



Having ‘itchy feet syndrome’ has always been a common ailment of ours! Having lived in three different countries, England, Singapore and the USA, and having traveled extensively through Europe, Asia, Australasia and North America we have a constant desire to be on the move, to be exploring new towns, cities, countries, to taste new and authentic foods and to experience new people and cultures. While we have been lucky enough to do much of this through company postings and assignments, early retirement was causing us to experience a severe bout of ‘itchy feet syndrome’. So, what were we going to do about it? Vacations cost money, and who wants to be on vacation forever? We were never ‘resort’ type of vacationers, unless you count the one on Sibu Island, Malaysia, where we stayed in wooden thatched roofed huts, with mosquito nets, creepy crawlies, cold showers, and set menus. We loved that! No pressure to look good at the pool, no dressing for dinner, kids playing on the beach from early morning ‘til sunset, great snorkeling and scuba diving and a peace and quiet that you can only find immersed in nature and only on this tiny island in the South China Sea.

We needed something to keep us occupied as we were not ones for lounging in front of the TV, didn’t love chain restaurants, too young for the ‘early bird specials’ and although we lived on a golf course, did not play golf. We didn’t like to ‘belong’ to clubs as we felt restricted by the commitment and really wanted adventure, variety and a challenge. Around us we saw neighbors in their 60s or early 70s still working in order to pay off mortgages, car payments or other debt or just to boost their retirement fund so they didn’t run out of money. They were counting down the days to retirement, and finally when they did, they were left spending hours and hours at the doctor’s office. We can only assume the change in their daily routines caused them to experience a shift in their health. They hardly traveled, scared to go overseas in case they couldn’t get their medications, or that they might get mugged or become victims of a terrorist attack. This was not for us, but neither was a future of luxury, lazy vacations.

We decided to SIT, EAT and PLAY!

The following is an A-Z guide of how to prepare for, and have a successful house-sitting experience, with a smattering of stories and experiences we feel are good to share – so read on and enjoy. Hopefully, you will be inspired to get up, get set and GO!

A

Is for...

Availability:

To take advantage of the numerous house-sitting opportunities that are out there, you must be in a position where you are fully available, without any commitments to hold you back. While you can take an assignment for a weekend or a few days, you still need to be completely free to meet the tasks and duties of your assignment. This also means allowing time for travel to and from your destination. Therefore, retirees and students who may be able to study remotely or have a gap year are ideal candidates for house-sitting. If you are a 'digital nomad' this may also be a great opportunity to travel, but you must ensure your house-sitting assignment duties are met, along with your work commitments.

And so it begins! No, not the journey... the preparation! We had to make sure we were clear of all our commitments in order to be able to take every opportunity to house-sit our way around the world. Marcel had mutually been retired from his job as Senior VP of a multi-national computer company, which had been responsible for our postings to Singapore and the USA and likely the instigator of our 'itchy feet syndrome'. I had a real estate business which I had been growing for six years, and while it was very successful, it was a career that I could put on hold and return to in the future, provided I continued with the education requirements. So, working commitments were easy to clear. We did not belong to gyms, golf clubs, social clubs so no loss of membership fees there. We were lucky enough to live in a condo community where pool and gym were included in our fees so no memberships were required, and being independent sorts, we cycled and kayaked often, so with only a yoga class subscription to use up our calendars were clear. We had no pets.

Family and grandchildren lived close by and yes, or course, we would miss them but they were young, in school and leading busy lives, and how cool would it be to have Nana and Papa traveling the world, having all kinds of stories to tell when they returned. I made a point of regularly writing a letter to my 5-year-old during our time away. She loved seeing the letter in the mailbox and taught her that there is another type of communication other than email or phone, and as she learned to read and write, she responded, telling me her news and drawing lovely pictures. Skype and WhatsApp also made it easy to keep in touch and 'see' them on a regular basis.

With no commitments we were available to apply for any house-sit that we felt would fit our criteria. We could go for as little as a weekend, or for as long as 6 months or even a year if it was a good fit. We were open to anything and everything and so we were eager to search for our first

house-sit. We were also available to leave at short notice and take advantage of some great airfare deals.

Assignments:

There are many types of assignments that come with a house-sit. Most usually require you to take care of pets, others to take care of the garden, tend a vegetable plot, maintain a swimming pool. Occasionally, there may be a requirement for you to look in on a disabled or elderly relative. Some may need you to help restore or renovate a home, others to help run and manage a bed and breakfast, lodge or holiday home. Some just require your presence in the home. Make sure you choose assignments that you are comfortable with and have the required skills to complete.

So, what were we prepared to do? We both had liberal educations, had traveled extensively already, had many skills. We had owned, operated and managed a vacation rental, which was very successful and so were familiar with maintaining a large property, had had pets in the past, were problem solvers, had gardening experience, had laid flooring of all types, painted, built decks and patios, maintained swimming pools, and generally could put our hands and minds to most things to get things done. We also loved to cook and entertain – we were invincible and felt we could do almost anything!



Our first assignment was a safe bet though. We applied for a position in lovely Shropshire, England. We are British, so we knew the language, new the country having lived there for 30 plus years, had driven there and of course our family still lived there so we could tag on a week or so to visit them if needed. The position was for six weeks, December through to mid-January and entailed taking care of two dogs, a cat and five horses! Now, while I have never owned horses, my daughter loved to ride, and Marcel had spent some of his childhood around horses. These were older, retired horses, did not need to be ridden, only fed, and watered twice a day – easy peasy! We would have our own apartment next to the main house in a converted barn, needed to walk the two dogs twice a day, feed and care for them, the cat and generally keep an eye on the place. It was a good first assignment, albeit the UK had the coldest winter on record, and an exceptionally large dumping of snow, the most in almost twelve years! We enjoyed the dogs, the cat, managed to take incredibly good care of the horses, despite the weather, and saw family in the process. While we did not expect it to be so cold, that was just part of the adventure and experience – you never know what you'll have to contend with!



Our second assignment was in lovely San Diego, California. It was a house-sit for our daughter and fiancée who were going on a trip to Japan and we offered to take care of her dog and cat for the two weeks. We love San Diego and never miss an opportunity to visit. We loved her neighborhood; the animals were easy to care for and we explored the city and did some touristy things we had missed on previous trips. We were able to help by doing handyman things in the house too.

Our third assignment was to South West France. Marcel's father was French, and we had visited France many times, but this five-month assignment would immerse us well and truly into the French culture. We had our own cottage on the estate, had to mow 4-5 acres of grass, with two ride-on mowers, prune the flowerbeds, maintain the pool when it was open (six weeks), walk and



take care of two gorgeous black labs, and cook for the owners when they had guests for lunch. The weather was delightful, the scenery breathtaking, the food was exquisite in quality and taste of course and we grew to love the dogs as our own, walking them around part of the 168-acre estate twice a day. As the owners of this assignment were regularly on site, we were able to take trips for a few days throughout the

assignment and enjoy the mountains and other areas of South West France. We also tagged on a week prior to the assignment, traveling through France, and three weeks at the end traveling through Northern Spain and Portugal, back through France to the UK to see family! What a trip!



Accommodations:

Your accommodations could be anything from use of the owners' house; another building on the property; a converted barn; an apartment; an RV or caravan. There are many possibilities so be sure that you are made aware of what type of accommodation will be living in.



In the UK we had use of a converted barn which had a large bedroom, bathroom and sitting area upstairs, with a kitchen and sitting and dining area downstairs. It was well equipped, and we loved that there were skylights in the bedroom roof where we could star gaze, or snow watch, in the evenings. There were many windows in the property, and we were able to sit and drink our morning coffee overlooking the beautiful Shropshire countryside, which continually changed with the unpredictable weather, looking stunning when the

snow fell. The barn was wonderfully comfortable and, most importantly, warm!



In France we had use of a cottage which had once been an Armagnac distillery. On arrival we entered the house directly into the kitchen and living area.... it was old, and quite cool inside, which would be great in the summer, but the stone walls felt a little too cold. While the kitchen had a cooker, two fridges, a freezer, dishwasher and, in fact everything you would need in a kitchen, the walls and beams of the building were rustic, very rustic and the complimentary cobwebs blew gently as we walked through to the other rooms. The floor was

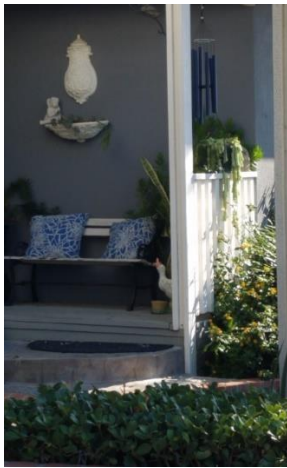


nicely tiled, which was cool to walk on – again, good for the summer, not so much in April, as the temperature had dropped – woolly slippers would have been a good item to pack. We went through to the bedroom and ensuite bathroom. Again, everything you needed, two closets that reminded me of my grandmothers' bedroom, a dressing table, and a desk. The bed was nicely covered and turned out to be very comfortable. The bathroom had a shower and vanity unit, toilet, and a heated towel rack which we came to worship in these early spring days and nights! The fireplace in the main area was another item we learned to cherish in the first weeks when the temperature was a little low. Marcel, kept the fireside burning, collecting logs, although luckily, he did not have to chop them! There were two more bedrooms, and another bathroom, with tub, a sink, which we

think may have been an adapted trough used in the wine making process, and a toilet that had a lovely view of the washing machine.



