



Home alone

What you need to know if you're leaving your home in the hands of a housesitter.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Do your homework:** check references and have a written agreement.
- **There are few official complaints and most people have happy experiences, but it's still very much a matter of luck and trust.**

Ever had that sinking feeling as you leave home to head off on holiday? Have you locked the doors? Left the oven on? Will the house be secure? Will the garden survive?

Will the pets be safe and will your neighbour remember to feed them? It's a lot to worry about and not the best way to start a relaxing holiday.

Enter professional house-minding companies. These organisations have hundreds of potential fido feeders, plant pamperers and homebodies on their books who are available to live in and care for your home while you're away. The idea is that you get someone to mind your place for little or no cost and the sitter gets rent-free accommodation. It sounds like a win-win situation, but what are the things you need to look out for before leaving your home in the hands of someone else?

Briefly, most house-minding companies we contacted provide a kind of directory service over the internet for home owners, with either a list of prospective housesitters or an option to advertise to attract housesitters. Other companies, for a small fee, will provide a matching service between the two parties. However, it's usually the housesitters who pay to be listed with the agency in the first place.

While house-minding agencies and directories can help you get in touch with housesitters, it's important to note that from there on the arrangement is totally between you and the person you choose.

For many of us the idea of having a complete stranger in our home can be a little daunting when you consider the possibilities. Will they trash the place? And how can you protect yourself and your home should problems arise?

Going it alone

The house-minding services we contacted say most house-minding arrangements are very successful. However, they all stress that the onus is on the home owner to make the arrangement with their potential housesitter.

"We don't act as a matching service as we could then be held responsible for any problems," says one service owner. "We stress the importance of checking referees, face-to-face interviews if possible or at least over the phone, and having written agreements so there are no arguments afterwards."

So once you have access to a list of potential housesitters, or have been contacted by housesitters as a result of your advertisement, it's then up to

you to go forward with the selection process. You'll need to interview potential candidates, by phone or in person. When you've made your selection you'll need to check references, and if they check out you'll then go through what you want the sitter to do in the house. It's advisable to meet several times so you and your sitter are completely clear on what you're expecting from them.

Get it in writing

Most of the companies we spoke to provide advice on housesitter recruitment and also have draft house-minding agreements that home owners can customise, complete and sign off together with the sitter.

The managing director of one house-minding company in Sydney stresses the importance of a written agreement: "We strongly recommend that a housesitting agreement is entered into so there is absolutely no misunderstanding about what is required." He also recommends taking a bond from the housesitter to the equivalent of two weeks' rent, and leaving it with a third party.

Check all the details

Another vital part of contracting a housesitter is a background check. It's a good idea to check with anyone who has used the housesitter in the past, as well as thoroughly checking professional and personal references.

Another thing to consider is a police check, which you can ask the sitter to provide. Says one company owner, "We don't insist upon it but we recommend it. If you have two candidates in front of you and one has one and one hasn't, it's probably going to be a deciding factor. In the majority of cases the police check doesn't have anything on it and that's what you want to see, but it does provide peace of mind for the home owner."

Make sure you're covered

Another thing to check are your home and contents insurance policies. While the insurance companies we spoke to said as a general rule it's preferable to have a property occupied than leaving it empty for long periods of time, they did point out that under some policies you may not be able to make a claim if the sitter does any damage to your home or contents.

You need to check that you're still covered with a housesitter in residence, and that the sitter themselves will be covered under the public liability clause. The Insurance Council of Australia suggests

checking the wording of your individual policy very carefully as there may not be cover, depending on the individual home policy and the circumstances in relation to your minder. If you're not 100% sure even after reading it, call your insurance company and get specific advice relating to your policy and situation.

Who house sits?

The companies we spoke to said wannabe housesitters need to be flexible. Housesitting tends to suit people with low commitments of their own, or those who are retired. The owner of a house-minding company based in Victoria says the housesitters registered on her database come from a wide range of backgrounds. "We have young

AT HOME ALL OVER AUSTRALIA

Thanks to a new-found hobby in housesitting, Gwen from Adelaide has travelled to many parts of Australia at very little cost.

