

SeniorSitters™

Worldwide Housesitting for Over 50s

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Occupation force

Need someone to look after your pooch while you're on holiday? These days it's easy to find a minder

When you go away in the summer, would you want a visiting backpacker or retiree to water your plants and feed the cat? Advertisements on websites such as Housecarers.com are matching households with virtual strangers who promise to look after their homes in their absence. House-sitting is more common abroad, where security is a greater concern, but some Hongkongers like to have someone stay full time, especially pet lovers who don't want to call on friends, kennels or pet-sitting services.

When businessman Euan Clearkin planned a lengthy absence a couple of years back, the New Zealander advertised online for a house-sitter to care for his two cats.

"It's the best option for the animals because they get the attention they need and it's on your terms," he says. "It's not as expensive as a kennel or a professional pet minder or walker." (Many kennels charge more than HK\$100 a day for board.)

Clearkin had responses from prospective sitters within days.

House-sitter websites recommend people check references and demand proof of identity before handing over the keys, but the 33-year-old says he relied mostly on instinct.

"Some people seemed more interested in having the apartment to themselves and had never even had pets before so they were ruled out quickly," he says.

"I pretty much went with my gut feeling. Elsewhere, I might have been more careful, but Hong Kong is a pretty safe place. Besides, we've all hired employees that came with good references who turned out to be duds."

He settled on Philip Ruers, a Dutch export trader who sought temporary accommodation on his return from the mainland.

"I got to stay in the apartment for two weeks, rent free, and in return I took care of the two cats," Ruers says. He now has his own flat in Hong Kong but still does about four or five house-sits a year because he likes animals, even though he doesn't keep a pet.



Housesitter Philip Ruers (left) with Euan Clearkin and his friend Jen McCombie at Clearkin's Kennedy Town home

"It's like a little holiday away from home," Ruers says. "And you get to watch their DVDs."

That's partly why Katie Wan and her family house-sit for friends several times a year. "My husband is in medical school so we live on a student budget," she says. "Our flat is small and it's nice to not worry about the air conditioning or heating bills."

The Wans also enjoy the use of gyms and swimming pools in their friends' more luxurious residential complexes, and well-stocked refrigerators also mean they can reduce expenses on food.

"We only have to take care of the pets - which once included a snake and chinchilla - water the plants and collect the mail," says Wan.

Such jobs aren't always so straightforward. Wan recalls her panic when their friend's son left a cage open and the snake escaped.

"When we arrived at their house, the cage was empty and we couldn't find the snake anywhere - which was pretty terrifying," she says. "Finally, after four days, we found it curled up by the bathtub."

Businessman Peter Wearing Smith recalls having to chase after a bolting bull when he house-sat for two "very active cats - and 40 head of cattle" on a farm in Australia. "It took me about three days to recover from that one, but mostly it's fun," says the Australian, who first house-sat for friends and acquaintances in Hong Kong and around Asia more than a decade ago. "You get to meet people, see new places and the animals are generally interesting."



Peter Wearing Smith had to chase down a bull during one house-sitting stay in Australia, and Katie Wan had a snake go missing for four days

When Wearing Smith moved to Australia in 2003, he spent two years moving from one house-sitting assignment to the next before founding Seniorsits.com, a firm that matches and advises homeowners and house-sitters over the age of 50.

"For a lot of older couples, house-sitting has become a lifestyle choice, affording them a holiday two to three times a year," says Wearing Smith. Homeowners are more comfortable with the older age group because they are considered more responsible, he says.

While 80 per cent of his house-sitting engagements have involved animals, Wearing Smith says he needed green fingers for the first. "It was for a retired Cathay Pacific (SEHK: [0293](#)) captain in Melbourne whose wife needed her plants watered," he says.

Seniorsits.com has listed house-sit opportunities from 39 countries in the past year, but house-sitting has yet to take off in Hong Kong, mainly because people here prefer to rent out their flats while they are away, Wearing Smith says. However, the arrangement could catch on.

British freelance journalist Marina Arnold, who expects to work in Hong Kong for a few months, sees a house-sit as a trial for a longer stay. "As I'm considering a permanent move to Hong Kong, I thought a house-sit would give me an idea of what everyday life would be like," she says.

Adele Jorgensen is also seeking a house-sitting assignment in Hong Kong. She and her pilot husband plan to move their family from Sweden next month and want to house-sit instead of renting a flat. "I thought it could be fun to house-sit in a more exclusive area in a house we would otherwise not be able to afford, to get a taste of how the other half lives," she says.

Having house-sat for friends, Jorgensen understands the need to take extra care when travelling with a baby. "They have an amazing ability to damage things when you turn your back for 30 seconds and in someone else's house, one must be particularly vigilant of the owner's possessions," she says.

Messy situations can be avoided, she says, by setting rules regarding the use of the telephone, power, water, visitors, breakages/damage and insurance.

The Wans simplify matters by keeping their things to one part of the house and use only one bathroom. "If something does break or [is] spoiled, we are upfront about it and offer to replace the item," Wan says.

But good housekeeping is vital - Jorgensen says the key is to remember that it is someone's home and not a hotel.

"You need to clean the toilet, to be sure to not leave marks on the furniture, keep things tidy, and so on," she says. "If the owners were to walk in the door unexpectedly, you would want them to be pleased with what they see."