One last room that we came to call the ‘gateway to hell’ was a storeroom. The light switch to the room was across the other side, so it was always dark on entering and leaving. This is where there were tools, a fridge, the ironing board, a wine rack, and a rather ominous looking door which was heavily curtained, and which we left well alone. We put the recycling in here and entered only when necessary!



Our accommodation in California was our daughter’s house. In the nice area of Talmadge in San Diego, the home was extremely comfortable, with everything we needed. It had an unusually large garden too which was a great place to relax and play with Duke the dog. We enjoyed walking around the neighborhood with Duke, looking at all the eclectic homes and gardens, each one with a hidden gem, whether it was a statue of an orc from Lord of the Rings! Or a waterwheel, or a Zenlike mosaic in the sandy soil. Every street was a new experience.



Whatever the accommodation, it will not be like your home. Respect the property, adapt to what it has to offer and enjoy exploring the surrounding area or neighborhood

Adaptability:

The fun thing about housesitting is that you never quite know what you are going to get. As much as you research, ask questions and consider the assignment, there are always surprises! You won't like everything you experience with a housesit, so you have to be mentally prepared to 'go with the flow' don't create drama and if you are fussy or particular about certain things, either prepare to address them beforehand or don't take the assignment. The assignment may only be for a few days or weeks, so whatever it is you are not quite comfortable with, realize it will not be forever!

You have to remember that the house you are taking care of is the property of someone else and their décor, bed type, electronic equipment or lack thereof, their kitchen equipment and amenities will not be the same as yours at home. Sometimes it will be better, sometimes not! Maybe the kitchen is new and modern with every gadget and gizmo available to you, or it could be a more primitive kitchen with fewer conveniences, a smaller area and no dishwasher!

When we arrived at our housesit in England, the kitchen had fewer bowls, plates and utensils than we were used to and it took a few days to remember to wash the dishes immediately after our meals, ready for the next one. We also had to adapt to the unexpected snowy weather. While we had warm coats and hiking boots, we did have to wear many more layers of clothing when the temperature plummeted suddenly. We were not expecting to shovel three-foot-deep snow drifts from the driveway, but we had fun with snowball fights!

Pillows and mattresses are quite a personal matter, and your bed for the duration may not be the same comfort level as at home. We usually do the 'goldilocks' test when we get to the housesit, to see if we need more pillows, or need to soften the mattress with extra blankets to make it 'just right'. On occasion we have had much nicer beds than our own and have enjoyed a better sleep experience.

Our greatest adaptations have had to be in the kitchen. At home we have a modern kitchen, with a plethora of sharp knives, numerous sizes of bowls, chopping boards for all kinds of foods, and ample dishes and plates of all shapes and sizes with which to serve and eat food from. We are avid cooks, so squeezers, scrapers, graters and grinders are typically available in our kitchen, but on our house sits they are scarce. However, instead of throwing our arms up in despair, we assess what we do have, adapt, and still manage to cook our gourmet meals. On our French housesit we were asked by the owners to cook and serve food for up to 14 guests on several occasions, and while we had the use of the kitchen in the main house and our small kitchen in the cottage, it was a challenge to juggle the pots and pans, dishes and platters. The stovetop in the cottage had three rings, the fourth not working, and each one was a different size, cooked at varying heats and Marcel became very adept at moving the pans from one ring to another to get the correct consistency for sauces and sautés. The oven in the main house had a mind of its own and there were tense moments when we thought we had overcooked the salmon. There were times when we thought it wouldn't come together and I have memories of running up and down the large garden area between the house and cottage, saucepan in one hand, balancing plates and dishes in the other, while realizing

I'd left a lemon, or some garnish on the kitchen table and would have to make yet another trip! We didn't panic, went with the flow, and everything turned out well and everyone enjoyed the food.

Whatever the differences, adapt to your new surroundings and be optimistic that this is a new experience and not necessarily a bad one. Be comfortable about being out of your comfort zone. You will undoubtedly learn something new from it, be stronger or more determined to deal with anything that comes your way. Remember, this is for a limited period, and unless it is detrimental to your health and safety, you can do anything for a short amount of time.



No tumble dryer here, just good old-fashioned fresh air!
The sheets smelled so good....

B

Is for...

Biography:

Most house-sitting websites require you to complete a bio on their site where people can read about you, your skills, and your availability. Make sure your bio is complete, concise, and truthful. Some websites have forms or sections for you to complete, others give you free range for you to make your own page. Skills, experience, and some detail about who you are is usually required. While you should include as much as possible, keep it concise, and fun and easy to read.

Writing your bio is a challenge in trying to convince someone to ask you to sit their house without revealing your whole life story. If you are members of different websites, then you may have to adapt your bio to fit their templates. The ones that offer a 'form fill' option allows you to be more concise, specific, and clear in your skills and experience. Use this type of template as a guide when writing your bio for your own website or another house-sitting website which allows free writing or for when you are applying for a position. Remember to make your application bio fit with the required position. Someone who only needs you to take care of the cat will not want to read a lengthy bio on how you are an avid gardener when there is no garden to tend. They may think you are not a good fit for the position. Keep your bio light and chatty and use bullet points to highlight your specific skills.

Background Checks:

While background checks are not mandatory, it is usually a good idea to have a background check on file in the event the owner asks for one. Some owners will only consider those applicants with background checks, as noted on many of the various websites.

Do not be offended if someone insists on a background check. After all, they are asking a stranger to come into their home and care for their possessions and pets. You can easily get a background check through your State's official site for a nominal fee. Marcel and I have not yet, so far, been asked to provide a background check. Once we have had several email and phone conversations, plus a Skype or in person interview, this seems to have satisfied everyone and alleviated any concerns on both sides.

C

Is for...

Commitment:

Once you have found a house-sitting position and have confirmed with the owner the dates and duties of the position, it is important that you keep to this commitment. While there is usually no written contract or monies exchanged, it is on an honor basis that you adhere to your commitment. Unless there is an absolute family emergency, you should honor your commitment, otherwise you may be subject to a bad testimonial and as such jeopardize your chances of landing further positions and overall you will spoil the reputation of house sitters in general.

During our house sits, the owners have asked us to stay longer, or return on a regular basis. While we have loved every one of them, we have been reluctant to commit to returning on a regular basis as there are so many other opportunities we would like to experience. We have always been honest with our house-sitting hosts and would never commit to returning until we were absolutely sure that is what we wanted to do. We have an open invitation to the house sits we have done and feel comfortable that we could call any one of them and be welcomed back.

Cost:

Usually there is no cost involved in house sitting other than airfare and/or transportation and your day-to-day needs such as food and drink etc. No rent is paid, no fee other than the subscription to websites. Heating, cooling, electricity, water, and anything that is required to complete the tasks assigned should be the responsibility of the owner. However, emergencies happen, and you may be required to pay an expense which should be reimbursed to you by the owner. (See Keep a Log).

While we have never been asked to pay for utilities, there are some house-sitting assignments that do ask for sitters to pay for heating or cooling. In the tropics, and in the depths of winter, heating and cooling costs can be significant and some owners ask that these utilities be paid for by the sitters during the assignment. This should be discussed prior to taking the assignment, to avoid any misunderstandings later. During our stay in France, we would have to fill the ride-on tractors with gasoline on a weekly basis. The owners provided a 'float' for us to pay for this and any other items that might be needed while they were away. It worked well, and we kept all receipts should they have been required.

Cats:

Cats are a common pet to take care of during a house sit. There may be one or there may be many – I have seen nine in a single housesit advertisement! While cats seem easier to take care of than most pets, make sure you understand what is required when caring for a particular cat.

While they do not need exercising, they do need attention and a watchful eye. Does the cat need medication, special food? Is it an outdoor cat? Indoors only? Is



it a mouser – are you comfortable with the daily delivery of a rat or mouse on your doorstep? We have been lucky with the cats we have taken care of. Mr. Wesley in England was an outdoor cat and frequently ate mice and caught birds in the farmyard. Meaty in San Diego loved attention and had his time for cuddles in the evening.



Communication:

Communication is key when house-sitting. First, communicating beforehand with the owner regarding all aspects of the assignment is imperative. Ask as many questions as you can think of – there are no stupid ones! Maintain contact and update any travel changes or other changes that may occur before the assignment. While you are conducting the house sit, make sure you have phone numbers, emails etc. for the owner in case of an emergency. If anything untoward happens during your stay, make sure the owner knows as soon as possible to avoid misunderstandings further down the road. Talk to the owner to see if he/she wants you to give daily, weekly, or monthly updates, especially if pets are involved. Make sure you have all necessary emergency numbers for your safety and the pets.

