

House sit your way to your first home

By Gillian Bullock

With the first home owners grant doubling to \$14,000 — and up to \$24,000 if you buy a new property in NSW — the attraction of building up a deposit as quickly as possible makes house sitting even more appealing.

House sitting is where you live in somebody else's house for a predetermined length of time free of charge in return for looking after the property and more than often caring for the home owners' pets.

It is an ideal way to save money quickly and is proving popular with those hoping to jump on the property ladder.

At the other end of the scale many retirees have become house sitters as it gives them the opportunity to travel around the country staying in different places at very little cost. It differs from house swaps as it is only one-way traffic.

There are a number of house sitting agencies in Australia who generally charge the house sitter an annual fee which can range from \$65 to \$270 for a 12-month period. They include Aussie House Sitters (www.aussiehousesitters.com.au), HouseMinders (www.houseminders.com.au) and Happy House Sitters (www.happyhousesitters.com.au).

The home owner does not pay anything for the service other than providing the house. Whether you give 100 percent access to the house or lock off some rooms with your possessions is down to the home owner.

Each transaction will have its own characteristics. But to avoid any problems it is important that you draw up a contract before the sitting takes place.

Nick Fuad of Aussie House Sitters says in five years his company has only had eight complaints and most of those were a result of a lack of communication between the home owner and the sitter.

The contract should state the length of the stay and what is included. It could be that all utilities are provided free of charge or the sitter might pay for gas, electricity and telephone. The latter is more common among longer stays. But it's up to you to negotiate what you will pay for and include it in the contract.

Toby Archer of the Tenants Union of Victoria says it is unlikely that you will be covered by the residential tenancy laws in your state if you are house sitting. As a result you may have issues in relation to security of tenure. Archer advises that you should always have a Plan B when house sitting.

There appear to be plenty of home owners willing to have strangers house sit. Of course, the summer holidays are inevitably a busy time but in a four-hour period registered as a guest of Happy House Sitters, ninemsn received three notifications of house sitting opportunities that were new listings.

Andrew Lasky of HouseMinders says he has a database of more than 1000 properties and 280 house sitters registered, with a churn of about five to 10 a week.

Lasky says the pros for a sitter are the ability to save on rent, the possibility to see different areas and the good feeling of helping somebody out by looking after their pets. For the owners it is a cheaper way of having their pets cared for than daily rates at a kennel plus it gives you the added benefit of security by having the house occupied while you are away on holiday.

Most insurers have no objections to your having a house sitter as it means the house is occupied. AAMI, for instance, says it does not even require the home owner to advise that they are using a sitter. And NRMA says there's only need to advise if it is for an extended period.

House sitting may not be for everybody but it can prove a good way to save.



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