



Islands like Syros are what dreams are made of. Especially when it costs nothing to stay there.

## A Home Away From Home, and Not a Dollar Spent

### “We Get Requests Weekly, More Than We Can Say Yes to”

**Names:** Kirsten and Mark Raccuia  
**From:** Chicago, IL  
**Housesat in:** Syros, Greece

A dazzling sunbeam sneaking through the shutters woke me. I had no idea what time it was. But I couldn't wait any longer to see the view.

I was in Syros, Greece. An island off the coast of Athens I hadn't even heard of just seven months before. Most foreign tourists skip Syros, even though it's less than an hour away from Mykonos. That makes it a perfect place for a home exchange, and a tangible feel of traditional Greek island life.

For me and my husband, Mark, participating in a home exchange is about living like a local. We prefer slow travel, which can get expensive if you are staying in a hotel or Airbnb. But if you can stay for free, that changes everything. And I mean everything. The world becomes your playground.

Going to Syros wasn't even a thought

for us until we signed up for a home exchange program. It wasn't because we weren't interested in the Greek islands. But one, we had never heard of Syros and two, traveling in Europe can be expensive.

Actually, every place is expensive when, like us, your regular home is in Malaysia (we moved there from Chicago). So, for the annual agency fee of \$150, we can stay in an eligible home anywhere in the world, for as many nights as we want (with the owner's approval, of course).

That's the thing about home exchange; you can stay in the most expensive countries and not pay a cent for accommodation.

Our host gave us all sorts of tips, and even virtually introduced us to her friends on the island.

We spent Greek Easter with

a group of expats who had been living there for at least 20 years. We got a real taste for local life and what it would be like to live there. (Which Mark and I did talk about.)

We found our perfect beach, savored all the local food, and learned the flavor profiles of various brands of ouzo. We

shopped at the local butcher, did a feta tasting at the local market (who knew there was sheep, cow, and goat milk feta?), and tried the homemade table wine from all the villages.

We had the time to get to know Syros in a way few tourists do. And it's all because of home exchange.

We spent more than five weeks in Greece and Cyprus and paid for only eight days of accommodation. The rest was all home exchange. If we were super-advanced planners, we probably could have used home exchange for those eight days as well.

Speaking of planning ahead... If you have your heart set on a country or town, it's a good idea to send out a lot of messages. Be proactive. The process takes some patience. Not everyone checks their emails daily, and some people may not respond at all.

Now when I wake up, I can't wait to see who has messaged me about an exchange. We get requests weekly, more than we can say yes to. Some people are planning out years in advance, which blows my mind since I can barely plan six months ahead. But if you want to travel the world, and not pay a dime, you can't leave it all to the last minute.—Kirsten Raccuia.

### “Housesitting in Hamburg Was a Fantastic Experience”

**Names:** Cassandra and Joseph Ellis  
**From:** Silver Spring, MD  
**Housesat in:** Hamburg, Germany

Joe and I have always loved to travel and discussed living abroad our entire married life. We know we are not ready to retire and make a permanent move, but we had a friend living in Hamburg, leaving to attend university, who didn't want to give up her apartment. When she asked, “Cassandra, do you want to take the apartment while I'm in school?” we jumped at the prospect and made our plans.

From her three-story walk-up with three bedrooms, in a picturesque suburb of Hamburg, we could walk to the metro or catch a bus outside our door. Public transport is accessible on the S-Bahn, U-Bahn, and buses, and even the ferries along the Elbe River made exploring Hamburg easy.

**“We got to know Syros in a way few tourists do.”**

is available at \$324,900. It's off-grid, running on solar power. A newly constructed three-bedroom home is listed at \$179,000. It comes partially furnished. See: *Cayecaulkerproperties.com*.

### **Dubrovnik, Croatia—The Jewel of the Adriatic**

Set on the Adriatic Sea, once a mighty maritime trading center and now tourism hub Dubrovnik is a centuries-old city that most recently stood in for King's Landing in the HBO show *Game of Thrones*. When looking at the 16th-century stone buildings capped with terracotta barrel tile, seaside battlements, and the baroque and Renaissance architecture of Old Town, you can definitely see why.

Imagine walking down narrow limestone lanes, discovering cute shops, cafés, and eateries...with blue skies and shimmering sea as your backdrop. Just outside this historic center you can still find deals on apartments and condos.

For \$215,000, you can get a one-bedroom apartment with sea views and five minutes' walk from Old Town. Going further out, a 10-minute bus ride from Old Town, is a three-bedroom apartment walking distance to shops and restaurants for \$187,443. See: *Realestatedcroatia.com*.

