

GUIDE · CHECKLIST

The Work Exchange *Starter Kit*

Work exchange is real work, and it deserves real terms. How to find a good one, value it honestly, and write down the agreement that keeps it good.

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Why EnRoute treats work exchange as a category, not an afterthought

Most job boards do not list work exchange at all. The platforms that specialise in it treat it as a lifestyle, which is why so many exchanges end with a traveller cleaning eight hours a day for a bunk bed and calling it an experience.

An exchange is a job with a non-cash wage. It has hours, duties, a place to sleep, meals, sometimes money, and a start and end date. Treated that way, it is one of the most accessible ways to live somewhere for a season, learn a trade, or bridge the gap between two paid seasons. Treated as a favour, it is an invitation to be taken advantage of.

On EnRoute, work exchange listings carry a mobility Geo-Flex score that rewards clear housing, clear hours and clear dates, and every one was read by a person before it went live. This kit is what to do once you have found one.

THE FAIR-TRADE RULE

Value what you give at the local minimum wage. Value what you get at what you would pay for it locally. If the first number is more than about 20% above the second, the exchange is underpaying you.

TYPE	WHAT YOU DO	WHAT YOU TYPICALLY GET	WATCH FOR
Hostels and guesthouses	Reception, housekeeping, bar, social events. 20–25 h/week.	Dorm or staff room, sometimes meals, sometimes tips or a small stipend	Hours creeping above what was agreed; "on call" that is really a shift.
Farms and homesteads	Planting, harvest, animals, building. 25–30 h/week.	Private room or cabin, all meals, often produce to take	Physical intensity; isolation; no clear day off.
Sailing and boats	Crew, cooking, maintenance, watches.	Berth, meals, passage to a new place	Skipper competence, safety gear, and who pays if you leave mid-passage.
Eco-lodges, retreats, camps	Guest services, kitchen, activities, maintenance.	Room, meals, access to the activity (yoga, diving, climbing)	Season-long commitments with no exit; the "training" that never ends.
Family and household	Childcare, tutoring, language exchange, elder company.	Private room, meals, pocket money	Boundaries between work and family time; live-in dynamics.

AU PAIR AND FORMAL VOLUNTEERING ARE SEPARATE TRACKS

Au pair programmes are regulated in most countries with their own visa, hours cap and minimum pocket money. Formal volunteering with registered organisations (conservation, disaster relief) usually has its own visa class and a fee. Both are good routes; neither is what this kit calls work exchange, which is the informal, direct arrangement between a host and a traveller.

02

Volunteering, working, and the visa line

The part everyone skips, and the part that gets people turned away at the border.

Most countries define "work" as any activity you would normally be paid for, regardless of whether you are. Receiving accommodation and meals in exchange for labour is, in the strict reading of most immigration codes, work. In practice enforcement varies enormously, but three things are consistently true:

- **A tourist entry does not permit work exchange** in almost any country. Some tolerate short informal exchanges; several (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US) actively do not and have refused entry to travellers who mentioned it.
- **Working-holiday visas permit it**, and are the correct route for the countries that offer them to your passport, typically for ages 18 to 30 or 35.
- **A stipend changes the category** in many places from "volunteering" to "employment" and can trigger tax and social-security obligations for the host, which is why good hosts are careful about it.

DESTINATION	USUAL ROUTE FOR AN EXCHANGE	NOTES
EU / Schengen (for non-EU)	Working-holiday visa where available; otherwise the tourist 90 days at your own risk	EU citizens can exchange freely in any member state. Non-EU travellers should not describe an exchange as work at the border.
Australia, New Zealand	Working Holiday (417/462; NZ WHV)	Explicitly allowed on the visa. Both countries treat unpaid exchange on a tourist visa as a breach.
Canada	IEC Working Holiday	Tourist entrants have been refused for planned "volunteer" placements at farms and hostels.
United States	No general route	Work exchange on an ESTA or B-2 is a violation. J-1 covers camps and some au pair placements; otherwise there is no legal path.
UK	Youth Mobility Scheme	For eligible nationalities; otherwise a visitor may not work, paid or unpaid, with narrow exceptions.
Latin America, SE Asia, Georgia, Turkey	Tourist entry, commonly tolerated	Enforcement is rare for short informal stays; still not technically permitted in most of these countries.

NEVER VOLUNTEER THE WORD "WORK" AT A BORDER

If asked why you are visiting, you are travelling and staying with people you know, which is true. Carry proof of onward travel and funds. This is not advice to lie; it is advice not to describe an informal arrangement in words that immigration codes define narrowly.

03

Valuing the trade

Put a number on both sides before you say yes.

Hosts rarely do this arithmetic, and travellers almost never do. Done in five minutes, it turns "does this feel fair" into a number you can negotiate with.