It is easy to stay in contact with everyone today. Either through email, text, social media or other video conferencing systems. There is little excuse not to be in contact with someone. During our stay in France, our owners traveled frequently but we were able to text and call, keeping in mind the time differences when they were overseas. We were not required to give daily bulletins, but we did make sure we contacted them once a week to give them an update on the pets and the house, usually sending a photograph. We had a large tree fall during their absence, which was quite significant and had to be cleared; another time there was a beehive in the kitchen which had to be dealt with. While the owners planned for people to come in and do the work, we needed to be on hand to supervise and make sure things went smoothly. Luckily, we have not had any major sicknesses with either the animals or ourselves, but it is prudent to make sure directions to hospitals, doctors, vets, and emergency numbers are on hand.

Cars:

It is unusual for transportation to be included in a house sit. Likely you will be asked to provide your own transportation which can be expensive. Sometimes there may be use of a car on occasion, or cycles that you can use. However, unless you are in a city with public transport, it is probable that you will need to either take your own car or hire one.

During our stay in France we were able to take advantage of a short term leased car. This was cheaper than hiring one over the 6-month period we needed one and the pick-up and drop-off was quick and easy. It was a brand-new car, reliable and as we were traveling through France and later Spain and Portugal, we were able to drive it through all those countries. In England we could only rent for a maximum of 30 days, but we returned the car and picked up another for our final two weeks. Be aware of rules of the road for the country, or state, that you are in!



Our wheels for six months in Europe! Small but exceptionally good on gas and nippy too! The pickup and drop off was so easy and efficient.

Our ride in the UK. Little did we know we should have hired a 4-wheel drive!



D

Is for...

Destinations:

House-sitting is a worldwide endeavor. You can do this in almost any country and while you will need to pay for airfares, the accommodation is usually free. What a way to see the world! From exotic Asian retreats, to mountain cabins and busy bustling cities, there are so many opportunities. You may however only want to house-sit in your home country, maybe only in cities, maybe only in warm climates. You can choose! Most websites allow you to type in your preferences and only receive opportunities that fit your criteria.

While it is exciting to be traveling to a different country or State, you should always research your destination regarding transport, amenities, and religious and cultural customs in order to both assimilate into and respect the local communities. Choose your destination carefully – do not choose a house-sitting assignment in the middle of winter in Canada if you are not prepared to shovel snow, stay indoors or lug firewood to keep you warm! We have enjoyed our house sits in both cities and small villages, and also in the vast French countryside and all have come with unexpected experiences.

For our house sit in the UK, we obviously realized it would be winter, cold, and likely rainy. What we did not expect was a large winter snowstorm that dumped the most snow the UK had had in many years. Of course, no one can predict the weather, but one thing that we had forgotten about was the number of daylight hours in the UK in December. We had planned to see to the animals in the early morning, spend most of the day sightseeing or visiting family, returning home in the early evening to see to the animals again. However, by the time we had watered, fed, and walked the animals, had our breakfast, and readied ourselves for our days' activities, it was almost 11am. After driving to our sightseeing destination, or our family we would only have a couple of hours before darkness fell at around 3.30pm so our days had to be planned accordingly, in order to make greater use of the daylight hours.

In France, we had to accustom ourselves to the long lunch hours where shops and businesses were closed from 12 noon until after 3pm. The days of operation for many shops were erratic, the cheese shop opened Wednesdays through Saturdays from 9-12 and 5-7, but on some Mondays 8-10 and 4-6, with the third Tuesday being closed all day, oh and don't forget if there was a Saint's day that month, which there always was, then the shop would be closed then too! The butcher and bakers were also as erratic and each one different, so days had to be thoughtfully planned if you wanted

your cheese and bread on the same day!! The owner finally gave us a calendar with all the holidays listed – almost one each week.

These are obviously things that cannot always be anticipated, but in general, think carefully about where you would be most comfortable with a house sit, but always expect the unexpected. That's the fun of it all!

Dogs:

Dogs are one of the main reasons people are looking for house-sitters. Kennels are expensive and owners prefer that their dogs are in familiar surroundings while they are away. However, some dogs need more attention than others.

Some will require long walks every day, even rambles across fields and moors. Some will only require a quick run in the yard. Others will require medication and special food. Make sure you understand the duties involved in caring for someone else's beloved pet. Poop scooping is a given so be prepared. Different sizes and breeds will need different types of care and handling. Bruno the Bull Mastif may be a gentle giant, but if you do not have the strength to hold him on the leash, then maybe the assignment is not a good fit. Similarly, if Polly Poodle needs shampooing three times a week, a play date with several of her clique friends and hand fed tuna and tripe and you are not prepared to do that, then choose a different assignment. Make sure you are comfortable with the breed – some larger, fiercer breeds need special handling. We have looked at assignments where the pets sleep in the sitter's bedroom or even on the bed, something that we would not enjoy, so this is a question we ask up front. Ask if all vaccinations are up to date and have the local vet details to hand.



Jillie, the dog we cared for in England was a rescue dog and extremely nervous around us at the beginning. She looked quite vicious when we first saw her and I was a little apprehensive, but after a couple of days she began to trust us and by the end of the six weeks, she was very obedient, walked much more easily on her leash and was the most gentle dog, despite her wild, wide-eyed expression.

Jack, the Jack Russell was also easy to take care of, not needing quite as much exercise, but still lots of attention.

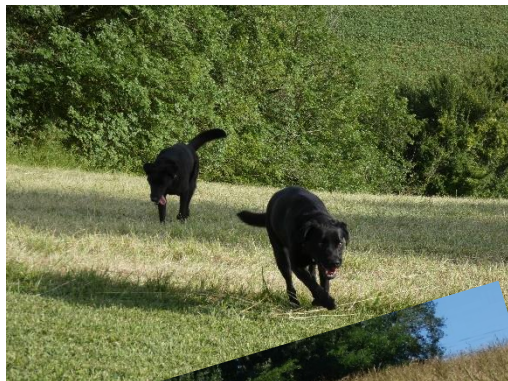


Duke, the golden lab in San Diego, was easy and a joy to care for. Walking around his neighborhood, he was greeted warmly by friendly neighbors and was always eager to play with other dogs too. He had a large yard to play in and we enjoyed our evenings playing fetch.

Duke chillin' on the patio.



Sapphire and Blackberry were our black labs in France. They had free range of the estate albeit they did have tracking collars. Their life was idyllic. Free to run up and down the rolling green hills, a dip in the pond every day, a warm hearth at night and two full meals a day, plus all the fruit they could gorge on during our walks. It is easy to become attached to the dogs and pets cared for during house sitting, and we have fond memories of all of them.



They had such fun playing in the fields.

E

Is for...

Experience:

There are some assignments that will require you to have experience, either in a specific field, or as a seasoned house-sitter. If there are horses involved, you may be required to have equestrian experience or have had previous house-sitting experience taking care of horses. Starting off with small assignments that only require care of small household pets and patio plants is prudent, to obtain the experience and testimonials required for others to consider you for larger, more varied positions.

During our stay in France we were required to take care of the swimming pool for a few weeks during the summer. We were lucky that we had had our own pool and had experience of cleaning out the filters and sweeping the pool. We were also required to test and treat the water each day. This was not a problem for us but for someone who has no knowledge or experience could find it frustrating trying to balance the pH each day, especially after a rainstorm or an especially hot day.

We were successful in turning a very swampy green swimming pool into a gin clear blue pool in a matter of days. What we were not prepared for was the leak in the pool. Each day the pool lost a significant amount of water due to a breakage in a pipe underground which had yet to be found. It was a challenge each day to keep the water at a reasonable level along with all the chemicals it needed.



Some sitters will require you to be great gardeners, have handyman skills, or be tech savvy, especially if they have a smart house. Only take on an assignment if you have the skills and experience that the owner is looking for. Agreeing to provide some skill that you are not already capable of will just lead to stress for you and upset for the owner when they return to find that what you promised was not maintained adequately.

The pool we had to maintain in France.

F

Is for...

Financial Independence:

Remember, you normally do not receive payment or compensation for house-sitting, so it is important to be financially independent during your assignment. You will receive, in return for your tasks and duties, free accommodation and the opportunity to live in and/or visit either another city or suburb, or even a different State or country. While you are not charged for accommodation, heating, or A/C, you may have to provide your own transport and you will have to cover your daily eating and entertainment expenses. Airfares are not typically included and so would be an expense.

Financial freedom is the best freedom. To be able to immerse yourself into a house-sitting lifestyle you need to have a certain amount of financial freedom. Digital nomads can continue working while house sitting but their duties to the house sitter must not be compromised. Transportation and airfares are likely to be the two major expenses. Set yourself up financially, with some safety net, before embarking on a house sitter lifestyle.

We set ourselves up to have the least amount of commitment as possible. We paid off the mortgage on our small apartment. Paid off the car loan; had no outstanding credit card debt. We did not belong to any clubs or associations that needed monthly or annual dues. Our only expense was medical, HOA fees for the apartment, electricity which was minimal while we were away and home and car insurances. Everything was set up to be paid online well in advance of the due date, so there was no chance of late fees or of missing a payment. Get organized and automated and you will have peace of mind while you are in your foreign country.

