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# CHOICE

Independent information for smart consumers

## HEY PRESTO, ESPRESSO!

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**LADDERS**

Which ones are safe?

**PET CARE**

Your options for pet care  
when you go away

There's a lot to consider when choosing a pet care service to mind your animal when you can't be there.

## OUTSOURCED PET CARE

**H**oliday time, yay! So you've planned your holiday, researched your destination, booked the tickets and hotels, obtained visas, learnt a little local language, arranged airport transfers and car rental, sorted out access to currency, redirected mail, disconnected the car battery, made arrangements with the bank, set up your automatic light switches, put the radio on talkback, asked your neighbours to keep an eye on the house ... and now you really do need that holiday. But for many pet owners, the biggest planning headache is what to do with Fido and Fluffy.

Unless you've a ready supply of willing and able friends and relatives, you're going to have to consider a commercial pet care service. In this article we look at the different kinds of care available, from boarding facilities to care in your own home, or the homes of others. We asked CHOICE readers to tell us their experiences with pet care services and how satisfied they felt overall (see *Pet care survey*, page 28). Each type of care has its advantages and disadvantages, and there's no clear winner. We received some horror stories, but most pets came home none the worse for their stay, even if not all had the happy experience hoped for or expected.

Ultimately the best type of care for your pet depends on your pet's nature and personality: gregarious, active animals have different needs to sedate loners. But it also depends on how good the care is: a friendly, well-run boarding facility is a better option than an unreliable or neglectful house sitter, even if Fluffy would really rather stay at home.

### BOARDING FACILITIES

These include kennels, catteries and care provided by some veterinary practices. Some are better than others in terms of the amount of attention given, individual space and opportunity for exercise. It's important to shop around, but remember price isn't always an indicator of quality.



ERIC NORA

### IN A NUTSHELL

- *There's no 'best' option for pet care — it depends both on the nature of your pet and the attributes of the particular minder or facility you choose.*
- *Shop around — take the time to compare facilities, services and prices.*
- *Word of mouth — friends, neighbours, colleagues and vets — may be your best bet for finding a good service.*
- *Get in early, especially during peak holiday times.*

Our dog owners paid an average of \$24 a day, and cat owners \$15 a day. However, prices varied enormously depending on extras (administering medication, exercise, bathing), duration (some have relatively high minimum payments for short stays), number of animals (you can sometimes get a discount for more than one pet) and location (city versus country).

In most states, there are no legal requirements regarding standards of pet boarding facilities, although they must be capable of ensuring that obligations under the various Acts concerning animal welfare and prevention of cruelty to animals are met. Some states have codes of practice for pet boarding facilities, which set out minimum requirements

for housing, feeding, exercise, health and veterinary care, hygiene and security. However, except in Victoria, these codes aren't mandatory.

### Kennels

We received many heartwarming stories of dogs returning from 'their holiday' happy and healthy, having enjoyed romps in the countryside and playing with other dogs.

For other dogs — and their owners — it can be a nightmare. We heard of incidents, ranging from the relatively minor to the more serious. The worst story we received involved a sleeping dog whose leg had inadvertently ventured through the fence, and was mauled by the dog in the next cage. The owners were called back on the second day of their holiday, and had to have their dog put down. The unsympathetic kennel owner refused to take any responsibility.

Other problems involved lack of exercise — it's not always clear that exercise time may be an optional extra, for which you pay. Then there's the definition of 'play': it could mean one-on-one time with a carer, getting lots of attention and affection; access to an exercise area alone or with one, two, six or 20 other dogs, perhaps supervised, perhaps not; or allowing your dog into a play area alone while their cage is cleaned, with no real impetus for active play.

The minimum recommendations for exercise spelt out in the codes of practice we looked at are access to an exercise area or walking a dog on a lead for at least 10 minutes, twice daily. Most people would probably expect their dog to get more than this. (Also see *Dog stacking*, page 31.)

### Catteries

While many people were satisfied with the care their cats received in catteries, it seems cats don't get quite as good a deal as dogs when it comes to boarding. Perhaps it's reasoned that cats are smaller and less active than dogs — they sleep much of the day, and therefore need less space. Whatever the reason, cats tend to end up in fairly small, though perhaps multi-level cages. As one website put it, "each run provides space and opportunity for isometric exercise".

