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Market moves...

● AS ANYONE who's seen the BBC's House Swap show will know, private home swapping is the latest trend among homeowners who are desperate to move but less desperate to pay agency fees. And it's not just happening for the benefit of the cameras. According to the free UK classified ads website, vivastreet.co.uk, home swapping ads are up 179 per cent on this time last year.

● DUNCAN JAMES has put two of his Hertfordshire properties up for sale. The Blue singer is flogging a four-bedroom family home in St Albans, which comes with a Jacuzzi, for £549,950. If high rolling is more your style, his Radlett penthouse is also up for grabs at £475,000. Contact Lumley Estates, 01923 853366.

● IF THE warm weather made you hanker for life on the water, rent a houseboat. A huge selection is available now at prices that are often cheaper than their landlocked counterparts. An open-plan boat with its own private deck moored near Kew Gardens starts at £245 per week, while a sailing houseboat in Battersea will go for £350-plus per week. See propertyfinder.com

● DESPITE being sold in 2007, Prince Andrew's former Sunninghill Park home in Berkshire is still uninhabited. The property was sold for £15m to a foreign buyer, who is yet to move in. Rumour has it that Bracknell Forest council has the power to seize a property if it is abandoned...

● LILY ALLEN, right, recently boasted that she bought a beach in Jamaica. But even for us mortals it seems that land might be a more affordable investment than London property. There is something for every price range on vladi-private-islands.de. You can pick up Quay Island, near Shannon in Ireland, for £344,447. Or if you have a spare £90k, an island with great tourism potential in Nagasaki, Japan, is waiting for you.



WITH LONDON'S RENTAL PRICES DROPPING UP TO 30 PER CENT, As rents plunge, tenants trade up

BY JESSIE HEWITSON

OWNING a home might not be so much fun at the moment, but it's a great time to be a tenant. Rents in London have fallen by an average of 18 per cent in the past year, according to Knight Frank agency, which means that savvy tenants are trading up to homes with gardens, an extra bedroom, or to a nicer area that would previously have been unaffordable.

Market analyst Hometrack reports that rents have gone down by 14 per cent in Camden, 10 per cent in Wandsworth, 11 per cent in Clapham and 18 per cent in Notting Hill. This means that, while a year ago, the average weekly rent in Camden was £415 it's now £355. In Wandsworth it was £335, now it's £300; in Clapham it was £337 and now it's £300 and where renting in Notting Hill set you back £554 12 months ago, now it's just £457.

The reason rents are going down is that the number of properties available to rent has dramatically gone up. "We have seen a new breed of landlord in homeowners who have opted to rent their properties rather than sell at a reduced price," says Peter Bolton King, CEO of the National Association of Estate Agents, which recently launched the

website propertylive.co.uk. "This has put tenants in a good position. There is a definite trend for tenants in London finding bigger properties in better areas without paying too much more. I advise current tenants to shop around, if they haven't already."

Tenants are asking for an average of 10 per cent below the rental price, according to Emilie Thyse, lettings director for central London at Marsh & Parsons agency, and if they're renewing their lease they are normally asking for a drop of between five and 15 per cent. It has also meant landlords



having to ensure their properties are in mint condition — the days of presenting a tired flat and expecting to rent it out easily are gone.

If you want to make sure you're paying the best price, buying agent Stuart Spence of Locate Property Finders suggests you find cheaper comparable properties in the area,

and offer 10 per cent less than the cheapest one. "Show the landlord or letting agent three other similar properties in the area that are going for less. It's a good bargaining chip to try and get the price down," he says.

He also recommends looking at new-build, as you'll often find investors competing against each other to get their identical flats rented out. "There is major potential for negotiation in these situations. If you've got one block with 50 people all trying to rent out their identical flats, you get the pick of the building. Play the landlords off against one another until you get the cheapest offer," he says.

And if you can afford to stay put for 18 months to two years, offer to sign up for a longer tenancy. Landlords will often cut prices a further 10 per cent if they don't have to re-let for the foreseeable. Like mobile phone bills, the best deals come to those who commit themselves for the longest.

KNOW THE TRICKS TO NEGOTIATING A TENANCY

TIPS for negotiating a lower rent, by Jo Eccles, of buying agency Sourcing Property.

● Do your research — are there other flats also available for rent in the building? Use this as ammunition when negotiating.

● Consider committing to a longer tenancy. A lot of landlords are favouring longer-term tenancies.

● Try to accommodate the landlord with your move-in date — no landlord likes a void period.

● If you're past the break clause in your existing tenancy, try to renegotiate a lower rent. Landlords often pay a smaller fee to the agent when a tenant renews, compared to letting to a new tenant.

Why I live in... Barnet

ANTHONY COSTA, 27, is in newly reformed boy band Blue. He lives in Barnet, north London. I was born and bred in north London, so living in Barnet means I'm back in the centre of everything. I lived in Hertfordshire for a while and a cab home from town would set me back £120. After a while that starts to make a real dent in your pocket. I fell in love with my two-bed flat on the first viewing. It's really smart. It helps that it's a new build because I'm a hygiene freak. I chose Barnet mainly because



it's on the Northern line and Leicester Square is 10 minutes away. My football team, Tottenham Hotspur, is also 10 minutes away. There are some great restaurants. I love Al Fresco, a cheap and cheerful Italian on the High Road. The veal and spaghetti is a must. I'm half Greek, so I eat at the Blue Olive in nearby Cockfosters at least three times a week. It's great value and they serve a proper Greek kebab. Hampstead Heath is only 15 minutes away, otherwise there's a local park which I jog round every other day.

and three for sale in the neighbourhood



Two-bed conversion flat with sash windows and views over Ravenscroft Park. Share of freehold. £250,000, Winkworth (020 8447 5656)



Four-bedroom semi-detached house with a south-facing garden and off-street parking. £449,995, Winkworth (as before)



Five-bed detached luxury home with 3,400sq ft of living space. Includes a sauna, gym and garage. £1.65m Fusion Residential (01923 815520)

Antony Costa