

Homes away from home Vacation houses are finally taking off in North America

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Tracey Bryksa, with daughters Hayley, left, and Taylor enjoy the pool at the private vacation home they rented in Florida.

THERE really is no place like home, and that's especially true when you're on a vacation.

How many times have you come home from a holiday happy to be sleeping in your own bed and eating home-cooked meals again?

So what if you could take your home on vacation with you? OK, maybe not your own house but something just like it, if not better.

Vacation homes, long popular in Europe, are finally taking off in North America. The idea is simple -- instead of renting a hotel room or suite, you can rent an entire house with all the comforts of home.

From vacation rental agencies to private home owners, there are countless rental options around the world. Just do a quick search on the Internet and you'll find everything from one-bedroom, high-rise condos on the beach to six-bedroom estates in nearly every corner of the globe. That's exactly how we found houses to rent in Florida last winter. And its how my friend Danielle has rented properties in Mexico three years in a row.

Last summer, we started planning our winter holiday with some close friends. With a one-year-old, three-year-old and four-year-old between us, it was going to be a family vacation. But being stuck in a hotel room with napping children and facing restaurant battles every day was not our idea of a holiday.

A weekend getaway to Thief River Falls the winter before had left us stuck in separate, dark hotel rooms as soon as the kids crashed. While the dads went out to play, the moms had to stay.

Like that was going to happen again! This time, we needed to find somewhere warm, child-friendly and not too expensive. Florida seemed to be the perfect choice -- especially when I discovered the world of vacation homes.

Across the globe, there are literally thousands of houses for rent by the day, week, month or season. It all depends on what you're looking for. Some are rented out by professional property management companies, while many owners sublet their own vacation properties when they are not using them.

Just type in "vacation rental" and you'll find hundreds of websites where the choices are endless. You can rent everything from a basic cottage to a grand mansion in the lap of luxury. Be prepared -- unless you know exactly what you're looking for, it can consume an enormous amount of time sifting through piles of listings.

I spent countless hours on the Internet. We were looking for a house somewhere near the ocean, with three bedrooms and a pool, which was close to amenities and cost less than \$1,000 US.

A word of caution -- book your trip as soon as possible. After sending out dozens of e-mails, only a handful of people responded with availability. And that was planning the trip seven months ahead of time! Many people find a spot and stick with it year after year.

We found a great house in Cape Coral, a community next to Fort Myers in southeast Florida. The house was owned by a couple in Dorset, England. After communicating back and forth on e-mail and asking tons of questions, we sent them a deposit in pounds sterling and we were booked. Now the rental was not without complications. Booking so far ahead, we had seven months of waiting to contend with. We watched Florida get ripped apart by several hurricanes last summer, hoping our house wouldn't be affected. Luckily, the only damage was the screened pool cover was blown off, but it was quickly replaced.

Then our lovely English couple decided to separate. They put their Florida house up for sale and sold it a month before our trip. After getting an alarming e-mail that we could no longer rent the house and realizing our contract could be declared null and void on their whim, they pushed the possession date back just for our stay. We were lucky.

It all worked out in the end. We arrived in Florida and took up residence in our three-bedroom house. Think Linden Woods or Royalwood, but with palm trees. Less than a year old, the house was tastefully decorated with over 2,000 square feet of living space. Not only was it lots of room for three kids and four adults, it was fully equipped with all the comforts of home and more.

Groceries were only a five-minute drive away and we stocked the fridge with everything we wanted, perfect for our crew with three picky children, a vegetarian and another with a severe food allergy. Buying our own food was also much more economical than eating out every day.

We were able to live like Floridians. We'd pop down to the shopping area in the morning, hit the beach in the afternoon and hang out in our private pool in the evening. Then we'd put the kids to bed and the adults could still enjoy the night. It was perfect.

The best feature of the house? As a mom, it was definitely the main floor laundry room. Being away for 10 days with kids, not only could we pack light, we also didn't go home with suitcases full of dirty clothes.

After a week in sunny Cape Coral, we packed up the kids in the mini-van and drove to Orlando, the Mecca of vacation rental properties. Orlando has thousands of vacation homes, with full neighborhoods devoted to short-term rentals. Entire subdivisions have been developed to cater to the tourist market.

This time, we rented a house through a property management company, All Star Vacation Homes. Proving to be a much easier rental experience, not only did we have the peace of mind knowing our booking was secure renting from a large company, we also booked only weeks before our holiday. While some rental agencies use stock images of model homes, their slick website at www.allstarvacationhomes.com took us on a virtual tour of the exact properties that were available.

One of the largest property management companies in Orlando, All Star Vacation Homes started out selling real estate and quickly saw the niche opportunity to expand into vacation rentals. The company has a wide range of homes in seven different developments, from brand new, one-bedroom condos in private, gated communities to luxurious, seven-bedroom estate homes in exclusive neighborhoods. "We work with the builders to create homes that are specifically designed for short-term rentals," says Sara Moore, All Star's vice president of marketing.

While our house in Cape Coral was comfortable, we were blown away by the house in Orlando. It was nothing short of luxurious and could easily put any show home to shame. With over 3,100 square feet, we were living in the lap of luxury with another screened-in swimming pool. The kids even had their own theme rooms -- Buzz Light-Year and Disney Princesses.

Again, we settled in like we were at home. We got up early and ate a full, home-cooked breakfast before embarking on a day at Disney World. And after a fun, but exhausting tour of the theme park, the kids crashed and we were able to immerse our aching muscles in our own private Jacuzzi. Not bad!

While Florida may just be the pinnacle of vacation home rentals, they are available around the world. My friend Danielle Anderson has rented houses in Mexico for the last three winters and swears by it.

She and her husband Arne rented their first home in Playa del Carmen when their daughter was just 11 months old. They wanted to escape the Winnipeg winter, but knew a hotel just wouldn't cut it with a baby. Surfing the Internet, Danielle came across a site called Vacation Rentals by Owner at www.vrbo.com and found a property owned by a Montreal couple.

The fact that it was Canadian-owned gave Danielle the impetus to call and after a lengthy discussion with the friendly owner, they were set to go to Mexico for a week that winter. For only \$900 US, the Andersons rented a beautiful, four-storey, Spanish estate home with tons of room and a rooftop terrace looking out over the ocean.

"For us, it was perfect," says Danielle. "To be stuck in a one-room hotel with a sleeping baby would have been a bit of a drag."

Located just two blocks off the beach, the house was in a safe, gated community that even had a very North American-style grocery store.

"We ate great," Danielle adds. "We went into town a couple of nights, but we were pretty happy just to be at the house." That first year, they got to know the area well and started planning their next vacation. They found several houses they liked and looked them up online when they returned home. The next winter, their choice was closer to the beach and even included daily maid service for only \$100 more.

Last winter, they upgraded yet again and rented a spectacular house just off the beach, complete with a housekeeper who did all the cleaning and would even cook the meals had they wanted her to. That one cost \$1,200 US for the week.

A self-described comfort girl, Danielle says it's nice to go somewhere that's safe and affordable and just stay put.

"We're planning for next year already," she says. "For us it just works."

While you do give up hotel concierges and restaurants, you definitely get more bang for your buck renting a house. For less than the cost of an average hotel room, your family can stay in luxury with more space than you'll ever need. It's like having a home away from home.

*Tracey Bryksa is a Winnipeg writer and regular contributor to the Free Press Sunday Homes section. **Reprinted with permission, Winnipeg Free Press***