Food:

While food is rarely included in a housesit, there may be some that offer opportunities for you to cook if you are a budding chef or foodie, and therefore include those meals. If you are house-sitting on a farm, estate or a small holding that grows produce, you may be able to 'pick your own' for free.

If you are in a foreign country, you can explore and take the opportunity to taste new and wonderful dishes with ingredients you've only seen on travel shows. If you are in your own country, there are lots of regional dishes to savor. Depending on the time of year, you may be able to try foods that you are not able to buy, at least fresh, in your own part of the country. You may be able to seek out local restaurants and farmers markets. Whatever your taste, this is a great opportunity to expand your knowledge and tastebuds.

While we were in Shropshire, England, we were lucky enough to be close to farms that sold both produce and meat locally through their farm stands. Fresh chicken and duck eggs were readily available, and we had some delicious local lamb and pork. The organically grown vegetables were earthy and so full of flavor! We did indulge in our old favorites of Pork Pies, Cornish Pasties and extra thick double cream!



In France, our weekly trek to the local markets was always an adventure. The vendors soon recognized us and very often placed a few extra carrots, lettuces, or tomatoes in our bags. We were able to sample different cheeses before we bought, and the bread was always freshly baked, and delicious. There would be stalls of ready prepared food of rotisserie chickens and roasted potatoes, huge circular pans of paella and both sweet and savory crepes. We tried them all!



WARNING: You will more than likely gain weight! With all the new options available, you just have to try!

Foreign House-Sits:

Being able to sit a house in a foreign country is really a great opportunity to visit that country and enjoy the food, language, and culture. However, some language skill will be necessary and all documentation regarding passports and visas is your responsibility to arrange. Understand that you will need to abide by the laws of that country, deal with the local authorities and respect the religions and culture of that country.

Our house sit in England was not ‘foreign’ to us, as we were born and raised there. Nevertheless, after being away for 25 years, many things had changed, and we had to adapt. We had forgotten how short the days were in December and struggled to do all the things we wanted and needed to do before dark. The roads are still much narrower than in the USA, but each time we return it takes a few days of driving to handle the twists and turns on the left-hand side of the road again. Many of the traditional pubs are not the same as when we lived there. Now many of them are restaurants, so no ‘popping in’ for a quick pint.

In France, although we spoke and understood quite a bit of the French language, the area we were staying had a strong dialect, so it seemed we understood nothing at all. We managed to communicate, and enjoyed the interactions, which usually ended up in either fits of laughter or a red face and a quick exit.

One such incident occurred when a beehive fell down the chimney in the main house kitchen! One day while the owners were away on vacation, the cleaner and a handyman happened to be in the main house working, when they were disturbed by a loud thud. They followed the sound and on entering the kitchen were greeted by a swarm of bees. There was a hive in the chimney which had become so heavy that it had fallen to the ground. They duly called the owners who advised they would call someone in. Marcel and I stayed out of the kitchen and brought the dogs down to sleep in the cottage, until the bees could be attended to. The next day, we were happy to see someone arrive at the main house. I walked towards him and he greeted me explaining in French that he was here to ‘regarder’ something. I didn’t quite understand what he was saying but he made a gesture with his hands that took the shape of a beehive, so I told him I would get the key and let him in. He looked a little puzzled that I needed a key but waited for me anyway. Marcel joined us and we all walked up to the house, the kitchen window now open, in the hope that the bees would find their way out. He mentioned that there were bees and I said yes, they were in the kitchen and directed him in front of me towards the kitchen door. He looked at me in horror and started waving a paper around in front of my face, which Marcel looked at. Ha, he was not here for the beehive, but to assess a hole in the wall of the barn for insurance purposes! Oops, I wondered why he had no ‘bee’ equipment... Marcel knew about the hole, and he duly showed him where it was, the guy muttering under his breath all the way down the garden. The bee man arrived two days later, but the bees had all died by then. Not sure if the insurance covered the hole in the barn wall....

G

Is for...

Guests:

A house-sit assignment is not an excuse for the rest of your family to visit you for their vacation. Unless you have the permission of the owner to have someone visit and/or stay while you are on assignment, you should not invite guests to use the accommodation or amenities. Discuss with the owner if you are on a long-term stay, whether a visit from a family member is possible. Do not just assume that because they are out of town their house or apartment is a free hotel.

As soon as your friends and family are aware that you are off housesitting, you are likely to get responses like: 'that's great; we'll come and visit while you are there, we've always wanted an excuse to go to....' Or 'I have a cousin who lives in that state/country, I'll arrange a visit so we can come see you'. Be firm with your friends and family, this is not an opportunity for them to tag a vacation onto your house sit. If you are away for an extended period, and you would like to have someone visit, then you should speak with the owners and obtain their permission.

During our stay in the UK, family were about 2 hours away. We did have a couple of day visits from them which was fine with the owners. There was no need, nor room, for them to stay overnight.

Whilst in France, we did seek permission for our family and friends to visit, and the owners were open to this, provided it did not impede our commitment with the planned lunches they had requested us to organize and prepare or our other tasks we had been assigned. My brother and his wife came from the UK for a weekend, and my sister-in-law and husband came for another weekend. We also had friends from the USA who had already booked a vacation in the South of France and they arranged their own accommodation close by and visited us daily for a couple of days. It worked out well because we had arranged all this with the owners and sought their approval. Be upfront and honest.

Gardening:

Gardening and taking care of houseplants and veggie patches is another common element of housesitting. Some require a daily watering, but others require constant attention to pruning, digging, weeding, mowing, and harvesting. Make sure you know the extent of the duties involved in this area and be sure to have the skills and knowledge to take on this type of assignment. Know your weeds!

During our time in France, we had plenty of gardening to keep us busy. When we first arrived and drove down the long grassy driveway, I knew we had our work cut out for us. With shrubs and trees dotted throughout, it wasn't going to be a straight run. Off to the left side a small paddock ran down to the house. On our first mow of this, we were both mesmerized by the view of the snowcapped Pyrenees in the distance. After the driveway, hiding behind a row of conifers, there



was a large lawn area to the side of the main house. This lawn could be classed as the bowling lawn, nice and flat, green and not a shrub in sight. Opposite and to the front of the house was another lawn, with shady trees overhanging wrought iron tables and chairs, where cocktails would be served on sunny evenings. Stone pots filled with lavender and ivy hid behind bushes, and grape vines covered the first two thirds of walls of the house.

To the side of the house was a fenced area, which had a patio and pool surrounded by yet more grass, once again with fantastic views of the Pyrenees. Around our cottage there, was a formidable amount of grass, rolling down towards the cottage, behind the cottage, down another hill towards the field, in front of the cottage, and another small area which led through a dell out towards another field. The whole area was carpeted with daisies, buttercups and dandelions and looked very pretty, but we knew they would not be there for long. Luckily, there were two ride-on mowers. We estimated about 4 acres in total. Along with the mowing, a weekly ritual was to deadhead the many rose bushes on the estate. This was quite satisfying, and the roses bloomed well into the summer. Weeding one of the beds by the house was a request from the owners, which would have been much easier if I had been a little more knowledgeable about weeds. I tentatively pulled up anything that looked out of place or was growing too fast, hoping that it wasn't a special shrub, planted in memory of some long lost relative!





Initially, we did almost all the mowing in one day, as we needed to get an idea of the time commitment and then ease into a routine so that we wouldn't have to mow every day. The weather was cool, but sunny and every other day, it rained. This caused the grass to grow like crazy. No sooner had we decapitated the daisies and buttercups, showing off the pinstripes of our new lawns, the darned things would be blooming again within a day or two. Our new suit of green soon became a white and yellow polka dot skirt, and I swear we could hear the clover growing by the inch when we sat outside for our evening cocktails. It seemed like we would be mowing constantly. After a few weeks, we had it down to a fine art. We both used the mowers and while the steering on one of them had a mind of its own, once we got going, it was like synchronized swimming. Marcel and I twirled and whirled, dipped, and dove and had it all done in just a couple of hours. As the summer days faded, there was less growth, and less mowing.

H

Is for...

Honesty:

All owners are looking for honest, trustworthy, and reliable people. They are after all, asking for a complete stranger to come into their home and take care of their property, pets and belongings. Some will require a background check (see B above). They will also want you to be honest in your application. If you don't have the skills or experience they need, then don't apply for the position. It is both time consuming, stressful and financially detrimental to you to accept a position under false pretenses and then leave before the assignment is complete due to your inability to complete the tasks, or simply because you do not like it.

Be honest with your hosts. Ask questions regarding expectations. Let them know if you are hesitant on any particular issue. Many times, a call or email for clarification on an issue, may be the only thing preventing you from being able to apply, or be accepted for the house-sit. Your honesty will show the hosts that they can trust you to communicate with them if needed, whether it's just a confirmation that all is well, or that there is a problem they need to know about.

