

# A Middle-Aged Princess in Tramping Boots: Adventures in Life, Love, and House Sitting

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*A Middle Aged Princess in Tramping Boots Adventures in Life, Love, and House Sitting*

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*Dedication*

*This book is dedicated to my parents and to my grandparents, who were adventurers in their own way.*

**Preface** Whenever I tell people what I do for a living, they often respond with "I would love to do that." I live in lovely homes all over Brisbane and the Gold Coast. I pay no rent and my phone and internet use are free. It all seems too good to be true and when I first heard of it, I thought so too. Surely people did not let others stay in their homes for free. But they do, and I am living proof. I am a house sitter. It started when I found myself in Brisbane without a place to stay, without an income, and without a clue what to do next. I remembered reading about house sitting and so I signed up for a web site. After a few hiccups I found myself in charge of three dogs, a lovely two story home, and a nice cool pool. After I had fed the dogs their gourmet breakfast and taken them for a tangle filled walk, I was free to do as little as I wanted all day. It was like being on permanent holiday with pets thrown in for company. Bye-bye office desk and hello best job in the world. Since then, I have looked after more than a dozen homes and several dozen pets. I move to a different location almost monthly and have explored dozens of communities from the inside, as a community member and not just a tourist. I read the local paper, get the local letterbox specials, and often meet the neighbours. I have free accommodation and the home owners have the security of knowing that their cats, dogs, fish, chickens, or even miniature ponies are being fed and cared for in the familiar setting of their own home. I live a luxurious lifestyle on a tiny budget. Almost anyone can house sit. You just need to be happy to move homes, live lightly in a home (i.e. no parties) keep it clean, and love the pets as if they were your own, even the unexpected ones, like the seven foot snake that lived in one families ceiling. It's a small price to pay for the freedom and fun that this lifestyle brings. It is like being on permanent holiday. It's a life I dreamed of, hoped for, planned, coveted, and then created. My hope for you is that as you read, you will be

inspired to dream, hope, plan, and then create a perfect lifestyle of your own. Life can be outrageously good, but there is not much prestige in being a house sitter. My children sometimes ask me when I am going to get a "real" job. My mother tells everyone that I look after dogs for a living. I could be described as an itinerant of no fixed address and no regular income, but I could also be described as a free (and exuberant) spirit who is almost always on holiday. I wrote this book to share my adventures, inspire others to see that life in middle age can be exciting, and hopefully, to make my children proud. After all I am now a published author. That should count for something. I wrote about my first adventure filled year house sitting in my book titled "Housesitting in Australia." These are the stories and adventures of my just as remarkable second year. **Acknowledgements** This new chapter in my life has been one adventure after another and I have so many people to thank. I am very grateful for the wonderful families who trusted me with their homes, the people at Aussie House Sitters who connected us, and the new friends I made along the way. I would like to thank my children for putting up with the embarrassment of a mother who is having a midlife crisis (and loving it) and I thank my parents for raising me to be curious and adventurous. Most of all, I need to thank Phil who loves me without any strings or expectations, and who is so easy to love. This book would not have been possible without his moral and practical support. Thank you everyone.

*Our greatest happiness in life does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed us, but is always the result of good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits.* Thomas Jefferson

**Prologue** If there is a more beautiful view anywhere in the world I do not know where. I watch the planes cruise past level with my bedroom window against a backdrop of sage green hills, cornflower blue sky, and the buttery yellow of dawn arriving along the horizon. The sun has turned the sea into a shimmer of sparkling silver lights and the river into molten metal. In the evening, I watch the lights of the Gold Coast blossom along the curved shoreline as the night sky fades to purple and ebony. Just a few kilometres away, thousands of people are paying thousands of dollars a week to stay in this region, I pay nothing. No rent, no phone bill, no power bill, nothing. I have free internet, free local calls, and use of all the laundry and kitchen facilities. The home itself is beautiful. There is a charcoal sketch on a stand in the living room, a huge draped wall hanging in the foyer, and dried twigs in outsized ceramic pots at the door. Three glassed-in frames on the wall are filled with dried moths, beetles, and other bugs, swirled into pretty patterns. There are paintings the family have created themselves at every turn, each one a masterpiece of colour, form, and often humour. And every room is designed to make the most of the remarkable views with picture windows in each room and four balconies to choose from if I feel like dinner outside on the deck. It is better than living in a luxury hotel, because it has heart, and soul, and is designed to be lived in, from the fully stocked library of interesting books, right down to the last slotted spoon, and garlic crusher. It is practical, comfortable, and it has a wonderful feel about it. In my first year of house sitting I was almost full-time. I looked after eight homes and eighteen pets in that year and survived on a very modest income. I had some budget house sits, but generally my role as a house sitter provided me with a Princess lifestyle on a paupers budget. I wrote my first book (Housesitting in Australia) and considered myself a Queen among house sitters. Then I started my second year. It began with my most embarrassing, disheartening, and crushing day since starting as a house sitter. It was worse than the day I found myself down to my last five dollars with only carrots and cheese in the pantry. Worse than the time a cat I was looking after went missing for three days. Worse than the day my motorbike exploded hot sticky green goo all over my leg. It was the day I was evicted from two homes. **All Packed and No Place to Go** I spent my second Christmas season as a house sitter, in a family home near the theme parks on the Gold Coast. It wasn't anything fancy, just three bedrooms and one bathroom, but it was comfortable, and I was very happy there. Through a combination of careful planning and good luck, I had lined up my next house sit to start the same day this one finished. Then the owner emailed and asked if I could I stay an extra day. He said he was coming a day later than planned. I offered to leave late in the day so I could feed the dog before I left. My next family would not mind as they would not be home anyway. On my second to last day, I packed up as

