1994): most of our respondents are teachers or people working in related fields. As argued by Groote and Nicasi (1994), one reason for this is the fact that teachers can be very flexible regarding the period in which they want to travel. However, if this is certainly true, it is also necessary to note that, generally, people with a higher level of education are also usually more open-minded and therefore more willing to try out new ways and alternatives.

Another characteristic that emerged from our study is that families who opt for this type of tourism are usually quite large in number. The majority of our respondents have a family with four members. Swappers are also more discerning in their demands, more conscious about their health and generally interested in "green" issues. About 70% of our sample replied positively to our question about whether they usually buy or consume environmentally friendly products. More than 60% also stated that they often buy organic food and/or fair trade goods.

One element that emerged as particularly significant among these tourists is their level of "trust" in unknown people. Compared with the general Italian population, the level of "trust" among swappers is in fact considerably higher. This is certainly not a surprising finding as one person should "trust" a "generalized other" to agree on swapping his/her own house. We should also consider that for Italians the house is very important, a factor that may also explain why home exchange began spreading in Italy relatively later than in other countries. In this regard, our findings reveal that home exchange is also more common among people who possess an holiday house, which is usually the house swap initially.

Our data on the spread of home exchange seem to confirm how this phenomenon is linked to what has been called "consumer empowerment", a phenomenon that scholars believe is connected with the evolution of the Web 2.0, therefore of a new communication system that is able to "digitize word of mouth". Organizations such as TripAdvisor, whose website features the reviews and opinions of over 30 millions tourists, which influence the choices of tens of thousands of travellers all around the world, provide evidence of the growth of the power of the consumer, which has occurred in no other sector as it has in tourism.

Directly knowing a person who has already experienced a home exchange vacation greatly increases the possibility of choosing this alternative way of travelling (46,8% of our respondents knew someone who did an home exchange before swapping their house); the percentage of respondents who replied that they knew HomeLink through the web is also high (19,9%) especially if compared with newspapers (8,3%) or advertisements (0,6%). Knowing

that other travellers from all parts of the world have had the same experience of staying in the same home gives people peace of mind when making a choice as delicate as this. Relationship marketing (Gronroos 1994) focuses on the importance of interpersonal communication in the current socioeconomic context. If this is true generally for all sectors, it is even more important in tourism because the satisfaction of the traveller strongly depends on the relationships that he/she creates with other travellers, with people working in accommodation facilities, with local inhabitants and with the environment.

MOTIVES OF THE HOME EXCHANGE TOURIST

Home exchange is clearly a "low cost" way of travelling. The growth of "low cost tourism" is usually seen as a consequence of two interconnected phenomena: the increase in the number and availability of low cost airlines - which allows tourists to travel at lower prices without sacrificing basic services or security - and the rise of an *empowered consumer* (Campbell 1995; Kozinets 2002), therefore of a consumer more aware of the many different alternatives out there, who has started to opt for services without "frills" (unnecessary expenditure, e.g. the coffee on board an aircraft), and who is willing to try different formula (e.g. accommodation) and is capable of optimizing his/her time of purchase (e.g. in order to receive advanced booking or through auction on line).

The success of low cost airlines has also forced companies in other sectors to reduce their tariffs. As a consequence the "low cost revolution" has started to spread from airlines to other types of businesses: from cruise ships to hotels. A trend that has recently been reinforced by the economic crisis. Over the last ten years, the low cost way of travelling has become a sort of "style of travel", a conscious choice that cuts across different social classes, from students to professionals¹.

Exchanging homes is clearly located within this trend and for several aspects it could be assimilated to budget hotels, holiday homes, youth hostels, convents, bed and breakfasts and so on. However, as our data also demonstrated, *swappers* have some special characteristics when compared with the usual "low-cost travellers". Behind this choice there is the desire to know the other, to fit into a different cultural context with a more direct approach.

As our research has demonstrated, saving money is only of secondary importance for people that opt for this kind of vacation. For people who replied to our online survey, the most important reason for swapping home is the possibility to go on a truly different holiday (36.5% vs. 14.7% who replied underlined the economic aspect), a fact that clearly differentiates swappers from mass tourists.

Table 3: Motivation for joining HomeLink

	First motivation	Second motivation
Savings	14.7	24.4
Exploitation second home	14.7	10.3
Convenience of staying in a house during the holiday	17.9	8.3
Cultural experience	36.5	25.6
To see less known places	1.9	2.6
Making an environmental friendly holiday	0.6	4.5

¹ With regards to these trends, the University of Bergamo recently carried out some quantitative studies regarding low-cost tourists at the Milano-Orio al Serio Airport, the first low-cost airport in Italy, which confirm these tendencies.

Meet new people	5.1	13.5
Making unusual holiday	1.3	5.8
Other	3.8	0

Home exchanging means creating a relationship that often results in a true friendship with people from other cities and/or countries. In this regard, some scholars have stressed the “intimate” aspects that characterise this type of experience: exchanging homes allows tourists to experience the customs and habits of an area, and become integrated into all aspects of the social fabric of the visited area. Another important element that seem to induce people to choose home exchange is greater environmental concern, because home exchanging is considered a green way to travel. In reality, swappers don't consider this green concern as a strong motivation for their holiday (0.6% as first choice, 4.5% as second choice), but as we have discussed above it appear to be an *implicit* belief in their way to travel, in the choices that they do in what they buy.

CONCLUSION

When discussing the phenomenon of Home Exchange, the mass media generally spread the idea that people decide to spend their holiday by experiencing this alternative way of travelling because they want to save money. This paper has presented and discussed the data of a pilot study which aims to portray the profile of "home swappers" in Italy. As a conclusion we can certainly confirm that home exchange is an emerging form of “alternative” tourism which requires confidence, respect, an open mind, inventiveness, preparation, enthusiasm and flexibility. If the economic aspect is certainly a factor to take into consideration in the explanation of the growth observed by this type of tourism, the possibility to cut the accommodation costs is certainly not the whole story here.

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