



SPRING BREAK FOR DOGS

by Kim Goggins photos by Dean Palmer

The incessant hopping around and tail-wagging begins when the suitcases are taken out of the closet. 'Zippy' can barely contain her excitement, and with the gusto of youth, 'Daisy' follows her lead, practically spinning across the ceramic tile in anticipation of what's to come.

Perhaps it's not the reaction most dogs have to an inclination their owners are heading out of town, but for nine-year-old Zipper and five-year-old Daisy, when mom and dad are away, they get to play.

Michelle Heskamp just shakes her head and laughs. Knowing that their dogs are being well taken care of when she and her partner Mike Hodgkinson vacation outside the country takes a lot of pressure off the couple, but knowing the pups are just as excited as they are about their vacation, also takes away the guilt of having to leave them behind.

Zippy's Husky howl picks up when Heskamp turns off the highway to take the country road that leads to Snuggles Pooch & Kitty Holiday Camp near Orillia, Ont. Michelle barely has their

leashes in hand before the pair scamper past her to one of two large fenced-in play areas.

"They immediately run through the front door. I've been gathering their stuff from the car and Roy's opened the door and I've not seen them again until after my trip. They run through the front office, out to the play area, and it's like, I guess that's it; no goodbyes; no thank you very much. They're gone and I'm left," she jokes. "But it's very good. I just laugh about it."

BOARDING

Heskamp says they've had dog sitters in their home before, but prefer knowing their dogs are safe and happy at Snuggles. Owners Janette and Roy Mainey have heard – and seen – the down-



GOLDEN RETRIEVER / ENGLISH SPRINGER SPANIEL / WEST HIGHLAND WHITE TERRIER

side of using a boarding facility. When they first came to Ontario from England in 2000, they needed to board their two Border Collies and were shocked at what they found.

"We found one lady who was looking after them in her basement. She had chain-link pens downstairs and it stunk awful. Then we found one that was more of a barn style with shavings on the floor, and all the dogs were together, so we didn't like that," Mainey says of their quest to find the perfect boarding facility. "It was really trial and error and then figuring out what we'd want for our own dogs, which is somewhere clean, nice and warm; somewhere with a TV playing; somewhere where dogs aren't able to see each other if they don't want to."

Boasting a "luxury getaway for pets" Snuggles has separate

buildings for dogs and cats, and rather than wire cages or chain-link fences, each dog is treated to a homey, 56-square-foot space – essentially dry-walled bedrooms – complete with heating and air conditioning, a television, private outdoor run and a comfortable bed raised off the floor.

Zippy and Daisy appreciate the socialization time at Snuggles, but not every dog gets along with others and not every owner wants their dog to mingle. That's why it's important to visit a facility and ask questions (see sidebar) before the dogs stay, says Mainey.

While the Maineys provide individualized attention in a safe environment, they acknowledge that dogs are more comfortable in their own home.



BORDER COLLIE / ENGLISH SPRINGER SPANIELS

Professional pet sitting is one of the fastest-growing home-based businesses in the world but dog owners need to be cautious when hiring one. Visit the Pet Sitters International web site at www.petsit.com for more information on what to look for in a pet sitter. There is also a locator to find an accredited sitter in your area.

"If [owners] can get people to come into their house or take the dog home with them, then obviously that's the better alternative," says Mainey. But, she points out, sometimes the added work of an older, incontinent dog or a puppy that needs heightened exercise and supervision, as well as a safe, enclosed space, may be too much for a sitter and that's where a boarding facility can do more for the canine.

PET SITTERS

Tina Conidis, owner of The Housesitters Canada in Toronto and its affiliate company, It's a Pet's World, says that over the last 32 years she's heard thousands

of heart-wrenching stories of friends or family members letting pets down.

"There was a case where a neighbour promised to look after a dog when the owners were going away for a month," she recalls. "That poor dog ended up spending an entire month in a bathroom, completely enclosed, lived in all its [excrement] and had to drink out of the toilet. It was half dead by the time they got back."

Conidis's company offers pet sitting in the dog's home or in the sitter's home. She recommends meeting the pet sitter beforehand, with the dog. If the dog will be staying in the sitter's home, the meeting should take place there to ensure the home and routine meet the dog owner's expectations. The first meeting is the time to ask about the fee and if there are extra charges for things like administering medication, or damage caused by the dog. Pet sitters should be bonded and insured, she says.

Dog owners need to have information ready, too. Letting your sitter know where the kibble and cookies are kept is not the only information needed, says Donna Rafalski, of Kobedog Pets in Gatineau, Que. From an aversion to ear rubs to a lump on the dog's body, everything should be discussed prior to the owners going away. Routine information should also include the feed-





We'd like to extend our thanks to Country Haven Kennel in Freelon, Ont., for granting us access to photograph some of their canine guests while they romped in the snow.

ASK QUESTIONS

- Do the dogs require proof of updated vaccinations?
- How often are the dogs taken out? Where do they go?
- What are the hours of operation?
- What experience does the staff have with dogs?
- Do any have first-aid training for dogs?
- What services does the facility offer if a dog becomes sick?
- Will they administer medication?
- Are the dogs able to socialize with other dogs in a safe environment?
- Will the dog get individual care and attention?
- Does the business have liability insurance?

ing and walking schedules; daytime and nighttime routines; and the dogs' quirks and worries, as well as the veterinarian's name and phone number.

A good pet sitter will know how to put nervous dogs at ease, will ask many questions about the routine and give references. Still, Rafalski recommends watching the dog's reaction during the first meeting. Avoiding eye contact, and other signs of stress in the dog, such as the face and/or ears pulling back, could be normal, initially, but if the dog's anxiety doesn't dissipate, it's not a good fit.

"Don't always assume that your dog is going to be okay with just anyone. That's why the first interview is so important," she advises. "Not all dogs like all people. It's the same way that we look at someone on the street and go, 'Ugh'; dogs are the same way. They have individual tastes and that needs to be respected."

Kim Goggins is a journalist whose articles have appeared in many Canadian magazines and newspapers. She lives with her husband Hugh and dogs 'Alex' and 'Brodie,' who don't seem to mind that her writing has gone to the dogs.