

TRAVEL TALK - PETS AND HOUSE SITTERS

BY CHASE BINDER

Barely a week goes by that someone doesn't bring up the conundrum of wanting to travel, but not wanting to leave their beloved pets behind in a kennel. Sometimes it's an emotional issue—worry about how Fido or Fluffy would do being kenneled. Sometimes it's a financial issue—kenneling multiple pets can easily exceed \$100/day. Not so easy for retired baby boomers looking to spread their wings. One solution is to bring your pet with you. Over the last six or seven years we have found dog friendly vacation rentals (vrbo.com, homeaway.com, flipkey.com) and hotels (bringfido.com) are increasingly available, as are dog-friendly restaurants along most of the major holiday travel routes in the US and Canada.

But suppose your travel doesn't lend itself to bringing the pooches? Perhaps you found a great deal for a week in London, a cruise you can't resist, or perhaps you need to fly to San Francisco for five days for your granddaughter's wedding. Now,



A cat, a dog and a lovely English cottage! One of the hundreds of animal-loving families needing house sitters.

there is a great budget-conscious option which also keeps your pets right in their own homes. It's found at trustedhousesitters.com, a not-so fledgling company that provides a platform for matching pet-loving house sitters with people who need a house sitter who can be trusted with their pets.

The concept is simple—a straight barter, no money changing hands. People willing and able to move into your house and provide



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love, attention, food & water, walks and even cuddles for your pets post their profiles on trustedhousesitters.com. You post your location, the dates you need a sitter, and information on your pets and their needs on the same website. When you find a match...you have a free sitter for your home and dogs! Or, if you're the sitter, you have a free home in one of many fabulous countries around the world.

True, this might not be for you if you if your first thought is "ugh! I don't want a stranger in my house, let alone taking care of my animals!" When a friend from Maine told me about the website, my mind started off in that direction. I thought of the Airbnb.com disasters—supposedly upstanding renters trashing homes, refusing to move out and worse—so I shook my head. But a bit of research on the trustedhousesitters.com website and a long conversation with the founders in the UK eased my nerves.

First, the platform is designed to link animal-lovers—the animal piece is not an afterthought or an accommodation for a subset of the target group. Call me silly, but I have always believed that if you love animals, you're a good person. Also, it's committed to transparency. Both sitters and homeowners are encouraged to write reviews. This helps root out any bad apples (though the founders say this extremely rare) but also give the sitters a chance to see how accurate the home owner's depiction is of their property,

situation and pets. Most soothing, though is their Trust & Safety policy. Each member receives a verification badge in a 3-level process that begins with basic verification of address, contact information and such and goes through the enhanced level that includes criminal background checks with appropriate government authorities around the world. No worries—no need to contact the FBI or your own police. Trustedhousesitters.com has a contract and direct link to an independent third party that will do it for you.

The customer service is terrific. I joined (\$120/130/yr.) and was building a dual profile (Bud and I often need house sitters, but also wouldn't be opposed to a free stay in Tuscany, Provence or even Cornwall), but only got it partly done before other priorities intervened. Within a day, I got an email from a customer service rep asking if I had

the people who respond to your needs—whether it be for a week, a month or even longer. You'll find all sorts of opportunities.

I haven't tried it yet, but my friend did and was thrilled. She needed a week's sitter while she and her husband go on a last-minute cruise and within an hour of posting she got 12-15 replies. After some back-and-forth by email and phone, they've settled on a sitter from Halifax, Nova Scotia. The folks at trustedhousesitters.com say that about 97% of the people who need sitters find them within the first week. Cool! And it's not at all unusual for firm friendships to be forged across countries and even continents. I may not be ready quite yet, but I love browsing through the daily listings. I am thinking we'll start with a long weekend in London—there seem to be lots of flats with just a cuddly cat needing some love. *How fun would that be?*



How about this home in Spain...see dramatic Andalusia, and care for the family pets. (Photos courtesy of trustedhousesitters.com)

questions and also making some very good suggestions about how to improve my profile.

One of the nice things about the platform is the lengths they go to to make people feel comfortable with the process. There are contracts, lengthy and detailed profiles of animals, homes, sitters—all with tons of photos. It will be your job to communicate back and forth with



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