much as I could and left it by the door. I called my next house sit to confirm that I was still coming, and then I went to bed. In the morning I washed the sheets, half-cleaned the kitchen, then decided that since I had all day, I might as well do some computer work: web surfing, emails, messaging, etc. Anything to delay the cleaning and packing I should be doing. I became engrossed in the vortex that is the internet and at midday I was still at my computer. Suddenly, I heard the unmistakable click of the door and a hearty "halloo." It was the owner of the home, a large sociable Australian man. He arrived all smiles and apologies about being home early. He said he had given me the right arrival date the first time. He breezed on in, negotiated my too big pile of suitcases and boxes, and stepped over the vacuum cleaner still on the floor. I had no choice but to front up sheepishly, still in my pyjamas, while he introduced me to a friend he had brought with him. I was painfully conscious of my belongings still strewn around the door, and the crumbs still on the kitchen bench. Even worse, I was flying a little blind, since I had not put in my contact lenses. The friend must have wondered what sort of a lazy, squinty eyed, house sitter had been employed, but the owner was perfectly gracious. He acted like it was completely normal to come home to a half-dressed woman in his home. He insisted I could stay as long as I liked and invited me to have a drink with them outside. Instead, I spent the next two hours feverishly, cleaning, vacuuming, and packing everything into the car, while cursing the amount of stuff I had collected in just one year. My best friend, the love of my life, and sometimes house guest Phil, had just started in a job in Western Australia. As well as my own paraphernalia, I was looking after several of his bulging clothes bags, and a large quantity of surprisingly heavy bits and pieces, in an overflowing cardboard box with a dodgy bottom. Between us, we also had two body boards, diving gear, a plastic set of drawers, and a full sized printer. It was early afternoon before I finished vacuuming and polishing, and had my belongings all bundled carefully into the car. The owner came outside to wave me off and said he would call me in October when they went on their next holiday. I felt a flash of relief. Despite the turmoil of his welcome home, he obviously still felt I was competent. Then my day got worse. I drove to my new house-sit. At my new house sit, I drove into the garage and parked my car right up against the wall. There were only a few inches of wiggle room but I successfully shut the garage door and headed on in to the living areas. When Phil and I had visited to meet the family, the husband had explained their needs while the wife looked on nervously and made occasional instructions on the best ways to double lock the sliding door or latch the windows securely. The family had a large modern home that was all cream walls, marble surfaces, and wide open spaces. The wife was understandably nervous about a stranger in her home. When I arrived, it was not quite as excessively tidy, as I remembered. I was surprised to see three laptops lying around and a small pile of clean washing on the bed I was to sleep on. I assumed they must have just run out of time and I decided to fold the washing later. Their boisterous and sporty looking schnauzer stood nose to the glass door, leaving long muddy streaks where he had scratched to get my attention. It was still raining, so I decided to let him in for a bit. He bounded in happily, leaving muddy dog prints all over the tiled floor. I tried to wipe his feet with an old towel, but while I tried to clean one muddy paw, he would wander away on the other three. After several tries at pinning him down, I gave up, cleaned the floor, and sent him back outside to find his own shelter. It had been a tough morning and I was tired after all the cleaning and packing at the previous house, so I decided to start with a late lunch. I sat down in front of the TV with some chicken and salad and opened my trusty laptop. I connected to their internet and went online to see where I was, and to look up a suitable route to walk the dog. Two hours later (and who knows where the time went) I decided it was time to unpack. The car was so securely wedged into the garage that was impossible to open the rear door. I decided to bring in just what I needed for the night and leave everything else for the morning. As I was in the bathroom putting out my toothbrush and toiletries, I heard some banging and wondered if it was the house next door. Each house has its own sounds and it takes me a while to get used to them. Then I heard a loud "Hello" from the living room. Someone was in the house. It was the owner of the home and two of his daughters. He looked surprised to see me and I was flustered enough to be speechless. I had just called the night before to confirm and yet I was a day early. I had been busted again. I suspect he got the dates wrong. I hope it wasn't me. I worry about early Alzheimer's. After a short

discussion where he offered me a blow up mattress, I decided it would be less embarrassing to leave. I packed up the thankfully small amount of stuff I had unpacked, left my little stash of camembert cheese, soda, and juice in the fridge and hoped he would tell his wife that I just came by to drop the food off. She was already nervous enough about the whole house sitting thing. Now I was without a home for the night. Luckily I had family nearby. I headed over to my ex-husband's house. I had stayed at his house in the past for many weeks, but after two and half years the divorce papers had just gone in and he wasn't looking too impressed to see me. I decided not to ask him for a room for the night and headed over to my oldest son. He too did an almost believable impression of being happy to see me. Despite the fact it was 18 months since my separation from his father, my son was unhappy that I was seeing Phil and picked this night to tell me so. We had a conversation more suited to a father and wayward daughter, than a son and his mother. We left on a good note but I decided not to ask about a room for the night.

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In her second year living in other people's homes as a house sitter, the adventures are as much fun as ever. Nikki stays in everything from a million dollar home in a gated community, to the back of a car in a McDonald's car park. She continues to explore Australia's South-East Queensland as she cares for other people's cats, dogs, ponies, and even a snake. This year she also takes us to outback New South Wales and over to New Zealand to stay on a yacht with attitude. Nikki's first book "Housesitting in Australia" was the story of her first year. In this, her second year, there is even more adventure as Nikki takes to the ocean, both on it, and in it, and shares her experiences with online dating. In a Middle Aged Princess in Tramping Boots, Nikki offers more of her unique insights into house sitting along with tips for finding and completing a house sit.

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