What I give

Hours per week _____

Local minimum wage per hour (USD) _____

Weekly value of my work (A) _____

Use minimum wage even if your skills are worth more; if you are doing skilled work (web design, carpentry, teaching), use the local going rate instead and expect the host to acknowledge it.

What I get

Room (what a similar room rents for per week locally) _____

Meals (per week, what I would spend) _____

Stipend, tips, pocket money per week _____

Extras: lessons, passage, activities, equipment _____

Weekly value received (B) _____

$A \div B =$ _____

Under 1.2: fair. **1.2 to 1.5:** negotiate the hours down. **Over 1.5:** you are underpaid; walk unless the intangibles (a skill, a language, a place you could not otherwise reach) are exceptional.

Worked example

	HOSTEL IN LISBON	FARM IN GEORGIA
Hours per week	24	30
Local minimum wage / h (USD equiv.)	\$5.50	\$1.70 (no legal minimum; market rate)
A: weekly value given	\$132	\$51
Room (local weekly rent equivalent)	\$150 (dorm bed)	\$60 (private room, rural)
Meals	\$0 (not provided)	\$45 (three a day)
Stipend	\$0	\$0
B: weekly value received	\$150	\$105
A ÷ B	0.88, fair	0.49, generous

The farm looks worse on hours and better on value, which is typical: rural hosts provide more and pay in kind; city hostels provide a bed in a place where the bed is expensive.

04

The agreement, before you arrive

Written, even if it is a long message. Both sides keep a copy.

Almost every bad exchange story is a story about something that was never written down. A good host will welcome this; a host who resists it has told you what you need to know.

TERM	WHAT TO AGREE	AGREED
Dates	Arrival, departure, and the notice either side gives to end early	
Hours	Per week, which days, and the two days off. Whether "on call" counts.	
Duties	Listed. Anything else is asked for, not assumed.	
Accommodation	Private or shared, with whom, and what it includes (bedding, wifi, laundry)	
Meals	How many, who cooks, dietary needs, whether food is stocked or budgeted	
Money	Any stipend or tips, how and when paid; any costs you are expected to bear	
Insurance	Who covers injury at work; your own travel insurance and whether it covers this activity	
Equipment and safety	Protective gear for farm, building or boat work; training given	
Communication	Who to talk to if something is wrong; a check-in after the first week	
Visa	Which of you has checked the immigration position, and what was concluded	

ONE PARAGRAPH THAT COVERS MOST OF IT

"To confirm: I arrive on 3 May and leave on 14 June. I will work 24 hours a week, Monday to Thursday, mainly reception and breakfast service, with weekends off. I get a bed in the staff room, breakfast and one other meal on working days, and free laundry. Either of us can end the arrangement with a week's notice. If anything comes up we will talk about it on the Friday of my first week. Does that match what you had in mind?"

05

Red flags, and how to leave

Before you go

- ☐ Hours are vague, or higher than 30 a week.
- ☐ The host will not put terms in writing.
- ☐ A fee, deposit or "contribution" is required.
- ☐ Reviews mention people leaving early.
- ☐ The listing photos are stock, or the host will not video call.
- ☐ The host describes the work as "helping out" with no end time.

Once there

- ☐ Hours exceed the agreement in the first week.
- ☐ Your passport or documents are asked for "safekeeping".
- ☐ Accommodation differs from what was agreed.
- ☐ You are asked to do work that needs training you were not given.
- ☐ Meals are withheld or rationed as a lever.
- ☐ You feel unsafe, or isolated without transport.

Leaving early

1

Name the gap.

In writing: "We agreed 24 hours; this week was 38." Most fixable exchanges get fixed here.

2

Give the notice you agreed.

A week, unless safety is the issue. If it is, leave the same day; you owe no notice to a host who has broken the terms.

3

Have the exit funded.

Before you arrive anywhere, hold enough to reach the nearest city and pay for three nights. It is the single thing that keeps you free to leave.

4

Write the review.

Specific, factual, undramatic. The next traveller is reading it.

06 First-exchange checklist

- ☐ I have a written agreement covering dates, hours, duties, room, meals and notice.
- ☐ I have checked the immigration position for my passport and the destination, and I know what I will say at the border.
- ☐ I have valued the trade (section 3) and the ratio is under 1.5.
- ☐ I have read at least three reviews and video-called the host.
- ☐ My travel insurance covers the kind of work I will be doing.
- ☐ I hold an exit fund that gets me to a city and through three nights.
- ☐ Someone at home has the address, the host's name and my planned dates.
- ☐ I have packed for the work (boots, gloves, sun protection, layers) and not just for the travel.
- ☐ I know what I want from this exchange: a language, a skill, a season somewhere, a bridge to the next paid role.
- ☐ My next paid season's application window is in the calendar.

NOTES FOR THIS EXCHANGE

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