Gwen, a self-described 70-year-old pensioner, says that once her five kids moved out of home she felt like doing something different with her life. She'd read about housesitting and decided to sign up with a house-minding directory.

Now in her second year of sitting, Gwen says she's having a "wonderful time" as well as helping out some satisfied customers. She's had some interesting gigs so far, from farmhouses in Tasmania and country NSW, beach houses in South Australia and Queensland and even in the mountains in Victoria. She says she's found most of the accommodation quite luxurious. "All the houses have been very comfortable, and I've met some delightful people," she says.

Gwen says the key to a successful housesit is common sense, and recommends using a detailed agreement to help safeguard both parties in case there are issues. Most of all she says it's important to have respect and treat the home as you would your own. "I always think while I'm there that if they walked back in unexpectedly, there wouldn't be any surprises."

For Gwen, who's on a limited income and has her own home, house-minding has given her the freedom to travel to unexplored areas and beauty spots all over the country. "I pay for my travel there and back, any breakages and phone calls. I provide my own food and in return I have free accommodation, all for a few hours of pet and garden care.

"I've found all the owners quite generous — I've received vegies from the garden, fresh eggs, bottles of wine and gifts. All have given me permission to use the computer to go online to read my email, which is my lifeline when travelling. The rest of the time is my own, to go sightseeing with my camera or just rest and relax."



SANDRA LESKE



couples, people who have just relocated from one state to another, travellers — particularly the over-50s group who want to travel.”

Some people also find house-minding a great way to save money on rent in order to save for their own home or to travel cheaply both in Australia and overseas. For those who are looking to travel long-term, many agencies also provide opportunities overseas.

One house-minding company owner we spoke to said overseas housesitting can be a rewarding way to travel. “We’ve had a couple of people who have had two or three sits in the UK, and it does allow people to live in the local community when they’re overseas and feel a real part of it. We even had one lady who did a house-mind in Greece and ended up whitewashing the walls with the locals for a festival!”

Few complaints

So while house-minding can provide a great experience for both the sitter and home owner, it’s important to do some homework before saying yes. The NSW Office of Fair Trading says complaints about house-minding services aren’t common, but it still recommends anyone



AN UNHAPPY HOMECOMING

When Jean from Sydney needed to visit family in Italy for two months she was reluctant to leave her neat and tidy cottage, carefully tended garden and much loved cats alone, so she decided to use a housesitting service.

Using a housesitter directory Jean made contact with a young couple who wanted to housesit in order to save on rent. After speaking to them on the phone, she met them at her house on several occasions to run through what she required. She checked references, arranged for an agreement to be signed by both parties, left detailed written instructions and took a bond of \$500.

Feeling confident that she’d covered all possible bases, Jean headed off to Italy. When she returned home she says she faced a disaster.

“The house was filthy. The garden was waist-high in weeds and all my treasured plants were dead. The cats were starving; one of them had developed an illness as a result, requiring ongoing medication. Bills had been left unpaid, the pool was rank, the car battery was flat. Many household items were missing, which I didn’t

even discover until some time later, and the fridge was full of mouldy food, including items I’d left for them as a friendly welcoming gesture.”

Jean’s neighbours told her the sitters had barely spent any time at the house at all. When she tried to contact her housesitter to discuss these issues he was elusive. She then contacted the staff at the directory she’d used, who were sympathetic but said there was little they could do apart from giving her the \$500 bond they’d arranged to hold as a third party.

Determined to get an explanation and some further compensation for damages, Jean eventually tracked the housesitter down and arranged a meeting. “He seemed to be partly shamefaced and partly dismissive,” she says. “He couldn’t explain why this had happened at all, he just kept saying ‘I’m sorry you’re dissatisfied’.”