### **Gili Islands, Indonesia—A True Tropical Island Paradise**

To the east of Bali, off the west coast of Lombok, are a trio of small islands: Gili Trawangan, Gili Meno, and Gili Air.

This is the type of place where you can truly get away from it all. There are no cars or motorbikes but rather bicycles and horse-drawn carts.

Each island has its own character. Trawangan is the most developed and somewhat of a party spot for backpackers, although it offers low-cost dive classes as well. Meno is more low-key—and romantic, much of it deserted so you can have a beach all to yourself. Air is somewhere between the two and an up-and-coming yoga destination. You get to the islands via fast-boat from Bali.

Foreigners are only able to buy homes leasehold in Indonesia. A two-bedroom luxury villa on Gili Trawangan is available for \$150,000. On Gili Meno is a one-bedroom beachfront bungalow, fully furnished, listed for \$66,081. See: *Gili-property.com* and *Indonesiapropertysales.com* ■

## **Real Estate Notes From Our Correspondents Around the World**

■ **Canal Boats in Southern France.** In 1681, King Louis XIV of France presided over the opening of a canal that would connect the wine regions of the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. Today, the Canal du Midi has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site and is still in operation. Live-aboard canal boats regularly traverse this historic waterway—relaxed-looking occupants often holding a glass of chilled rosé wine.

Canal boats have a distinct real estate advantage over their brick-and-mortar counterparts—movability. A canal boat is naturally designed to change locations, enabling you to take advantage of more favorable supply-and-demand conditions elsewhere when you're ready to sell.

Before the advent of railroads, canals were a key component of Europe's transportation infrastructure. As a result, you can motor your canal boat from the Canal du Midi in France to the Black Sea coast of Romania.

Canal boats even allow you to occupy prime real estate in the heart of major metropolitan cities. Many people live aboard canal boats floating on the Thames River in the center of London for a fraction of the rent of an apartment.

Prices vary dramatically. For example, a 33-foot Dutch Steel River Cruiser in need of refurbishment is currently for sale in Burgundy for \$15,000. However, a polished, 42-foot RECLA Tarpon boat with four cabins and located in the Canal du Midi region costs \$110,000. See: *Boatshedmidicanals.com*.—*IL contributor Shawn P. Mitchell.*

### ■ **Sustainable Living in Ubud, Bali.**

Located on the terraced slopes of the Ayung river and surrounded by the tropical Bali forest, the Green Village Bali compound consists of 12 characteristic and sustainable bamboo homes.

Originally the vision of John Hardy, known for his jewelry design, the village has attracted entrepreneurs and celebrities from all over the world.

Bamboo is one of the world's most sustainable and versatile building materials, and all of the bamboo used in the

Green Village is locally grown in Bali and the neighboring island of Java. The properties are designed to withstand extensive sun and rain exposure, while blending in with the natural environment. And even if this is a high-concept, designed living experience, one mantra that applies is that "nature is the luxury," rather than resort-style opulence.

Originally no plans were drawn, instead bamboo models were made. Now, you can learn to build your own models and houses, in workshops which are hosted onsite.

Just a short walk away is the Green School, a campus where students can learn all about the principles of an organic permaculture system, and daily tours are available for those interested in learning more.

The villas and houses are available for sale or rent, an opportunity to spend time close to the natural surroundings of Bali. The Green School, Green Village and bamboo factory can all be visited on a guided tour. See: *Greenvillagebali.com*—*IL contributor Josephine Brierley.*

■ **Malaysia's Foreign Investment Thresholds Decrease.** There may be good news on the horizon for foreigners wanting to buy property in Malaysia. Until now, the minimum purchase price for condos in urban areas has been RM1 million. But from January 1st, 2020, the government will lower the threshold to RM600,000 (\$144,000).

The reason behind the decreased threshold is to help sell off the glut of high-priced condos currently on the market.

This change only affects foreigners wanting to invest, not those on an MM2H 10-year visa, who already have different thresholds to adhere to.

The deduction is expected to take place throughout 2020 and will be revisited at the end of the year. It only applies to condos, not landed homes that are currently for sale. It doesn't include new building projects yet to be launched.

Each state in Malaysia has the right to decide on their thresholds for foreign buyers. At the moment, it is still under debate whether Penang will overrule the RM600,000 and choose a different price point for the change.—*IL contributor Kirsten Raccuia.* ■