Health:

You do need to be fit and healthy to take on a house-sitting assignment. Even if the assignment is just being present in the home while the owner is away, you still need to be free from ailments and have a healthy lifestyle. No-one wants house-sitter who is on heavy medication or is likely to suffer illness or trauma during the stay. This is not to say a disabled person cannot house-sit, but they would need to be sure the premises were able to accommodate their needs. Some assignments may require heavy work or long periods of walking; stairs may be an issue for some people while weather may also affect someone's health. Be sure to check your healthcare plan if you are going overseas, to ensure that you have coverage.

If you are housesitting outside of your home state in the USA, check that your health insurance will cover you in another state. Ensure you have your medications with you or arrange for transfer of your prescriptions to a pharmacy close by if you are on a long-term assignment.

If you are traveling overseas, ensure that you have adequate coverage to evacuate and repatriate should a critical event happen. There are several long-term travel plans available and even if you have health insurance in the USA, some deep investigation into the overseas coverage will be necessary.

The one good thing about medical treatment overseas, is that in most cases, it is cheaper than in the USA, the quality of care is comparable and, in many cases, even better. We have been lucky so far; we have not required any medical attention during our house-sits. We take care of our diet and exercise and have few ailments. However, accidents happen so it is prudent to be prepared.

Home:

Prepare your home before you leave, especially if you are taking a long-term assignment. Mail, utilities, and tasks that prepare the home for being vacant for a length of time need to be attended to. The last thing you need is your own home emergency.

Our apartment is small and in a gated community, so it is easy to lock up and leave. We have a couple of friendly neighbors who keep an eye out and let us know if there is anything untoward going on. We did install a camera inside the apartment which we can dial into whenever we want, but this is primarily to be notified if the fire alarm goes off, or if anything needs repairing or attending to we can see it happening in real time. Initially we had the motion sensor switched on, but living on a golf course in Florida, the sensor caught the reflection in the window of golfers going by and the swaying of the palm fronds in the breeze. We switched it off after the fifth time it went off in the first hour.

Before you go:

- Set the AC or heating according to the weather forecast while you are away.
- Cancel or suspend cable service.
- Hold or redirect mail.
- Empty the fridge completely and clean thoroughly. There's nothing worse than coming home to a furry growth in the fridge. Reduce the amount of food in the freezer.
- Check nothing is left in the microwave – in our experience peas have been known to spend a few weeks locked away there!
- Turn the water off either at the mains, or at each toilet, and at the washer.
- Close some blinds or curtains but leave others open and set lights to come on at intervals to show someone could be home.
- Clean, clean, clean. There is nothing better than returning home to a clean, fresh home. Cover furniture in dust sheets if you are likely to be away for an extended period.

- Have a neighbor check on the property and ask if they can turn the water back on just before you arrive home, flush the toilets and run the water to clear air pockets.
- If you are leaving your car behind, leave the keys with a neighbor and have them turn the engine over once a week to keep the battery from draining. Or better still ask them to drive it for a shopping trip.
- Do not leave dirty laundry in the basket.

Horses:

Taking care of horses is quite common for house sitting-assignments. Some may need riding, others just feeding. Whatever, there will be early mornings, mucking out and haybales involved. Be sure you are experienced and willing to take on these lovely animals.



I've added this here simply because we have taken care of horses as an assignment. While I am not experienced with horses, my husband was comfortable with the task and once I knew they did not need to be ridden, I was more confident about taking care of them. There were five altogether and we had a half mile walk to the barn and field where they were housed. Twice a day we fed them, Roxanne, Sadie, Theo and May, and a little Shetland pony named Paris, brushing their coats every other day and mucking out the barn daily.

Over the weeks we came to know all five of them well, observing their habits and enjoying their personalities. There was definitely a hierarchy with the horses with poor Paris being on the bottom rung. We did spoil him a little by leaving some food in the red bucket and letting him finish it off when the others pushed him away from the food troughs. They spent their days out in the field and came galloping towards us when they saw us arriving to feed them. Mucking out was not too bad, only during the bad snowy weather did the horses stay in the barn longer and thus more piles of poop to scoop. We had some unexpected very cold weather and the challenge was to keep the water pipes from freezing and breaking the ice off the water buckets. A kettle of boiling water came in handy to solve that problem!



I

Is for...

Independence:

The ideal candidate for a house-sitting assignment will be an independent self-sufficient one. Owners will need you to be proactive and resourceful during their absence, in case of emergencies. They do not want house-sitters calling them for every little problem that may come up during their absence, so a 'can-do' attitude and positive outlook is essential.

There's no place for complaining and whining as a house sitter. If there's a problem, you fix it! Have emergency numbers at hand, contacts for mechanics, plumbers, electricians etc. Discuss with the owner possible events that might happen while they are away and how they want it handled in their absence, especially if there is likely to be costs involved.

In France, we had two ride-on mowers which we used, and they would need to be filled with gas quite regularly, due to the amount of acreage that had to be mowed. The owners provided us with a 'float'. A few hundred Euros that we used to purchase the gas, and for anything that we needed for the cottage. The drains and toilets needed a treatment every few weeks, as they were on a septic tank, so we were able to use that money without dipping into our own finances. We kept receipts and when the float was low, we requested more.

Put a process in place with the owners if there are likely to be expenses incurred while carrying out your tasks, so that you can independently solve problems without bothering them while they are away.

J

Is for...

Just Do It:

If you have time on your hands, have no commitments, are financially independent and are looking for change and adventure then house-sitting is an ideal pursuit for you.

While there is a lot of research and planning to do before embarking on a house-sitting assignment, once you have decided it is something you would like to try, then just do it. The sense of adventure, new opportunities, meeting different people, seeing a different part of the world or country, experiencing different cultures, will take you out of your comfort zone. But that's the exciting part, by experiencing all these things, being immersed in a different life for as short or as long as the assignment allows, will open your mind and enrich your life. Don't be afraid! Do the research, be aware of your surroundings, be sensible, honest and committed to your assignment. It's worth it.

K

Is for...

Kids:

House-sitting positions are in general, not kid friendly. However, there are some that require long stays, many helping hands, and are in idyllic area where kids would benefit from a few months of farming, taking care of pets and learning about another country and its language and culture. They are infrequent, but you may be lucky enough to find a position where a family would be welcomed.

Some of the child friendly house sits we have seen advertised tend to be in rural areas, where there are numerous animals to care for and plenty of space for the kids to explore. If you are on a long house sit and have grandchildren, it may be possible, if suitable for kids, for them to come and visit for a few days. As always, check with the owners to see if they are open to having children on their property. Make sure it is safe for the children to be outdoors; there may be farm machinery in barns, ponds across fields and other potential hazards.

Keep a log:

Whenever your owner is away, it is useful to keep of a log of any incidents that take place during your assignment, such as if there is a leak that you had to fix, or a tree that fell in the garden, a plant died or you had to make a visit to the vet with a pet. Keep all official letters and all receipts for any services you had to pay for in their absence.

During our house sit in England, we had to order hay for the horses and have feed delivered. Luckily the owners had an arrangement at the local feed store, so we did not have to pay out of pocket for these expenses. However, we kept a log of what was ordered so that there were no discrepancies at a later date. In France, we kept the receipts for the gas and maintenance of the lawn mowers and for all the food we bought for the luncheons we had to cater for. There were a few household items such as drain cleaner and solutions required for the septic tank that we had to purchase. We produced the receipts and were duly paid. A tree blew down in the yard, the septic clogged up and beehives fell in the house resulting in the kitchen being filled with swarming bees. The owners were contacted, and we were able to mitigate these problems without expense to us, keeping note of the dates and times of the events.

L Is for...

Long Term:

Long term house-sitting can be anywhere from one month, up to one or even two years. This may be due to someone leaving for a job assignment, family commitments in their home country, or just that they need someone to take care of their home while they travel. Whatever their reasons, make sure that your availability allows you to see the assignment through to the end and do not commit if you are not sure.

One of the reasons why we love to take on long-term house-sitting assignments is because we love to ‘live like a local’. Our stay in the UK was for six weeks, and although the weather was snowy and cold for most of the time, it was great to get to know the local area and the people who lived there. The local pub was great for an evening drink and the food was delicious on the several



occasions that we treated ourselves to dinner there. We contacted the local rambling club, and spent a lovely day hiking across the countryside, learning the history of the area from a local who was 80 years old, and his father had also been born and raised in the small village. So much history! We patronized the local farm stores and small village shops and many of the artisanal Christmas markets that cropped up at that time of year. With hot toddies and mince pies, snow on the ground and carolers on street corners, we felt we were in a Dickens novel.

We were in France for five months. We traveled quite a bit in the area during that time and even further afield to the Pyrenees and further inland to beautiful rivers and gorges. We enjoyed the local night markets that were ubiquitous in the summer months, attended Moules Frites nights at the local community center, frequented the local restaurants in the small town close by and became friends with the owners. This was so much more interesting and rewarding than just a couple of weeks visiting. We were able to watch the changing landscape from spring to summer and into early autumn, watching one crop replace another in the many surrounding fields. We saw beautiful fields of green grass, peppered





with wildflowers, soon turning yellow in the heat of the summer, and then being baled up into large rounds of hay ready for the winter feed for the cows. Brown furrowed fields suddenly bloomed into bright yellow sunflowers, finally being replaced by fields of greens, ready for the winter harvest. The Pyrenees went from clear snowy topped peaks of spring, to hazy heights of purple during the summer and then to deep green gorges, with waterfalls and fast flowing rivers. We felt very blessed to have witnessed the changing landscape through the seasons, each one special, each one spectacular.