The environment can be fairly dull, or even stressful if your cat doesn't like the close company of other cats. A few readers commented on some country facilities that consisted of cages within a large tin shed: cold in winter, hot in summer and no outside view or natural light.

### Vet boarding

The main complaint about vets' boarding facilities was that the cages were very small — designed for animals recuperating from illness or surgery, rather than for

## PET CARE SURVEY

In addition to asking people for details of their experiences, we also conducted a small survey to find out how popular various forms of pet care are, and how satisfied people were overall.

Of those who responded, the most popular form of care for dog owners was boarding facilities (31%), closely followed by staying in the home of friends or relatives (26%) or having a friend or relative housesit (24%).

Among cat owners, the most common form of care was having the cat stay home and a friend or relative pop in to feed it (42% — only 18% of dog owners used this option). Having a friend or relative housesit (26%) or having the cat boarded (23%) were a distant second and third.

Most people (around 80%) were 'very satisfied' with the care their pets received.



longer-term stays. It's worth checking if they'll spend any time out of the cage. While they may not get the attention and play space they'd like, at least you should be confident their basic needs will be met.

### IN-HOME CARE

The main alternative to boarding, which may particularly suit people with cats, fish and/or caged animals, is having someone care for them in your home — by either moving into your house for the duration of your absence, or visiting once or twice a day to look after your pets and otherwise keep an eye on the house.

The potential benefits include that your pet stays in a comfortable, roomy and familiar environment, your garden and pot plants can also be cared for, and your home can look lived-in for increased home security. While a home visit service can cost as much as keeping one pet in a boarding facility, if you have several pets you'll come out ahead.

Potential drawbacks include lack of privacy, damage and neglect to your home and possessions and putting your faith in someone who may let you — and your animals — down. If you're using a home visit service, or even a house sitter who works long days, your pet might become bored and lonely, and get up to mischief.

A few people commented they'd had minders (usually friends or relatives) who weren't really animal-people, and while kind and well-intentioned, didn't look after the pets as well as they should because they didn't notice anything amiss.

The main problems our readers reported seemed to be that the people were unreliable: not turning up every day for feeding and attention, or not living in the house as per the agreement (for example, having two overlapping house-sitting arrangements, and spreading themselves a little thin).

Cats were fed only dry cat food (despite frozen 'fresh' food being left for them), and had been left with dry water bowls. Dogs weren't walked, and were starved of company due to the minder not being around as promised. Animals being overfed was just as much a problem as being underfed — ask anyone who's put their pet on a long-term weight-reducing diet, only to see the effects blown in a few weeks. And one minder replaced (presumably ...) a dead goldfish with a Siamese fighting fish. It's rather lonely!

Reported fees for home visits were around \$20 per day, with dog walking sometimes attracting an extra fee.

### CARE IN THE HOME OF OTHERS

Several satisfied customers wrote to us about an almost-national franchise called **Don't Fret Pet**. A carer takes



### THANK YOU

Thanks to everyone who wrote to us with their stories — they were invaluable when compiling this article. Particular thanks go to the following, whose stories and advice we've included: Ariel Endean, Bonnie MacDonald, Christine Bray, Jean Porter, Jodie Ricardo, Kate Stevens, Ken and Carol Phillips, Maria Smith, Melanie Maybury, Peter Gibson, Robyn Smith, Sally Young, Sandy O'Keefe and Sonja Morgan.

your dog to live with them — as a part of their household. Fees charged are around \$28-35 a day, varying by peak and off-peak periods. You also provide all food and equipment.

Sometimes the carers are people who love dogs but don't want the commitment of owning one. Sometimes they are animal lovers with pets of their own, happy to help others out. The carer themselves only gets \$6 of your daily fee — so they're not in it for the money. The rest covers public liability insurance and workers compensation, as well as administration.

If something happens to the original carer while you're away, and they can no longer look after your dog, the franchisee will find an alternative carer (or take the dog in themselves) — so you won't be left in the lurch. There are franchises in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Canberra, the Gold Coast and Cairns.

