

Vacations Are No Day At the Beach For Pets; Making Arrangements Before You Take Off

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When Ellen Makar of Clarksville plans her summer vacation, the first order of business is deciding where to go. The second is planning what to do with the dog.

"It's right at the top of the list," said Makar, who has used boarding kennels and a neighborhood pet sitter, but now leaves her border collie with dog-owning friends. "Dog care is important to us."

More than 64 million American households have pets, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, and when those pet owners leave home, someone has to pour out the kibbles and scoop out the litter box. Options run from the simple and cheap (hiring the kid next door) to elaborate and not cheap (finding a pampering pet spa).

Kitty can stay home alone and unattended, can't she? Perhaps. Veterinarian Mike Berbert of Gaithersburg Animal Hospital says healthy young cats that have passed a physical within the past year may be left unattended for up to three days. Older cats, or those with medical conditions, should not be left alone.

Katherine Calder of Friendship Hospital for Animals in Northwest Washington recommends healthy female cats be left unattended no more than five days, and males, which are prone to urinary tract obstructions, no more than two.

Multiple bowls of hard food and water, plus extra litter boxes, must be provided.

Neither veterinarian recommends leaving a dog unattended, even with a dog-door to the yard. "If I had a dog-door, I would not be comfortable with wildlife or intruders being able to come in through that door," said Berbert. "And dogs left alone outside could get into problems. They could eat something they shouldn't, or start barking so that someone calls the animal warden."

Birds also are poor candidates for solitary stays because they are highly dependent on social interaction, quickly soil their cages and require frequent changes of food and

water. Calder advises not leaving a bird unattended; Berbert says unattended stays should be limited to two days.

"People should not forget that when a pet is left unattended, there is a risk an unexpected illness or injury will go untreated," Berbert added. He also noted that some pets can eat a three-day supply of food in one day, and that with multiple pets, one animal could eat the other pet's share of food.

Pet care often means hiring a neighbor to stop by. The upside is that the cost is less than boarding or hiring a professional pet sitter. The downside is that a neighbor, particularly a young one, might forget to visit. And if a pet needs special care, such as receiving injections, the teen next-door might not want to do it.

An informal survey of 17 young people in the Washington area suggests pay rates vary widely and depend on the number of daily visits required and the tasks involved. In Falls Church, Arlington and Northwest Washington, where neighbors are usually a short walk away, young sitters were earning \$2.50 to \$7 per daily visit; most received \$5. In sprawling Great Falls, where it's often a drive to the house, rates ran \$6 to \$10 per visit. Normally, a visit includes bringing in mail and newspapers, feeding the pet, cleaning litter, and playing or walking. Some expect extra pay for multiple dogs. A few have given oral or topical medications.

In setting pay, pet owners might keep in mind that providing animal care is not always as simple as it seems. Kane Kanagawa, 16, of Great Falls has been pet sitting for three years. On one job, while caring for two hairless cats and an iguana, one cat escaped from its room and headed for an attic area. "We heard a meow and a thump and we thought it had landed in the furnace," said Kanagawa. "We were freaking out."

Eventually, kitty was found unharmed, and Kanagawa began feeding the iguana some live crickets that were kept in a box. The box top fell off. "There were about 50 crickets jumping all around the house," said Kanagawa. "We could hear them, but we didn't know what to do." With the help of the hairless cats, all 50 crickets were corralled and returned to either the box or the iguana. What should have been a half-hour visit took nearly two hours.

On another job, Kanagawa had to break into a client's house through an unlocked window after the rushed owner dropped off the wrong key and left the contact information inside the locked house. "Things like this do come up," Kanagawa said. "They teach us responsibility."

Matt Sese, 12, a cat sitter in Falls Church, cited another time-consuming job glitch. "The owner didn't leave enough food," he said. "We had to go to the grocery store to get more."

Lots of adults make -- or supplement -- their living by going to other people's homes to care for pets. Sheila Smith, a spokeswoman for the 6,500-member Pet Sitters International, said a professional sitter provides peace of mind. "They usually have plenty of experience, they may have had training, and they should be insured and bonded in case of a problem."

Smith advises pet owners to check references and draw up a written agreement specifying fees, duties and the owner's contact information. "There also should definitely be an initial consultation at the owner's home before a sitter takes a job," Smith said.

Becky O'Neil is president of the Northern Virginia Professional Pet Sitters Network, which includes 37 members serving Northern Virginia, Maryland and the District. She said many area pet-sitting services charge a one-time registration fee of \$10 to \$25; a single visit for one pet generally runs \$15 to \$25, with \$3 to \$5 extra for each additional pet.