Leave it as you found it, and leaving in general:

At the end of your assignment, always leave the home and property in as good as, or better condition as you found it. This will ensure a great testimonial from the owner and boost your reputation as a great house-sitter.

Leaving a house sit is a bittersweet experience. Leaving the animals that we had grown to love, the home we had made ours for a short few weeks or months and the surrounding areas we had come to know, is quite emotional, but at the same time, exciting as we know there is more to come with new assignments on the horizon. The last week of stay in France was quiet. The grass had stopped growing, and the owners were away until our last day, so we had time to reflect.

- our last Monday trip to Aignan and the weekly market. I saw the white bearded vegetable guy, who we'd 'conversed' with on occasions here and at other markets in the area, with his jaunty hat, white beard and who was again gruffly chastising another customer. I'm glad it wasn't just me who caused him to groan and grumble and throw his lettuces at me! Au Revoir Monsieur – I'll never look at a lettuce quite the same again.

- our last meal at La Brocante, the quirky little restaurant in Aignan that served Thai food on Thursday nights and which had become a regular event during our stay here. Nancy, the owner, was a real character; from the Netherlands, skinny as a rake, and scantily clad, with a huge welcoming smile and as disorganized as anyone I had ever known. On our first visit, she quite openly told us she was about to give up on the restaurant, which was for sale, and proceeded to break a glass every time she served a table. The food was good though and cooked by her son who we saw on many occasions following his mother around the restaurant tables, trying to clear up the glass, spilt food, and trying to appease those customers she had forgotten about, or had been served the wrong dish. Her obsession with trying to move the parasols so that no-one was in the sun was endearing considering that the sun was setting quite quickly, and when the wind blew, the parasols came away from their wiry skeletons allowing the sun to shine directly where she didn't want it. As the weeks progressed, we became better acquainted with her and she even sat down

with us and helped us drink our wine and revealed her life story, which was colorful, but quite sad. Marcel was almost ready to buy the restaurant from her to help her out of her current situation. We enjoyed evenings of Pad Thai, Chicken Curry, Nasi Goreng and Laksa – the best we have had since leaving Asia – with extra spice of course. Who would have thought we would come across this in a small rural French village?

- our last mowing of the lawns! The weather has cooled a little, and the grass has not been growing so fast these last weeks, so we managed to leave the mowing until the last week. Luckily the ‘bone shaker’ mower had the steering repaired so we were able to use both mowers. As much as it is a chore, it is actually quite therapeutic, sitting atop the machine, watching those lines appear in the grass, chomping down the weeds and spindly dandelions. While the steering had been somewhat repaired, I felt it would only be a matter of time before the wheel would be spinning again, and it certainly hadn’t done anything to improve the comfort of the machine. Still, a few hours later, the lawns, fields, paths and hills were looking short and sharp and a little greener now that the sun was mellowing after the blazing summer.

- our last trip to the supermarket, the small Carrefour where we had become familiar about where they kept the eggs, when they did and didn’t have bread; where we would have to watch our ankles on market day lest we stepped in front of the local ladies out on a mission doing their weekly shop, wanting to get the best cut of meat, the freshest bread and the choicest tomatoes. I’ll miss using the little baskets on wheels, which we had become adept at maneuvering around the tiny store, the small conveyor belts at the checkout, one traveling up to the cashier, where your purchases are ‘bleeped’ and sent down another where you are waiting to place them into your shopping bag – no plastic, no baggers, but a very nice ‘Bonjour, merci, bon journee, au revoir’ that was said with sincerity, rather than a line from the training manual.

- our last trip to the ‘dechetterie’. This is the recycling and trash stop. Something of a ritual for us every few days. There’s no trash pick-up at the houses, but dumpsters are placed in each town and some in between where trash is disposed of. Brown bins for regular trash, such as food, which must be in a black bin back. Yellow bins for paper, plastic, plastic bottles cans etc. And the wonderful glass bottle bank, where it gave us great pleasure to throw in, one-by-one, the wine bottles, beer bottles and any other glass item we had. I’m sure they deliberately installed very tall bins, so that the sound of the shattering glass could be heard by everyone in the near vicinity. There is something very satisfying about hearing the smashing of glass in a safe environment, and there were times we were disappointed when one didn’t break, almost wishing we could find a secret entrance to pick it out and try again... we did however, hope that no-one came by at the same time as us, as we were sometimes there for quite a while with a wide array of wine bottles. After a while we bought a few boxed wines, and also had our wine containers filled at the pump, so some weeks we only had a couple of bottles to smash. It wasn’t too much of a chore, but there were times when we put the trash, stinky bottles and other refuse in the trunk of the car, only to go sailing past the trash site, on our way to the store or a restaurant. Then we’d be looking for another, only to find that suddenly we were on a road that had no trash areas for the next 20 km. Not pleasant in the heat of the summer when salmon and shrimp had been on the menu the night before. So, that little ritual will not be missed.



- our last walk with the dogs, which is the saddest part of this week of lasts. Our walks have been enjoyable, even when it has been foggy and wet. The landscape has changed over the five months we have been here, and every day brings something new to see, new flowers budding, trees and bushes laden with fruit, deer, badgers and birds crossing the fields during the dusk hours. We've seen all kinds of farm machinery, cutting, mowing, reaping, and

sowing, and the fields change from hay, to sunflowers, from peas and maize back to meadows and beautiful wild flowers, and of course we have looked across the wide valley to the Pyrenees, which we are still drawn to. Every day, depending on the weather, they appear anew, sometimes clear and angular with white snow caps, other times dark and grey, feeling closer than they really are on those days. Of course, our walks are always eventful as we have the dogs. We have enjoyed taking care of Sapphire and Blackberry and have come to enjoy their personalities and company. They have been a joy to walk twice a day and to watch, frolicking in the fields, burying their heads in the ground looking for mice, tails up and wagging. We have enjoyed watching them splash and swim in the lake and come running to us for treats when we call, expectant expressions on their faces. They bring us shoes in the morning, signaling its time for their walk and every evening, come running to remind us of another walk before dinner. We will miss them.

I told a lie – not our last trip to the dechetterie. We have to say goodbye to our faithful attire that has seen us through our walks and gardening endeavors over the last five months. Our boots are worn, soles with holes, ripped and torn and now molded to the shape of our feet, after traipsing



through the morning dew. Our pants soft with wear, faded with the sun and stained with the juice of blackberries, peaches and cherries – the fruits of our daily walks. Shirts are ripped from the thorns of roses, stained with sweat and grease from the machinery and ragged and tatty through constant wash and wear. Socks are stiff, and t-shirts are stretched and pulled. They have been faithful to the end and so deserve a spot in our photo album as a reminder of the work and wonder of our house sit in France.

Legal issues:

There are no contracts to be signed when you take on a house-sit, unless of course you and the owner feel you need to sign a waiver or other type of document, depending on the assignment. It is an assignment of trust and honesty.

We have never been asked to sign a contract, or waiver on our house sits, but an owner may need you to sign a waiver for any personal injury while on their property. You may find you want to do something similar to make sure you are not held responsible for any breakages or malfunction of equipment. It really is something between yourself and the owner and depends on the property involved and the type of tasks you have been asked to perform and what equipment you will be handling. For the most part, it is a verbal agreement that you will be conscientious and honest. We have only had to sign a paper for the owner's tax purposes, stating that we received no payment.

M

Is for...

Medical:

You are responsible for obtaining any medications from your doctor before you leave the country. Some medications may be bought over the counter in some foreign countries. Check that your health insurance covers the country you are visiting and ensure that you have researched the vaccinations required well in advance of your assignment – some vaccines need several months between the first and second injection. Check hospitals and doctors in the area you are staying prior to your stay, even in your home country – an unfamiliar city can be difficult to navigate - don't wait for it to be an emergency. You may need to buy additional travel health insurance if you are not covered overseas or in a particular state.

I'm happy to report that we have had no medical issues while on a house-sitting assignment, but we always make sure we are covered for any medical emergency. We obtain the required amount of prescribed medication prior to our departure. On arrival, we ensure we know where the nearest doctors' office and hospital are located, and we always take a trip to the pharmacy on arrival to pick up any 'over the counter' items. No need to carry tubes of creams, and pots of ointments when they can be purchased at your destination. Although trying to ask for arthritis ointment in France did prove a little confusing but eventually, we all managed to agree that the cream was the correct one. A small first aid kit is good to have while traveling.

Money:

Usually there is no money involved in a house-sitting assignment. You, as the house-sitter should be financially independent. There may be some outlay of money should there be an emergency, such as a visit to the vet or pet medications required and the protocol for this should be discussed beforehand.