Although the housesitter did agree to pay extra to cover her costs, Jean is very reluctant to use one again. “It’s just awful, you come home from a 30-hour flight feeling tired and jetlagged and then you’re confronted with all this mess. It shouldn’t have been this hard — my house is very low-maintenance, it should have been a breeze. Two months of neglect: what a homecoming!”

SITTING PRETTY

For Fritz and Gertrud from Melbourne using a housesitter was the perfect solution when they travelled overseas last year.

The couple, who would otherwise be leaving their house and garden unattended for two months, found a company on the internet that seemed to meet their requirements and registered, providing details about the housesit, setting up a mailbox with the company and advertising to attract potential housesitters. Within a short time they'd received over 20 replies.

Once they'd chosen a candidate Gertrud conducted the initial interview in a café. After a reference check they invited the potential sitter to their home. Fritz says it was important to get to know her before inviting her to do the job. "This was our first housesitting experience and we were quite apprehensive. It was a question of leaving the house unattended for two months and perhaps getting it ransacked by burglars, or leaving it to a stranger and possibly getting it trashed."

Fritz says the home page of the house-minding company's website provided a list of do's and don'ts, as well as a detailed sample contract that home owners were recommended to sign with the sitter. "All of this was provided at no charge to us." However, the company made it clear that it didn't

accept any responsibility: "Any agreement would be between the sitter and us."

Fritz says a housesitting arrangement is a case of "mutual trust". As an extra incentive he offered to pay all heating, electricity and water charges while they were away, provided the house would be properly looked after. "Since this sitter was interested in saving money for her own house, we felt this incentive would encourage her to take care of the house right through to the end."

As it turned out, the pair were very pleased with their sitter, who looked after the family home well. And although Fritz says he would use a housesitter again he's aware that luck still plays a part in a successful housesit: "It depends very much on the chosen person."



SOME HOUSE-MINDING COMPANIES IN AUSTRALIA

- **HouseMinders:** www.houseminders.com.au; phone: 1800 61 64 63.
- **HouseCarers:** www.housecarers.com.au; phone: (02) 9913 1844.
- **House Sit World:** www.housesitworld.com.au; phone: (07) 5482 8008.
- **Happy House Sitters:** www.happyhousesitters.com.au; phone: 1300 780 809.

To find others try an internet search for 'housesitting'.

interested in using a house-minding organisation to shop around, ask questions and educate themselves before committing themselves to a sitter. It also recommends doing a general search on the internet for any adverse comments about a particular operator or minder, to see if they've had any identifiable problems in the past.

Other consumer affairs offices that were contacted around Australia said they've also received very few or no complaints to date about house-minding, but also recommend doing your research before taking the plunge.

You might even decide it's worth getting legal advice. The Law Society of NSW recommends using the help of a solicitor to vet your house-minding agreement or even draw it up for you. A solicitor can also hold a bond in a trust account as a third party. John McIntyre, Chair of the Property Law Committee, says that although housesitting can sound like an ideal arrangement, there are still risks. "It can look deceptively simple but if things go wrong it could be nothing short of a legal disaster." ■

What steps to take and what to look out for

- Try to leave a reasonable amount of lead time — say six to eight weeks — in order to find and engage a housesitter.
- Once you've found a potential candidate, try meeting them first in a neutral place such as a café, to protect your privacy.
- Ask for a variety of references, such as from previous housesits, employers, personal references, and a police check.
- If you're comfortable with them, meet them again at your home. Show them around to familiarise them with what needs to be done.
- Provide a list of written instructions and emergency contact numbers.
- Prepare a house-minding agreement in writing. If you want to be doubly sure, get your solicitor to check it over or draw it up for you.
- Ask for a bond, which should be held by a third party.
- Check with your insurer whether you're still covered with a housesitter in your home — and whether they're covered.
- Arrange for a friend or a neighbour to drop in occasionally to check on the house.
- Provide a contact email or phone number and ask the sitter to contact you regularly or if there are problems.