

# The Five Surprising Benefits of Housesitting in Retirement

By Glenn Lamb

It was 2015 and my wife Jacqueline and I were planning to travel. I was 54 and Jacqueline 48. While we both enjoyed our jobs and loved our home on the outskirts of Melbourne, we wanted to satisfy our wanderlust while still young enough to enjoy everything the world offers. It was never our plan to work until the official retirement age. So our thoughts turned to how could we do this now.

We decided to take the plunge on an 'adult' gap year. We had been subscribers to *International Living* since 2013 and it was time to 'test the waters' to see if the reality matched the pictures painted in the various articles. I resigned from my job and Jacqueline took a 12-month unpaid leave of absence. We intended to test drive several locations in Asia for a few months each and, if funds allowed, conclude with a few months in Europe.

Then we stumbled across housesitting. In a nutshell, you take on the task of looking after someone's home, pets, plants... and in return you have free accommodation. In some cases you'll get the use of a vehicle. It's not a free holiday, there are many responsibilities but they pale into insignificance against the cost savings and local experiences. It sounded worth giving a go so to prepare we did an *IL* online housesitting course. Little did we know that it would lead us to such rewarding and rich experiences and change our life's future direction.

That was three years ago and we haven't looked back. Our experimental gap year is now a full-time life of travel and adventure and it's cheaper than if we stayed home. That's right—we save money by travelling...

To illustrate some of the many and varied benefits of embarking on the global housesitting lifestyle we've put together our top five benefits (not in any particular order).

### Live cheaper travelling than staying at home:

You may find this hard to believe but we spend less in a year living and travelling overseas and having amazing experiences than we did when we lived at home. Our yearly living costs in Melbourne were around \$47,300 (without a mortgage). We set a budget for our gap year at \$4,000 per month however we only ended up spending an average of \$2,660 per month (a total of about \$32,000).

We were stunned by this and it was one of the reasons we decided to do it full time. More importantly, we made a number of rookie mistakes regarding our expenditure during this first year of discovery and are confident that, with the lessons learned, we'll get this figure even lower.

On top of eliminating accommodation costs, we have much better control of our food bills. As you are living in a real home with all the usual amenities, you're able to self-cater. We still go out for an occasional meal whilst housesitting (and in many cases the homeowners will take us out for a meal as a thank you gesture) but



Glenn and Jacqueline Lamb have saved money by travelling the world.

our food costs are substantially lower than if we were staying in hotel rooms.

**Exposure to places you normally wouldn't visit:** When searching for housesits you may have an idea of a city or country you would like to visit, but trying to get a match doesn't necessarily work. We wanted to be in Edinburgh, Scotland for the Fringe Festival in August but quickly found that being too specific severely limited our opportunities.

However, if you're prepared to open yourself up to a whole country or state/province then all sorts of possibilities present themselves. We took a housesit in the Basque region of southwest France and stayed in a small village in a 300-year-old converted barn. This is not a place you would normally visit as a tourist but we had some amazing experiences. We walked inside the world's biggest enclosed cave that is open to the public (they have had a hot air balloon inside!), walked the 700-year-old ramparts of the first fortified town in France and attended the annual Basque weekend festival in nearby Bayonne (that was basically like a "Where's Wally" convention with everyone dressed in white and red!).

Every location where we have housesat has its own unique attractions and they are usually things that you would never be aware of as a 'normal' tourist. Housesitting adds a whole new dimension to our travel, which makes it even more exciting. As Forrest Gump said, 'life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get.'

**Meeting new and interesting people and making new friends:** Before housesitting we had our close friends and a social circle that didn't really change much. Our day-to-day life didn't throw up many opportunities for meeting new people and I think that is true for many empty-nesters and retirees. We took up ballroom dancing 15

"Ours is now a life of full-time travel and adventure."

months before we left and made some great new friends but found that unless you are ‘putting yourself out there’ consistently your social circle does tend to stagnate.

Housesitting has enabled us to meet many other housesitters and homeowners who have fascinating lives and stories. For example, we are privileged to now call an international banker from the Netherlands and an Ecuadorian heart surgeon our friends. Another sitter we met sold his life on Ebay, sold the rights to his story to a film studio and used the proceeds to complete his 100 bucket list items in 100 weeks and then buy a Caribbean island!

