

Home Swap: Vivien Wilson

Twenty minutes on the train from central Paris, a month's free accommodation, with car. Without further thought we accept the offer. We spend the next few weeks preparing our house. We buy fresh sheets and towels, organise service visits from plumbers and electricians. We tidy every cupboard and scrub our house until it gleams.

We arrive at our destination and collect a heavy bunch of keys from a neighbour who shows us how to unlock the three locks, the last awkwardly just inches above the ground. An overpowering smell hits us as we open the door; a mixture of stale cooking grease and something worse. The hall is small and dark. We throw open every window. We don't speak. We climb the narrow stairs and find our bedroom with its strange bed; two mattresses on a low frame. On every surface, there are objects, all thick with dust. I try to ignore it and check the bathroom, pleased the toilet, at least, seems clean, but there's no shower. We find that downstairs. It's tiny and sprouting black mould in place of grouting and there's no ventilation. The kitchen too is filthy - the floor and wall tiles are thick with grease. A large dirty cloth is pushed up against a cupboard. Beside the sink, the dish rack is piled high with blackened pots and pans. They all have holes. Under the sink there are three jumbo sized bottles of cleaning fluid. For us to use, I suppose.

We had been told that there was a washing machine and a dryer. We open what we think is a cupboard and discover steep steps into a basement. In a darkened corner, we find a car and the washing machine, and the source of the smell, a full load of wet mouldy washing! I want to go home; I want *my* kitchen, *my* bed, *my* shower, and *my* washing machine!

'Hardly a fair exchange,' I mutter as I set about scrubbing.

The next morning we catch the R.E.R into central Paris and visit the Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens. Each day, we discover a new museum, church or park. We become experts at negotiating the Metro and the Supermarché. I practise my French in restaurants. We feel like Parisians when, after three weeks, we finally catch the plane home to Australia, hoping our house is still habitable.