

# Be a Happy House Sitter

By Peter WEARING SMITH

**Over the years I have housesat for friends all over the place – at home in Hong Kong, in the Philippines, England and here in Australia. In fact, it was while housesitting here a few years ago that I actually wrote my book, “Outback Australia? – No Worries!”**

But it’s only within the last year that I have become a more or less full-time housesitter, through the Happy House Sitters website.

After I signed on in December 2003, it took only a few days for me to find a suitable listing on the site. But the owners had advertised for a female sitter. However, as it was barely a week before Christmas and the owners wanted somebody to take over from immediately after Christmas to the end of January, I thought about it for a couple of days then decided it would be worthwhile anyway to send them an email introducing myself.

Now for a word of advice.

This step is critical, and how you word the email is very important.

You have only one opportunity to make a first impression, and you want it to be a good one, don’t you? So, think carefully about your introductory email, and test it on some friends to get some feedback on the type of impression it makes.

Anyway, I must have made a reasonable impression, as I received an email from the owners, thanking me for my interest, but advising that I was too late and that they had already found somebody.

However, early on the morning of 24 December, I received a phone call from the owners. The woman they had selected to mind their house failed to turn up for an interview the previous evening, was I still available?

Now, here’s the next bit of advice – for owners as well as sitters.

Courtesy costs nothing, and owners should always have the courtesy to reply to all would-be sitters who contact them – even if it is only to say, “Thanks, but no thanks.” After all, the sitters have paid for access to the list, and it is very frustrating when owners just don’t bother to reply to their emails.

Similarly, this young woman let the whole side down by not turning up for the meeting with the owners. Worse still, she did not even have the courtesy to contact them with an excuse!

This reflects badly on every sitter listed with Happy House Sitters and gives us all a bad name.

So I made doubly sure that I was on time for my meeting with the owners. We met, they were satisfied and so was I. Thus, my first “professional” sit began two days after Christmas.

The house had a large and thirsty garden, so faced with Melbourne’s water restrictions, keeping the garden watered was a fairly major task, but nothing was lost, so the owners were happy when they returned, two weeks after the date originally planned.

Next, was a much smaller house on the Mornington Peninsula, south of Melbourne, caring for an elderly dog, a cockatiel and eight fish. As it was reasonably close to Melbourne, I was able to meet the owner – and the dog before anything was decided.

The dog, a deaf silky terrier was 16 and with loads of personality. She took a liking to me at the meeting, so her owner decided and I had my second gig organised.

I moved in a little more than a week after finishing the Melbourne sit.

All went well once again, and when the owner returned, the dog and I were nowhere to be seen! We were out for a walk, which I think impressed the owner, because she seemed very satisfied and asked me whether I would be available for a month at the same time next year.

Next was a move much further afield.

During my Melbourne sit, I had seen an advertisement on the Happy House Sitters site for a two months stint (which later became three), looking after a new house on Queensland’s Gold Coast. I sent my email to the owners, introducing myself, outlining my background and advising contact phone numbers.

The next day I received a phone call from the owners.

We had a general chat and both husband and wife asked me some questions, some of which I answered over the phone and others I later answered by email.

Evidently they were satisfied because the next day they emailed me back again to say they were happy.

The day after finishing the Mornington Peninsula assignment, I headed north, planning to take a leisurely trip, with a few days in Sydney en route.

However, the owners of the Gold Coast property had other ideas, and sent me an email with a second change of plans, this time asking me if I could arrive four days earlier than arranged.

Realising that flexibility is very important in this game, I was able to suggest a compromise, whereby I arrived two days earlier. This way, I still had a little time in Sydney, although the Melbourne to Sydney and Sydney to Gold Coast drives both became single-day affairs.

Two days before the owners left on their three months trip, I arrived so I could be briefed.

Today, they are still on their holiday, secure in the knowledge that a responsible person is looking after their house and garden.

While I am the very embodiment of a – Happy House Sitter!

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