

HOME ALONE?

There are times when you just can't take your dog with you. Luckily, you now have several options that will let you rest easy when you're away from home.



BY LISA PETERSON

Owners of purebred dogs around the country spend millions of dollars annually for the services of pet sitters who make pet-care “house calls”—ranging from midday walks and feeding to overnight stays when the owner is out of town.

“Basically, we replace the owner,” says Patti J. Moran, founder of Pet Sitters International (PSI), an educational organization for professional pet-sitters. “With pet-sitters, dogs continue their typical routine at home. The only thing missing is the owner’s scent.”

Raina D’Amico, of Newtown, Connecticut, travels regularly for her job as a retail executive, and she always makes sure her two dogs, an 8-year-old German Shepherd Dog and a 7-year-old black Labrador Retriever, get the best possible care while she is on the road. She favors professional pet-sitter Elisabeth MacMillan, from nearby Bethel, Connecticut, because Beth understands the dogs’ routines, “including cooking them steak for breakfast and giving them a peanut butter cookie after

their walk,” says D’Amico. “She emulates the things we do. The dogs think it’s great when Beth comes over, because she lets them up on the bed.”

MacMillan is well aware that she is providing peace of mind for the D’Amicos, and she enjoys her overnight stays with their dogs. “Max, the Shepherd, is better than an alarm clock. He wakes me up at five o’clock every morning to prepare his gourmet breakfast,” she says.

Professional pet-sitters keep latchkey dogs on their normal schedules by stepping in to feed, water, and exercise them, give them tummy-rubs, toss a ball with them, or walk them around the block. Pet-sitters often help out with other tasks like bringing in the mail, turning lights on or off, or otherwise making the house looked lived-in while the owners are away—all of which can deter criminals, according to Moran. Among the complimentary services included with standard pet care by PSI-affiliated companies like Pet Au Pair, of Bedford,



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Massachusetts, are collecting mail and newspapers; putting out and retrieving garbage barrels; watering plants; changing litter boxes; and adjusting blinds, lights, and home-security devices.

Greg Sideleau of Sandy Hook, Connecticut, works long hours as an attorney and has come to depend on Lynn Purus, a professional pet-sitter in his neighborhood, to walk his elderly yellow Lab.

"You can't burden your neighbor or a young kid with what's basically a real job by asking them to come over every day at two in the afternoon to walk the dog," Sideleau says. "They may volunteer to do it,

but after a while it is trafficking on your friendship." Professional pet-sitters provide an alternative to hitting up friends or family members for repeated favors.

But Ginger Leeuwenburg, of Pet Care Professionals of New England, in Lebanon, Maine, won't take care of a pet sight unseen. "You need to have a meet-and-greet session with a new pet," she says. "I don't like surprises. If someone calls up and says, 'I'm going to be away for four days, and the key is under the mat, can you come let my dog out,' that person will not get service."

"What a pet-sitter will or will not do is usually left to their own discretion, and how willing they are to go that extra mile," Moran explains. "One client asked a pet-sitter to tape his favorite TV shows. Another asked that the dog be taken for a ride in the car."

But pet-sitters shouldn't be expected to do things like plow your driveway or shovel the

walk after a snowstorm, unless they specifically offer such services. Nor should they be expected to wash the dishes you left in the sink. And conversely, if a pet-sitter has kitchen privileges, they should not leave a mess. Nor should a client ever need to worry that the pet-sitter might inspect personal items too closely.

When dog owners seek more than just a sitter for their pet, they should recognize the added value of any extra services provided, and be prepared to provide adequate compensation. New parents Michael and Rachelle Jayner, owners of Dixie, a 7-year-old Lab, found just such a provider in Rosary Bovello, who runs Gaithersburg Pet-Sitting, in Maryland. Bovello, who is PSI's reigning Pet-Sitter of the Year, does a lot more than just feed and walk dogs for her clients.

"I used Rosary as a planning tool," Michael Jayner recalled. "It was our first baby, and we were totally out of control. Rosary helped us plan what to do with Dixie ahead of time, and she became part of our phone tree when we went to the hospital."

Bovello, whose staff of two full-time and three part-time pet-sitters service 225 active clients, reports that dog owners such as the Jayners generally recognize the value of quality one-on-one time spent with their animals and are willing to pay a premium for the peace of mind—their own and their dogs'.

The cost of pet-sitting ranges from around \$8 per visit in rural areas to \$25 in the large metropolitan



Rosary Bovello, Pet Sitters International's reigning Pet Sitter of the Year. She and her staff currently service 225 clients, including Phoebe, a Golden Retriever in Derwood, Maryland.



areas, with an average cost of approximately \$13 per visit, according to Moran, whose book *Pet Sitting for Profit* (Howell Book House, 1997) is written for people who plan to start pet-sitting businesses of their own.

Most pet-sitters visit an animal three times per day. Since pet-sitters generally charge per visit, not per animal, owners of multiple dogs



Bovello and a fine-feathered charge. Some pet-sitters are willing to take on additional tasks, such as watering plants, bringing in the mail, or turning lights on and off; Clients should discuss these expectations in advance.

are often better off hiring a pet-sitter than boarding their dogs at a kennel.

Finding a pet-sitter in your neighborhood can be as easy as consulting a dog-owning neighbor; veterinarians, groomers, and kennel clubs are other possible sources of referrals. Some pet-sitters advertise in the Yellow Pages or in the newspaper classified ads under "Pet Services." PSI's web site (www.petsit.com) has a free referral service listing its 3,200 members by ZIP code.

Before choosing a sitter, a face-to-face interview is recommended. Before the interview,



10 QUESTIONS TO ASK A PROSPECTIVE PET-SITTER

- 1) What is your background with dogs?
- 2) Who will visit my dog—you, or another staff member?
- 3) What happens if you can't make it to my house?
- 4) Who else besides you will have access to the keys and alarm codes to my house?
- 5) How will you help ensure that my absence from the house is not noticed?
- 6) Do you have a brochure detailing fees, services, and policies?
- 7) Do you have a service contract?
- 8) Who is your veterinarian on call?
- 9) Are you bonded and insured?
- 10) Can you provide references?

prepare any questions you may have. (See sidebar.) Observe how the prospective pet-sitter interacts with your dog. Ask for a brochure or other printed list of services, with fees, a service contract, policies, references, and proof of insurance.

Moran cautions that not all dogs are well suited to pet-sitting. "For example, a territorial dog who would not let a pet-sitter into the house, or one with separation anxiety," she says. "A good pet-sitter will assess your dog's habits and routines during the initial interview and be able to tell you how well pet-sitting will work for your dog."

Dogs who don't travel well in a car or sick

animals who require medication at regular intervals (such as insulin injections) are better candidates for in-home care. Bovello uses voice commands when walking 10-year-old Oski, a blind Cocker Spaniel, so that Oski doesn't bump into things. Oski benefits from the stability in her routine, and a diet that can only be found at home. Bovello's attention to Oski's creature comforts is reassuring to Oski's owners when they go out of town. Whatever the cost, knowing that their dog is being well cared for is priceless. 🐾

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