These are people that in our old day-to-day lives we would never have met and the best part is that many of them are now our friends. The housesitting community is very supportive and we have been able to meet up with fellow sitters in different parts of the world. These are people who are living a similar lifestyle and this provides the common ground that enables us to develop new and ongoing friendships.

**Slow travel:** Do you come home from holidays needing a holiday? We’ve discovered the wonderful benefits of ‘slow’ travel. Instead of having to cram every tourist attraction or location into your allotted holiday time you can take a much more relaxed approach to getting out and about. Having housesat for durations ranging from just two days up to four weeks we found that the sweet spot for us is generally three to four weeks. This gives us plenty of time to explore an area and not be rushed. If the weather isn’t ideal for a particular trip we just leave it for another day. If we’re feeling a bit tired or off-colour, no problem, we just relax at home. If there is a particular time or day of the week that is

considered ‘peak’ then we just schedule to go another time.

Additionally, we choose to visit certain locations outside of peak tourist times so many places are a joy to visit without the tourist hordes. This benefit became very noticeable recently after we completed an eight-day tour of Jordan. Whilst we had a wonderful trip it was full-on with early starts and a busy schedule. We commented to each other how much we preferred our usual ‘slow’ approach versus the blitzkrieg method of arranged tours.

**Staying in beautiful/unique homes:** We have been so excited by some of the beautiful homes that we have been fortunate enough to look after and call ‘home’ (if only for a few weeks). Housesitting affords you the opportunity to stay in city, suburban or

rural locations all over the world—it’s your choice where you choose to apply. Many of the countries we have visited have history going back hundreds or thousands of years. It still amazes us that we have stayed in homes that are older than modern Australia. Some of our sits in the UK included a beautiful 300-year-old cottage in a small village with just a pub and a large 30-room manor house with a working livery on acreage. In the Southern Spanish hills we cared for a 300-plus-year-old cottage with metre-thick walls that used to be stables. An architect designed home with a massive pool and

separate accommodation annex greeted us in Provence, France earlier this year. On the flip side we stayed in an extremely small one-bedroom apartment in Hong Kong with a large dog. It was cramped but comfortable and yet another unique residence. These are properties you are very unlikely to encounter as a regular traveller but for us they have been ‘home’. ■

“Every location we’ve housesat has its own unique attractions.”

## Getting Started and Our Top Three Tips

**B**efore getting started in house sitting you initially need to do some critical self-assessment to determine if you are suited to it. Doing some sits in your local area for friends or family is an ideal way to see if you enjoy it. The majority of housesits require some level of pet care, whether it is dogs, cats, fish, chickens, horses, etc. so you need to love and be comfortable with animals.

Housesitting is becoming more popular and competition for sits, particularly in very popular locations, can be fierce so here are our three top tips for being successful.

**Tip 1: Prepare a great profile.** It is so important to have an outstanding profile highlighting your personal attributes, skills, experience and how you can provide the homeowners with the peace of mind that their property and pets will be well cared for whilst they’re away. Your profile is your introduction to the home owner and a way

to provide a connection between you and them so also include photos (particularly of you with pets).

**Tip 2: Be prepared for rejection!** It may take a while to get that all-important first sit but keep at it. We applied unsuccessfully for many sits before securing our first one for six cats in Hua Hin, Thailand. Two years down the track and with over 20 sits in eight countries we are not always successful with every application. To increase your chances look at sits over the holiday periods e.g. Christmas, Easter and school holidays, as there is greater demand for housesitters. Also, try sits advertised with a short lead time as these have less applicants and the home owners are less selective.

**Tip 3: Apply immediately when you see an opportunity that matches your requirements.** Depending upon the location and duration of the house sit, the home owner could receive in excess of 30 applications. You

must ensure that your application is one of the first they receive and it has to stand out from all the others—it’s akin to applying for a job. You must introduce yourself and show how your skills address the home owner’s requirements. You’re trying to make a connection, so if you’ve cared for pets similar to theirs then mention that. The more you relate to the home owner’s needs, the more likely they are to feel a connection. Remember, it’s a big decision for home owners to entrust their property, possessions and pets into the hands of a virtual stranger. Of course, in the early days you may have no direct experience (like us) however you can start with references from friends or perhaps point to comments made about you on websites like Airbnb. To gain experience—and the all-important references—you could encourage friends to go away for a weekend and offer to care for their pets.