We also had readers who were very happy with independent operators who offered a similar service. While these tended to be cheaper, there may be a problem if something happens and they're no longer able to look after your dog.

### DOG WALKING AND DOGGY DAY CARE

See our website ([www.choiceextra.com.au](http://www.choiceextra.com.au)) for info about and tips on choosing dog walking and day care services. Look under 'Pet care services' in the index.



## Pet care tips when ...

### ... CHOOSING A BOARDING FACILITY

#### Where to start

- Start looking well before your holiday.
- Try word of mouth — ask your work colleagues, vet, the breeder who sold you your pet, fellow dog walkers.
- Look at several different places — what's good for some animals may not suit yours.
- Check them out in advance: we heard stories where readers had booked facilities unseen, only to be disappointed or horrified when they dropped their pets off on their way to the airport, when it was too late to change plans. Likewise, if you're taking advantage of a boarding facility's pick-up and drop-off service, make sure you've checked it out first.
- Book early, especially for care during peak periods when the best places will fill up quickly.

#### Formalities

- Checklists to complete with things like your contact details, a full description of the animal, individual requirements (medical, dietary, bathing, grooming), vet's details, up-to-date vaccinations, worm treatment and flea prevention, weight on arrival, collars, toys, bedding and other equipment you bring, and likes and dislikes indicate the operators are interested and organised.
- Find out when pick-up and drop-off times are, and how they tie in with your travel plans.
- It's a good idea to leave contact details for a family member or friend who can make decisions about your pet's care.

#### Accommodation

- Runs should offer protection from wind and rain, and a partially enclosed area for sheltered sleeping.
- Check there are shaded areas and ventilation, and that heating or heating pads are provided if necessary in winter.

- Dogs should have beds raised off the ground, especially in winter.
- Cats should have bedding provided.
- Are there toys, scratching posts and other positive forms of stimulation?
- Pens should look and smell clean. Concrete may not look very cosy and comfortable, but it's easy to keep clean.
- Views to the outside world can help prevent boredom, particularly for cats.
- Is the cattery adjacent to kennels? Some cats might find the constant barking of dogs stressful.

#### Health and veterinary care

- Kennels should check your dog has been fully vaccinated (C5 or C6), and is up to date with heartworm, gastrointestinal worm and flea prophylactics.
- Cats should be fully vaccinated against feline enteritis and the viruses which cause feline respiratory disease (F3).
- Animals suspected of, or known to be suffering from, an infectious condition shouldn't be accepted.
- What arrangements are in place if your pet becomes ill? Do you want your own vet to be consulted in case of any treatment that has to be given by the boarding facility's vet? Decide your preferences well in advance and make your wishes known.
- Various codes of practice state that dogs under three or four months and cats under three months shouldn't be admitted for overnight boarding, other than in exceptional circumstances.

#### Food

- What sort of food is your pet given? Are you happy with the type and quality of food? Is it radically different from their normal diet?
- Are special dietary needs catered for?
- If your pet goes off their food, due to stress or loneliness, will the staff try to tempt them with some favourites?

#### Staffing and carers

- When you're shopping around, try to meet the people responsible for handling and caring for the animals, not just the office staff. Use the opportunity to see how they relate to your pet, and vice versa. Try to gauge whether they're in it for the love of animals or just the money.
- Ask lots of questions, and if the answers are vague or glib, go elsewhere. If they ask you lots of questions, that's a good sign they're interested in your pet.
- If they seem annoyed by your requests, such as dietary requirements, they may not carry them out.
- It's a good sign if they pay as much — or more — attention to your pet as to you.
- Is there someone on the premises after hours? If not, what



are the arrangements for after-hours care and supervision?

- If you're using vet boarding, who will be looking after your pet, especially if it's over the weekend or out of surgery hours?
- Owners assume — and are often assured — that their pets will get plenty of pats and cuddles, but it's a good idea to establish how much individual time is devoted to them each day.