It is prudent to have a small amount of cash in the local currency, but most countries accept US credit cards. You may need a pin number if your card does not have an electronic chip and note that most credit card transactions overseas are made at the point of service, by machine. No one will take your card out of your sight, even in a restaurant. Check that your credit cards are accepted overseas and what their international charges are, and always remember to call them, and the bank to advise that you will be spending money out of the country, or they may put a hold on the account.

Meals:

Your food is your responsibility unless the house-sitting assignment states that it is included. This may happen if the assignment is long term and is probably part of an estate or farm where the owner requires that you cook meals for them and their guests when they are at the property.

I have to say that one of the major draws to house-sitting and traveling in general is our enjoyment of experiencing the local cuisines. In California, we loved the healthy clean eating, the Mexican choices and the Asian bistros. In England we were amazed at the delicious intense flavors of the local produce, the tenderness of the farm raised beef and lamb and the comforting warmth of the local pubs. And then there was France!

Our five months in France inevitably revolved around food, eating in the local restaurants and enjoying the laid-back lunches and dinners that are rare to find in the USA, and visiting the local markets where we could find seasonal produce to cook for ourselves and guests. With great anticipation of livery coarse country pates, rich saucy main courses and decadent desserts, we started off on the right foot at the very first meal and continued for 5 months to savor the very best of what France had to offer.



Throughout our journey down to our destination in Gers, Southwest France, we stopped at auberges and logis where there was usually a gourmet restaurant. The accommodations were always clean and comfortable, although basic, but the food... that was our main focus. From the flaky buttery croissants and café au lait for breakfast to the humble Jambon Beurre baguette for lunch, to meals with fresh asparagus and lemon butter foam, local lamb and wild garlic, and delicate macarons for dessert we were treated to deep fresh flavors and pungent aromas at every meal. No plastic, slippery smoked salmon on this trip. It was smoky, dry and had a deep fishy flavor served with homemade aioli and delicately perfumed lemon mousse. The country sausages that were a favorite of Marcel's were tender, rich and meaty and accompanied by various mustards and gravies.





Gers is a renowned gastronomic area, with many great chefs training in this location. Fois gras is one of the main products of the area, along with yellow chicken, black pork, and duck in as many guises as you can imagine. The dried duck breast was akin to eating dark, creamy chocolate and was featured on many salads, along with duck breast and fois gras. Warm goat's cheese salad was another staple of

the region, each restaurant adding their own twist, whether placed on triangle toasts or deep fried into balls, all versions were delicious. All fries were cooked in duck fat and were served in small portions, concentrating on taste rather than quantity – which is a good thing, because I could have eaten buckets of them!

One of our favorite places to sit and have a long lunch, usually about 3 hours long, was the Central Café in Bassouse. A very popular bar/restaurant which, on Sundays, took over the town square. The food was simple, tasty and a set meal. Usually a choice of meats for the main course, but always a soup, salad, main course and dessert with a large carafe of wine included. Served family style, the lunch was a relaxing, enjoyable experience, with a large dose of people watching. All for a meagre sum of \$13 each! The wait staff were amazing; usually just two or three servers for countless tables stretching all the way along the street, and it was the type of place where, if you saw the servers were stretched, then the locals would clear their own tables, find their own silverware and generally help out, rather than sit and complain.



I must mention the Buffalo farm, where we savored, for the first time, Asian water buffalo. Skeptical at first, as we are not usually red meat eaters, we decided to give it a try. The contemporary restaurant with a jazz pianist playing, had a city atmosphere, yet was in a farmhouse surrounded by green fields of grazing dairy cows, flocks of sheep and the Asian water buffalo. The host was very welcoming and entertaining wielding a very large pepper grinder at every opportunity. We were pleasantly surprised when the terrine of buffalo arrived, looking very delicate and amazingly rich and creamy. Another surprise.



Marcel ordered a burger, a buffalo burger which he thoroughly enjoyed. I chose the buffalo steak which, while denser than a regular beef steak, was rich in flavor, and more tender than I expected. With a sorbets and lemon meringue pie for dessert, along with coffee and wine, and the jazz pianist, it was a very pleasant lunch overlooking the Gers countryside.

One of our assignments was to cook lunches for the owners and their guests on occasion and we thoroughly enjoyed planning and cooking five, three-course lunches for 8-14 guests. Menus of shrimp and mango salad, stuffed mushrooms, salmon with creamy lemon sauce, chicken paillard, lemon tarts, mini pavlovas, crepes and fruit, all went down well with the guests, with plates wiped

clean at every lunch. With side meals of Thai curry, chicken with cream and mushroom sauce, sweet and savory tarts, we were often very busy in the kitchen.

Of course, our very favorite thing to do was to cook all the lovely produce we bought ourselves at the local markets and during the five months, Marcel and I cooked some amazingly simple, tasty meals at the cottage. Always with bread, wine and coffee, and as much as possible, eaten outside on the patio or under the very large oak tree. Our spot for breakfast was at the front of the house under a little porch, sitting at the small yellow table watching the sun come up.



Lunch was either at the same spot or we would take a picnic down to the boathouse by the pond for some rest and relaxation. Enjoying the long, light evenings with good food, good wine and a loaf of deliciously crispy bread, we were in paradise.

From early morning to late in the day, our lives revolved around food. Whether we were shopping, preparing, cooking, experimenting, or eating in chateaus, monasteries, in the street, on the patio, on a picnic, at auberges with their gourmet restaurants, or at the local Moules Frites night, food was prominent throughout our stay. From a simple jambon beurre lunch, to the velvety, cheesy Tartiflette of the Pyrenees, from rich creamy fois gras, to deep earthy flavored meats, and decadent desserts and bottles and carafes of wine, food brought us closer to nature with all the locally grown produce at our doorstep. It enabled us to communicate with the local community at local events, and restaurants and we were fortunate to be able to relish in the real flavors of France over an extended period and over a few different regions. Unfortunately our waistlines did not fare so well.....

N

Is for...

Negotiation:

There may be an opportunity for negotiating airfares or transportation costs, especially with a long-term house-sit or one that involves a wide range of duties. If the house-sit is overseas, or is over a holiday period, or during high season the owner may find it difficult to fill the vacancy and therefore offer to pay some or all of these costs. While this is usually stated in the advertisement, after your initial contact, there may be an opportunity to ask if this is a possibility, but tread carefully, you may be rejected if your request is unreasonable.

We have yet to take a house sit where we feel we should be compensated for our time. For all the reasons above and below, house sitting for us is a privilege and allows us to experience so much more than we could by taking vacations. Our house sit in England was over the Christmas period but for us that was no problem as we were able to see our family. In San Diego, we were able to visit with our daughter and in France, we were able to take a few overnight trips during our stay and visit other areas and attractions.

O Is for...

Opportunity:

House-sitting is a great way to experience a different city, country or culture and there are many opportunities for you to explore, provided you have the commitment, the skills and the willingness to take the time to research, and choose the opportunity which fits your availability and experience.

Prepare yourself financially, educate yourself on destinations, and free up your time so that when opportunity knocks you can open the door and go!

P

Is for...

Packing:

Pack lightly and efficiently. For the most part there will be a washing machine available or a launderette close by but check before you leave. I would recommend only 4-5 days' worth of clothes (I would recommend a weeks of clothes 7-9 days even for multiple weeks this ensures you do not have to wash clothes every other day or so), but it will depend on length of the house sit and the types of duties involved as to the type of clothing you take. Research the climate and weather in the area you are house-sitting and what activities there may be that might need special clothing. You may be near the ocean where you might want to spend time on the beach, or in the mountains where you might need good hiking boots. My advice with toiletries is to buy them at your destination. This saves on weight in the suitcase or lengthy lines in airport security.

We always pack too much! Every time we try to scale it back, but there's always a 'just in case' and inevitably we always return with clothes we did not wear. Tips for packing:

- Roll everything...less creases
- Don't buy expensive suitcases....the baggage handlers don't care if it's a Guicci or a Costco bag, it gets thrown!
- Stuff shoes with electrical items, socks and small toiletries.
- Buy as many of your toiletries at your destination...they take up too much room and some even explode! If you are off grid, try bar shampoos and soaps instead of bottles, less trash.
- Hand carry medications with original prescriptions on the bottles. Hand carry phone chargers. Hand carry anything that you cannot afford to lose or be without.
- Have all paperwork in order ie visas, passports, driver's license and most importantly address of destination, etc
- Electrical adaptors if traveling overseas.

Tailor your clothes to the tasks you have to undertake. In England we needed sturdy gloves and boots for mucking out stables and in the end, warm clothes for the coldest temps on record for 40 years! Layering tee shirts, shirts and sweaters worked, but then our coats were pulling at the seams! We threw away much of our clothing before we departed France, they were well worn with all the walking, mowing and gardening and our boots just lasted through our last day with the help of some duct tape.

Privacy:

Some house-sits may have the owners home for some of the time, especially during long term assignments. Respect their privacy and they will respect yours. There may be areas of the home where you are not given access, and this should be honored. You may be on the premises but in a different building so respect their privacy and call ahead if you need to see them, don't just turn up on the doorstep.

