



## Sitting for a Living

Tending turtles, walking dogs, feeding goldfish and playing ranch-hand to a herd of llamas is a long way from an investment banking career in London – but for Christchurch's Lisa McFarlane running a farm and house-sitting service has turned up as many daily challenges as stock watching of the financial variety.

As owner of Town & Country Homesit, Lisa has learned the fine art of matchmaking: partnering suitable, police-checked housesitters with clients who want to leave their animals in care in their own homes – or on the farm – while they go off to enjoy what may be their first holiday in decades.

Lisa, 27, identified a market niche for an agency that could provide experienced "sitters" for farms and lifestyle blocks and, on her return from London two years ago, decided it was "worth a go". Her mother Helen helps with the business, taking care of advertising and client calls. As a farm owner herself, she knows how hard it can be to get away for a holiday.

"Most of our clients – town or country – have at least one pet and the lifestyle block and farm owners may have a wide range of animal-based activities for the sitter to take care of. Things like feeding out, moving stock, drenching and dagging require reliable sitters with farming experience."

Good farm sitters are hard to come by, however, and Lisa says they learned the value of experience early. "Farming experience is absolutely essential because there's just too much that can go wrong on a farm if a sitter doesn't know what to look for. Farmers have a feel for their animals and are alert to sickness. They generally know how to deal with everything from fly-blown sheep to plumbing problems and equipment breakdowns. Last year, we had a couple looking after a rural property when a storm struck and blew down several trees. By the time the owners returned, our sitters had chopped the fallen trees and neatly stacked the wood." Potential sitters have to pass a police check and Lisa's own reference-sifting system before they're assigned to a job. Even then, says Lisa, it's sometimes the animals that decide: "We've had a situation where the sitter and clients

were ideal for each other, but the sitter felt ill at ease with the dog." The company's sitters include retired farmers, nurses, teachers, mature students and people between homes or relationships. Most are between 45 and 50 and Lisa says it is becoming a popular part time "occupation" for retired couples. She says both client and sitter have to abide by a set of legal terms and conditions and sitters are only paid if they carry out extra farm or garden work. Clients pay a \$50 to \$75 registration fee plus a daily animal minding fee, which varies depending on whether it's tending to one small dog, for instance, or a herd of goats.

While minding rural blocks has its own set of wayward possibilities, it seems plenty can go awry in the city. Lisa says they've had a number of incidents they can now laugh about – like the sitter who was greatly surprised when the client's toilet came away from the wall during a private moment; or the small dog that ate its owner's false eyelashes and shredded her knickers; or the boxer pup which thought it could still fit through the cat door, demolished the lot and ran around the garden with the cat flap stuck around its middle. The same dog also ate its owner's university notes.

"People adore their animals, to the extent of having electric blankets for their cats. They're often so relieved to find someone to tend their pets. You'd be amazed at the number of people who haven't had a holiday in 20 years because they couldn't find someone suitable to look after Bertie," says Lisa. "We've minded everything from turtles and birds to goldfish, cats, dogs and alpacas. One city property had 13 chickens in the back garden and another five acre block had cats, dogs, cows, goats, pigs, horses, pet magpies, turkeys and chickens. The only thing we haven't taken on is rats, mice and weasels." Helen McFarlane says nearly all their clients have animals and many are fussier about their pets and farm animals than their houses. "At the end of the day, they just want peace of mind. They want to know the dog is walked regularly, the plants are watered, the mail is cleared and the house is secure. It's about everyone – people and pets – having a stress-free holiday."

Adrienne Rewi ■