In Good Hands

HOW TO FIND A PET SITTER

When it's time to plan a vacation, you need to decide where to go, where to stay and how much to spend. But there is one more question: Who will keep an eye on your cat? More than ever, our pets travel with us. When they can't, some of us have family or friends take care of them. But who can we turn to when family and friends aren't available? Bonded and insured professional pet sitters are available in most areas. Using a professional pet sitter lets your pet stay home in familiar, secure surroundings. A little research will help you find a pet sitter that is right for you and your cat.

Find a Service
With the dramatic increase of professional pet sitting services in the last few years, finding a pet sitter is relatively easy but still requires due diligence. Jemme Addon, an independent full-time cat sitter with 25 years of experience and New York City's first, recommends seeking a trusted friend or your veterinarian for a referral. If looking in the Yellow Pages, look for pet sitter ads that indicate the services are bonded and insured and if they are members of a professional pet sitting organization such as Pet Sitters International or National Association of Professional Pet Sitters. Both offer pet owners an indicator guide and other helpful resources.

Beth Nulfa, marketing manager at FSI says, "There's no 'one size fits all' when it comes to finding the right pet sitter for you and your cat. Finding the right person requires an investment of time—time to do phone interviews, time to conduct the in-home interview and time to thoroughly check references for ones you're considering hiring."
The In-Home Interview

After making a few calls and asking preliminary questions to narrow down your choices, the next step is the in-home interview. This consists of two basic parts: asking the pet sitter prepared questions and introducing your pet.

Have a prepared list of questions so you won’t forget to ask anything. PSI offers a guide with tips for conducting an interview available on their website (see box).

At the beginning of the interview, ask for proof of insurance and references (they should be gladly offered). Adlon and Stultz stress the importance of bonding and insurance for protection of your home, property and your precious kitty but also assurance that the person does not have a criminal record.

Following that, ask what special training the person has for your particular type of pet. The range of specialization can be surprising.

Joan Houser, a pet sitter with Pet Watch in Vancouver, Wash., has cared for a variety of animals and has experience giving medications, including insulin and IV fluids. In addition to cats and dogs, Houser says, “I have also taken care of horses, cows, sheep, goats, lizards, turtles and birds, including chickens and peacocks. The most unusual was probably silkworms.”

When discussing rates, ask what services are included. Often a pet sitter provides services such as bringing in the mail and newspaper or watering house plants.

Next, ask if the service uses contracts. A service contract benefits both the pet owner and pet sitter. “A well-written contract outlines the details associated with the service the sitter will provide, including fees and amount of time spent with the pet,” Stultz says. “It also documents any specific needs the pet may have.”

In addition, Houser says, “It authorizes the sitter to seek emergency care if necessary. It also guarantees the client that the sitter agrees to provide the services stated in the contract in a reliable, caring and trustworthy manner.”

After you’ve discussed basic information and you are comfortable with the answers, show the pet sitter around your home, focusing on areas where pet supplies are kept, your pet’s eating and sleeping areas and any places your pet is not allowed to go.

The next step is introductions. When introducing your pet to the pet sitter, watch how the pet sitter interacts with your pet. He or she should demonstrate a calm yet confident attitude around your pet. You wouldn’t want someone who is afraid of lizards to care for your iguana, for example.

Timid behaviors accounted for, how does your pet respond to the pet sitter? You know your pet’s normal behavior toward strangers. Use your knowledge and intuition. You need to feel comfortable with your choice for your pet.

The time you invest to find a professional pet sitter can give you peace of mind when your pet cannot travel with you.

“Hiring a professional pet sitter means you don’t have to rely on untrained or unwilling friends or neighbors,” Stultz says. “Professionals are better suited to identify potential health concerns and respond to pet emergencies than the ‘kid down the road.’”

By investing time and doing a little research, you can ensure you have chosen the pet sitter that is right for you and your cat.

Ramona D. Marek, MS Ed., is a freelance writer and member of the Council of Directors of the Cat Writers’ Association. She lives in Vancouver, Wash., and is inspired by her two muses, Tsarevich Ivan, a Siberian, and Natasha Fatale, full-time diva.

The following organizations can give you more information on pet sitters.

Pet Sitters International (PSI)
201 E. King St.
King, NC 27021
336-983-9222
www.petsit.com
info@petsit.com

National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS)
15000 Commerce Pkwy., Ste. C
Mt. Laurel, NJ 08054
856-439-0324
www.petsitters.org
NAPPS@petsitters.org

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Finding a pet sitter you (and your cat) love just takes a little research.