Visits normally include walking, scooping litter, feeding, watering indoor plants, adjusting blinds or lights to create a lived-in look, and bringing in mail and newspapers. Often there is an additional fee for giving medication, typically \$1 to \$5 per dose. O'Neil, who is also owner of Becky's Pet Care in Alexandria, estimates about half of local services, including her own, have staff that can give injections.

Many professional sitters offer overnight stays for \$50 to \$85 per night, O'Neil said. Typical overnight service includes an evening feeding and walk or playtime, a nighttime walk, and a morning feeding and walk or play. Some services include a midday visit as part of the overnight charge, others require an additional \$12 to \$18.

Lisa Snyder, owner of Pets 'n Plants Pet and House Sitting in Vienna, said hiring a professional ensures that a pet will not be forgotten. "Our sitters are accountable to someone. We have a procedure to check that a job is done," she said.

Dog owner Kim Campbell of Mason Neck, who uses Becky's Pet Care, said that another benefit is not having to plan so far ahead. "When we were kenneling, we'd have to make our reservations at practically the same time as our vacation reservations, at least four weeks ahead," she said. "Now, even if we forget until a few days before vacation, we can usually get a pet sitter."

Kennels and some animal hospitals offer boarding, and fees vary widely.

At Friendship Hospital for Animals, daily fees range from about \$23 for a dog less than 15 pounds to nearly \$30 for a dog more than 95 pounds. The fee includes access to a run, but walks cost an additional \$4.25 each.

Kenneling for cats is about \$22. Animals requiring significant attention from a veterinary technician, such as diabetics, are charged \$57.75. Boarding is for 24-hour periods.

The Royal Pet Shop and Kennel in Alexandria charges according to the size of the cage. Daily rates run from \$16 for a 3-by-3-foot cage, to \$24 for a 5-by-10-foot cage. The fee includes four walks a day. Cats are charged \$13 per day; small caged animals are charged \$10 daily. The kennel does not take pets requiring significant medical attention, such as diabetics.

The Web site of the American Boarding Kennels Association, www.abka.com, includes a locator for finding member kennels, as well as tips on choosing a kennel.

Some professional pet sitters, often those with large yards in the country, take dogs into their own homes. Debrajean Norris, owner of Home Away from Home Pet Sitting Service in Viewtown, Va., in Rappahannock County, opens part of her home plus a 2.5-

acre fenced yard to canine boarders for a flat fee of \$25 per night. Before being accepted for boarding, a dog and its owner must visit Norris at home so she can assess the dog's compatibility. Owners bring their dog's food, toys and crate, if normally used.

Up to three boarders at a time share digs with the Norris family, including her own three dogs. Well-behaved canines may use a dog-door to come and go as they please, taking in the sights of the llama farm next-door or sleeping in Norris's basement. Large pens are available to accommodate any destructive or non-compatible dogs. "It's not like your home," said Norris, a licensed veterinary technician, "but it's better than a kennel because they aren't kept in cages."

Anne Angers of the Pet Nanny in Waldorf, also offers boarding in her home for up to four dogs at a time. For \$30 to \$35 per day, she allows limited access to her house and quarter-acre yard, and provides two daily walks.

Kitty Country in Lovettsville offers non-caged luxury boarding for felines. Owner Debbie Spring divided several of her home's bedrooms into cat rooms, none smaller than 4 by 7 feet, and all with cat perches, scratching posts, and a window overlooking a bird feeder and her five-acre yard. Cats are played with and brushed in a playroom with a television. Cost is \$20 per night plus \$10 per night for each additional family cat in the same room.

Then there are the resorts, such as Springfield's [**Olde Towne Pet Resort**](#), a 27,000-square-foot "spa" offering a range of "hotel suite accommodations" for your pet. At the lower range is the \$25 per night "Classic Cat," which includes a multi-level enclosure with a view of the woods or a sunlit hallway, gourmet food, a bed and a play session. At the high end, for dogs, is the \$85 per night "Luxury in the Rotunda," which includes a penthouse room with private play area, four walks per day, gourmet food, music, television and an Internet hookup that lets vacationing owners watch Fido play. Fido can also shop at the resort's pet store -- subject to an allowance set in advance -- where toys and other goodies are displayed at cat-and-dog nose levels. A la carte extras include a salon bath and a canine massage.

All of which makes your human vacation seem just a bit mundane, doesn't it?

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