Our French house sit had the owners home often. They were in the main house and we were down the field in a beautiful old cottage. It was expected that we would enter their home to get the dogs and feed them in the outdoor kitchen, but we were always respectful of their privacy if they had guests, or if they were eating on the veranda when we needed to cut the grass or do garden maintenance.

Pets:

The majority of house sits require that you take care of pets. Whether it is cats, dogs, horses or any other type of animal, make sure you are comfortable with the breed, size and the duties involved in caring for these pets. Some may only need one walk a day, while others need three or four. Some may need medication administered, some will need to be close to you at bedtime and others will be outdoors. There will inevitably be feeding and poop scooping, so whatever pet you are taking care of, be sure that you are prepared to do all that is required to pamper and provide care and attention before you commit.



Our house sits have included dogs, cats, and horses and I've talked about those above. However, we have seen positions where there are goats, chickens, sheep, pigs and exotic birds. Make sure you are comfortable with the type of animal you are taking care of. They are precious to their owners and deserve to have committed and caring house sitters.

Q

Is for...

Questions:

Ask as many questions as you can before you accept any assignment. Usually a phone interview or Skype call with the owner takes place if he/she is interested in accepting you as their house-sitter. This is an opportunity for you to ask questions of the assignment and is a good time to come face to face with the person you are house-sitting for and assess if this is a good fit for both of you.

Have a list of questions ready before your call. Take notes and always follow up with an email outlining the conversation and explaining what you thought you heard and understood, asking any further questions you may have forgotten. While you cannot anticipate everything before you leave, asking as many questions as possible will help to alleviate any surprises.

Quick Response:

It is highly recommended that you respond quickly to any assignment that you find interesting in order to have a good chance of being accepted. There are many opportunities, but there are also many applicants, and therefore the sooner you can respond the better your chances. You can prepare a detailed response that outlines a majority of what you wish to share when applying and then edit for the individual opportunity.

Do not be disappointed if you are not accepted, there are other opportunities. Unfortunately, you may not receive a response at all after your application. Owners may be inundated with applications and once they have found someone who fits their criteria they may not look further. It is frustrating when there is no response, but don't let that hold you back from applying for another opportunity.

R

Is for...

Reliability:

You must be reliable. Arrive when you say you will, perform the duties that you have agreed to and do not cancel at the last minute unless it is an absolute emergency. Doing so will not only put the owner in a difficult spot but will result in a poor testimonial and a slim chance that you will be chosen by others.

Returning:

If you have been a good house sitter and the assignment is one that recurs, you will likely be asked to return, which is great! However, if you are unsure as to your availability, or if you prefer to explore other opportunities, then do not commit to return. It may be that you cannot commit too far ahead. Discuss with the owner and stay in touch so that your options, and theirs, are open.

Of course, these two 'R's go together. If you are not reliable, then you will not be asked to return. We have been asked by each one of our sits to go back. And we will, but not yet....there's too much to explore.

Research:

It's always good to research the city, place or area where you are house sitting. A lot can be learned about the history, culture and everyday happenings. It is a good idea to research the climate, transportation options, shopping, amenities and local flora and fauna in order to get the most out of your house-sitting experience

Be informed about the area you are staying. Plan to visit places close by; have different experiences; try new foods; learn a new language. There's so many possibilities so take the time to research beforehand and plan your time wisely to take advantage of everything you possibly can.

S

Is for...

Security:

You will be taking care of someone else's home, so making sure it is secure when you leave and during your stay is important. Make sure you are aware of key codes, key placement, window locks and door locks and any smoke, burglar or other types of alarms that may go off during your assignment. Make sure you know the local number to call police or security services.

Don't invite anyone into the home unless you have permission of the owners. Don't allow maintenance companies or service companies into the home unless the owner has advised of their appointment.

Also, if you are unfamiliar with the city make sure you research the neighborhoods, stay out of crime areas and be aware of your surroundings. While we have traveled the world and felt very safe in large cities and small towns, we are always vigilant, and aware and alert of our surroundings.

Skills:

Some house sits require you to have certain skills, such as gardening, handyman services, pet care and medical expertise, swimming pool maintenance etc. Ensure that you list your skills on your bio and don't apply for an assignment that you are not sure you can handle! Taking care of someone's pet 'gator' may be an experience you like to have, but if it is not something you are skilled in then maybe it is not a good fit!

While we are prepared to do most things, we do not necessarily have every skill. We were able to take care of the pool and gardens in France and cook and serve meals but repairing the lawn mowers was something beyond our expertise. We were not required to fix them and the owner had a mechanic come in and see to the repairs, but it might be worth asking about your responsibilities in detail to avoid any misunderstandings.

Here we see Marcel picking peaches from the tree just outside our cottage.



T

Is for...

Transport:

You will likely need to provide your own transport when you house sit. Some assignments will provide you with use of a car for short periods or on occasion, while some longer assignments may provide you with a car or other type of transport for the duration. Bikes and mopeds may be available to you but ensure that your transport needs are taken care of either by the owner or by you before you leave for your assignment. If you are house sitting in a city, public transport would likely be the best option so do the research.

Car rental can be expensive, so figure out if you need one for the duration of the house sit or whether you can just rent for a few days to go further afield. In England we rented a car which was quite pricey, and small so take into consideration the amount of luggage you have. We knew we would be visiting family regularly and we were in a rural area, so this was the best thing for us. In France, we took out a short-term lease on a car for almost six months. This proved to be a very cost-effective decision.

Trust:

There are usually no contracts, nor money involved in house sitting so trust is a big part of the house-sitting concept. You will be trusted to take care of someone's property, pet and possessions and you have to trust that the assignment you have agreed to accept is one that provides adequate accommodation and the tools and means necessary to carry out the duties. Ask questions before you accept and make sure that everyone is aware of their commitment and expectations.

I cannot emphasize this enough. Owners are looking for trustworthy, smart and responsible sitters, and if you can meet those requirements, then your house-sitting experiences will benefit you more than you can imagine.

U

Is for...

Unique:

There are some incredibly unique house sits out there. We have seen vacancies for log cabins, houseboats, off-grid properties, tropical islands, sheep farms, hotels, inns and much more.

Who knows what will come up? As long as you have the skills, the will and the commitment and time you can do all or any of these house sits.

V

Is **NOT** for...

Vacation!

While you may have free time to explore, go to the beach and enjoy the area where you are house sitting, this is not a free vacation. Your priority is to take care of the property, and/or the pets and perform any duties that have been agreed to. Of course you may have use of a swimming pool, and all the amenities the house may provide, but this does not mean that you can invite family and friends to visit for a vacation unless of course you have already cleared this with the owner.

We have been incredibly lucky that our house sits have allowed us to tag on a vacation at either end of the assignment, with side trips in between, and this is what makes the whole concept so appealing. We have had family visit us overnight on occasion, but always with the permission of the owners.

W

Is for...

Willingness:

You must be willing to go above and beyond when house-sitting. Duties and expectations aside, there will always be something that comes up that you did not expect. A burst pipe, a sick dog, or an emergency repair can mean that you will need to call someone, visit a vet, or pay for something to be repaired in an emergency. Talk through these scenarios with the owner before they leave, so misunderstandings do not occur later.

Wi-Fi:

While wi-fi is likely to be available in most house-sitting assignments, it is always prudent to check the strength and availability, especially if you are still working full or part-time remotely as a digital nomad. You will, of course, want to stay in touch with family and friends and have access to the internet to explore and research activities in the area. It may be that there is only wi-fi in certain areas or at certain times of the day, depending on the country or location of the house-sit.

Wifi in Europe was slower than here in the USA, so uploading photographs always took a very long time. If this is something that is important to you then check before you leave.

X Is for...

Xcited!

It's exciting! New place, new surroundings and new food. New people to meet and new experiences – for nothing more than an airfare maybe and a commitment of your time and skills.

We spend a considerable amount of time during our house sits planning the next one, and even the one after that! We are off to Panama, to Italy and Kenya in the next year! We can't wait!

Y

Is for...

Yes, Means Yes:

If you make the commitment, stay with it! There's nothing more frustrating for an owner than having agreed to accept a house sitter and then being let down at the last minute because he or she has found another assignment that they feel is more advantageous to them. If you accept an assignment, keep your word! Of course, emergencies happen, but cancelling because you'd rather go to a different place is not acceptable and does harm to the reputation of house sitting, thus limiting chances for yourself and others.

Z

Is for...

Zen:

Be calm – don't panic. If you do not get the assignment you applied for, move on. If not this one, then another. That is the excitement of house sitting, you just never know where you are going to be in a few months' time! Tweak your bio and make sure you respond quickly to any opportunities that appear. If you are meant to go, you will!

While on your house sit the same applies, be calm and don't panic. If something happens, think it through, find a solution and resolve it or live with it. Think of it a lesson learned. As I have stated before, this is a temporary assignment, it is not going to last forever.

We have applied for positions and not had a response, or it has been given to someone else who the owner feels are more appropriate. But we have also been accepted for some great house sits and have enjoyed everyone.

Don't get despondent, keep applying, keep planning....

'Oh the places you will go'

