

On the house

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Housesitting is catching on as a way to lower your accommodation costs while discovering more of Australia - or the world. The trade-off? Feeding the pets and doing the chores. By Paul Edwards.

It's what is called a win-win situation: everybody has a holiday and everybody's happy. It's a simple concept called housesitting, and an increasing number of Australians are using it.

Housesitting allows homeowners to take off on holiday knowing their home, pets and plants are in good care, while the sitters get a chance to travel Australia or the world at minimal accommodation cost.

That's right - tomorrow the world. Web-based directories offer the chance for Australians to move into a home on the other side of the planet for a pre-negotiated term, saving hundreds or thousands of dollars on hotel bills.

It worked for Melbourne children's author Rachel Flynn and teacher husband Gordon, who spent Christmas and the first couple of weeks of the New Year sitting a house in Wimbledon in London.

"I was familiar with the concept because we had already done a housesit in Melbourne while waiting for our own home to be renovated," she says. "So I searched the internet for an overseas one, to save money on accommodation while travelling.

"It worked out brilliantly: No money changed hands and we looked after their house and pets in exchange for free accommodation including electricity, phone and other items, while the owners were on holiday in Cape Town.

"We met the owners for about an hour and their children explained how to look after the rabbit and goldfish. We saw them again for another hour when they returned, and then we moved on to the rest of our holiday."

Jean and Eric Speed used housesitting to travel Australia for several months in 2000 and again in 2002 and are planning sittings for the coming year.

"We're retired and pretty active and have the freedom to move away from home for long periods," says Eric Speed. "Our family keeps an eye on our own house while we're away."

Sittings were arranged through Australian Housesitters, which maintains a registry bringing together vacant homes and sitters. Registration fees range from \$150 a year, and the Speeds were flooded with responses - so many, in fact, that they asked for their entry to be deleted.

Their 10-month travels through South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland were arranged by phone and email, and either by good fortune or good management they were able to keep paid accommodation to just a few days.

"We have spent several years living and holidaying overseas and felt we wanted to see more of our own country," Speed says.

"When we saw an advertisement for housesitters, particularly with the option of focusing on country areas, we knew we had the answer.

"We had considered caravanning, but we wanted to travel as lightly as possible and to keep everything simple. There have been no sits that we've regretted, although we were sometimes made to feel like unpaid servants.

"Most owners realise the service we provide is mutually beneficial - we get cheap accommodation; they get housesitters who do odd jobs, feed and exercise animals, maintain gardens and provide security."

New Zealanders Ed and Julie Matkin have used the web to arrange a six-week sit in Yorkshire and a two-week stint in France. They arranged the sits through HouseCarers and were initially disappointed by the lack of response from homeowners in the UK and Europe.

"Then the responses happened and things fell into place," says Ed Matkin. "We wanted to see Europe as cheaply as possible. We'll be using a campervan for places where we couldn't arrange a housesit."

This combination of campervan and housesit is sometimes used by travellers within Australia. While they're between sits, they move towards the next assignment in their campervan. When they're looking after a home, the campervan is parked in the driveway, and becomes their transport for daily expeditions.

It seems there are more prospective sitters than there are homeowners looking for minders, but it is obvious from a search of the internet that there are plenty of travel opportunities.

Registration details on housesitting websites make fascinating reading. This is where prospective sitters, sometimes using pseudonyms, lodge their resumes and list when and where they are available.

- Hank Duckman and his wife are looking for people to mind their home in Morelia, Mexico, with the assistance of two maids and a gardener. The housesitters would be expected to look after the Duckmans' dog.
- Queensland couple Ross and Robyn Jobson have for the past four years looked after a home in Australia while the owners travelled overseas. Now they feel it's their turn, and are looking for sits for a year in the UK.
- Robert and Jacqueline Mountain have been basking in a luxury home in southern France for the past two years, but are looking for another assignment since the owners intend selling.
- Sydney executive director Robin Dunn and his wife have travelled many times to Europe, but always on business. "Now want to linger longer in one place, play some golf and learn to smell the roses again." They are available for 12 months sits in the US, UK or Europe in 2005.

Web sites and printed directories list thousands of prospective sitters, together with many homeowners who want the security of live-in houseminders who can also turn their hand to a spot of gardening.

Ian White, marketing manager of Australian-based HouseCarers, claims to have the most-visited site on the Web. He says 70 per cent of registrations are from the US, 10 per cent from Australia and 10 per cent from the UK.

"Cat owners in London form a significant part of our registrations," he says. "Many like to leave their cats in the house while they go overseas. We have helped many Australians find sits in the UK - there are regular postings for two or three weeks.

"We also get many housesits in holiday areas such as Gold Coast, Coffs Harbour and even the Whitsundays. The homeowners are looking to travel themselves or venture south, and looking for people to mind their homes and pets."

Caulfield-based housesit agency Happy House Sitters is geared to help homeowners and would-be sitters in Australia, New Zealand, the US, Canada, the UK and Ireland. Manager Malcolm Myers says while many sitters are simply looking for free accommodation, many others see the concept as a wonderful aid to travelling.

"It's a wonderful idea that can work anywhere in the world," Myers says.

"Travellers who stay in hotels or other paid accommodation often spend more than the cost of their airfares. With housesits they cut out just about all that expense."

Homeowners are usually advised to draft a housesitting contract to be signed by the sitters. The contract would specify the chores to be undertaken, such as gardening, cleaning, dog walking and mail handling, and would also stipulate costs to be met by the sitter. Usually these are limited to phone bills, but may include the costs of utilities.

Most housesitting agencies make their money from sitters' registrations - the householders pay nothing. Agencies usually don't screen either party but assist them with checklists of requirements and considerations.

Homeowners are advised to check their insurance policy before engaging sitters and may ask for a bond to cover damage. Most agencies go to great lengths to distance themselves from any grievances between homeowners and sitters, and stress that owners should do a thorough reference check on sitters, and try to meet them before the engagement starts.

This might make it difficult for a Victorian sitter trying to secure an engagement on the other side of the world.

"It might be difficult, but it can be done," says Rachel Flynn. "I think there were around 200 applicants for the sit we did in Wimbledon."

"As I'm still a member of the housesitting site, I keep my eye on houses available in Australia, but it's difficult to find one that coincides with our holidays."

Links

www.housesitters.com.au

www.HouseCarers.com

www.happyhousesitters.com.au

Housesitting Home and Away, tel: (03) 9431 5409