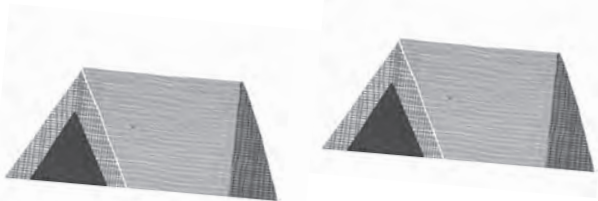


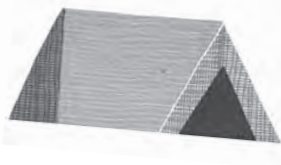
Camping



And then, of course, there's camping, which has never been cooler or more popular. There also now exist family-friendly sites with play areas and luxury bathrooms, yurts with four-poster beds and roll-top baths, and hireable 'tents' that are really more like cottages. For great advice on finding the right campsite for you, or for hiring a caravan, have a look at the amazingly comprehensive www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/system/topicRoot/Camping_and_caravanning.

Feather Down Farms are a brilliant invention. They're camping, but not as we know it. The 'tents' – which have solid wood floors and sturdy canvas walls – live in fields on various organic farms all over Britain; you don't have erect anything. *Au contraire*, these babies have comfy beds (with hay duvets), a flushable loo, a cold chest and even a wood-burning stove. The living area is 45 square metres: i.e. massive compared to a normal tent. And the Feather Down ones are beautiful – like something out of a movie about 1930s bohemians. You get your food from the farm you're staying on; there's no hot water and no electricity, but each farm has a wood-fired oven for pizzas and chickens for organic breakfast eggs. Children love these places and parents do too. Tents sleep six and cost from £345 a week in low season. Very highly recommended – see www.featherdown.co.uk – and there is now a Feather Down in France.

Also, discover the joy of yurts. Most yurt-hire companies are into saving the planet and have lots of ideas for nice gentle activities to do in their corresponding areas. There is also usually organic food somewhere nearby, if it's not growing in the field next door. Yurts are absolutely wonderful and really comfy. On average, a yurt sleeping four would cost around £300 a week, but prices vary depending on the time of year and the location. Here are some good companies:



House Swaps

Try a house swap. Your urban pad – avoiding the prohibitive costs of urban hotels – may be a more attractive proposition for someone than you could possibly imagine, even for people who appear to live idyllic lives by the seaside/deep in photogenic countryside. Use the home swap places (see below) but remember that it is also worth approaching holiday home owners you find online directly to ask them if they'd be interested in a swap. I've done this twice, with great success (by email and enclosing photographs). Ask, and you shall receive.

Anyway, house swaps are an invention of genius and can be hugely successful, providing you with a fantastic holiday anywhere in the world at bargain-basement prices. There are a few ground rules:



The main one is DON'T LIE when describing either your house or your neighbourhood.

If you live in a nice area but it borders a rough one – pretty much a given in many urban places, including London – say so. If your neighbourhood is rough but your neighbours divine, say so. If you're trying to swap your flat for an apartment in New York, your potential swappers will know exactly what you're talking about and won't be put off. But they will, rightly, be extremely annoyed if you make Tottenham sound like Mayfair, then they discover it isn't quite so once they've travelled thousands of miles.



Don't exaggerate the virtues of your house. Don't do it down either, but do be honest. If the wi-fi doesn't work on the top floor, say so, rather than saying the house is fully wireless. If the bicycles you're leaving for your swappers' use are functional but ancient, tell them. If you live under the flight path, let them know.



Try and give a sense of the neighbourhood. Saying it's nice for families, or whatever, isn't enough. Try and paint a portrait – the delicious smoothies available round the corner, the great secret picnic spot in

the local park, the café/shop/restaurant situation, the friendliness of your neighbours, the good public transport links, the fact there's a school nearby and things are noisy between 3.30 and 4 p.m. and so on.



Communicate as much as possible. Send pictures, of course, but don't be shy of asking any questions you may have, no matter how numerous or nitpicky – and don't get stroppy when people do it back to you.



Don't assume that what you see as a disadvantage can't be viewed by a potential swapper as a virtue, and vice versa. If your local garden square is overrun with toddlers at the weekends, that may be annoying for sunbathing singletons but great for young parents. If your local pub has a late licence and jazz nights on a Thursday, it may annoy a lover of peace and quiet but sway a night-owl music fan. If all your restaurants are ethnic, that could be a foodie's idea of bliss; if they're all greasy spoons, they might please a chronic Anglophile. And so on.

The websites you need are:

* www.homebase-hols.com

* www.homeexchange.com

* www.homelink.org.uk

* www.gti-home-exchange.com

Don't forget the micro-holiday, also known as the weekend house swap. Basically, you swap houses with a friend from Friday to Sunday – a friend who lives out of the way, not the friend in the next street, though I suppose that could work too. That's it. Free, completely easy and works especially well if you have children who are the same sort of age, because they can play with each other's toys.

