

TRAVEL JENNIFER HARVIE Take off on holiday knowing your home - and pet - are being looked after by a trusty house-sitter.

Tabby's eyes are failing, Rover's got a heart murmur, the budgie needs someone to talk to and the goldfish, well, they need love, too. Then there's the wilting garden, the irrepressible lawn and the evergreen pool. But what to do – the holidays are looming, the beach cottage beckoning.

Thousands of Australians are finding the answer in house-sitting services. Dee Wren, of House Minders International, says her business has grown eight-fold since it launched in 1996, and has almost doubled in the past six months.

Australian House Sitters Directory says it has linked more than 120,000 people with sitters since it began in 1993. Homes away from home can be anything from a cottage on Kangaroo Island to a luxury apartment on the Gold Coast, a dairy farm on the Murray River to a property in outback WA. But more often than not they are in cities, with 80% of business generated in metropolitan areas.

Pets are the main reason people seek house-sitters. "Boarding animals is very expensive and animals often fret outside their own environment," Wren says. "Then there are the issues of security, watering gardens and general home maintenance."

Sits can stretch from two weeks to a year. They're usually fairly relaxed affairs although formal agreements and bonds are sometimes required. Malcolm Myers, of Happy House Sitters, says 80% of his clients are professional couples, aged from 25 to 40, saving for their own homes.

Anya Favot, 40, has been minding houses for the past year. "I had a few debts to pay off when I started. Mostly people want you to look after their animals; I've looked after German shepherds, labradors, blue Russians ... I love it."