## Exercise

- Don't just assume your dog will be exercised, especially for short periods of boarding (less than two weeks). Make sure you know what 'exercise' and 'play' involve, as well as how long and at what (extra) cost.
- Are dogs of all types and sizes allowed in the yard at one time? How many? Are they supervised?
- Is the exercise yard free of bushes that might attract ticks? Are there other hazards? Wire mesh sheeting (sometimes used to protect grass) can catch your dog's foot if running or jumping — knee joints are very delicate.
- For large dogs especially, consider kennels in the country. Some of our readers reported their dogs had an absolute ball in the country, with lots of room to run around and swims in dams or creeks. Better-behaved dogs were even taken around with the farmer doing daily chores (mending fences, collecting the mail, etc).
- If cats are given access to an exercise area, for how long is it, is it individual time or shared with other cats, and is it supervised?

## ... CHOOSING AND USING IN-HOME CARE

- For what it's worth, ask potential carers to get a police check, and ask for (and follow up) references. However, these don't really mean much: people don't report unwatered plants, unwalked dogs, overflowing letterboxes and a messy house to the police; references can be faked; and referees may be friends who've been suitably briefed.
- When you meet potential pet minders, see how they interact with your pet — and your pet with them. If you have a large and/or lively dog, can they handle them?
- Provide the carer with a map of preferred walks and parks, and also provide any details about on- and off-leash parts of walks, and any local friends or enemies that may be encountered on the way.
- Make sure you let the carer know the house rules (sitting on furniture, sleeping arrangements), how pets are disciplined and a list of words and commands the animal knows and responds to (for toileting, bed, walks, etc).
- Apart from leaving your vet's details, it's also useful to leave the contact details for a friend or relative who can make decisions about your pet's welfare and general household matters and lend a helping hand if necessary. It

might also be useful to give that person a spare set of keys.

- Establish up front who pays for what — if you're not paying the house sitter, you may agree to pay some of the bills. You should also negotiate some kind of bond, paid in advance, to cover damages.
- Leave some money to cover food and any small unexpected expenses, such as medications, for your pet, and negotiate how you'll settle larger expenses such as a plumbing emergency. Arrange with your vet to settle accounts on your return.
- Several people commented that their cat litter tray wasn't properly cleaned out. Because it's not easy to convince pet sitters to dig around for solids and clumped urine, one reader simply provided enough litter and liners to replace all the litter every day.
- Emphasise the importance of having fresh water available for your pets, especially if the minders aren't pet owners themselves.

## DOG STACKING

A largely unknown issue — at least among dog owners — that emerged in our research is that of joint boarding, or 'dog stacking'. This is where the kennel puts two or more unfamiliar dogs into the one run. Sometimes it's sold to you as giving your dog a fun playmate — after all, dogs are pack animals. Sometimes you're not told at all — they just do it. It's more likely to occur during peak periods when demand for places is higher.

Potential problems include weight loss or weight gain due to competition for food, psychological problems (nervousness, anxiety), injuries resulting from fighting and illness resulting from lack of attention (things aren't picked up or too many dogs and not enough staff). Yes, dogs are pack animals, but they're competitive animals, and packs are based on dominance hierarchies.

Problems are compounded when a kennel accepts, say, double the number of dogs as runs, and some dogs prove completely incompatible with others and to be kept on their own. This means three or more dogs end up together. And you're unlikely to get a reduction in fees — it's about income, not concern for your dog's loneliness.

The ACT and Victorian Codes of Practice for boarding animals says dogs can be joint-boarded with specific (written) permission of owners; the NSW code says that dogs 'should preferably be housed singly, or in compatible pairs'.

Is it all bad? If the dogs are well-matched and their feeding and bedding aren't compromised, joint boarding could well be satisfactory, and some dogs will tolerate it. However, it's more likely that at best your dog will merely tolerate it; at worst they really suffer. The important thing is to know in advance what the situation is so you can make an informed decision.

Signs that a kennel may use joint boarding include not letting you inspect kennels during peak period, or that it won't take large or aggressive dogs, or that haven't been desexed because they're less suitable for joint boarding.

If you're concerned, it might be best to ask directly about dog stacking: "Will Fido have his own run, or will he be paired up with another dog?"