

Australia has some new stars.



Now proudly Australian made

Available exclusively at premium pet food retailers, veterinary clinics and the RSPCA.



For more information call the Hill's HelpLine
1800 679 932 or visit www.hillspet.com.au



No.1 Choice of Veterinarians Worldwide

© 2008 Hill's Pet Nutrition Pty. Limited. ®/™ Hill's and Science Diet are registered trademarks owned by Hill's Pet Nutrition, Inc. The Australian Made logo is a registered trademark owned by Australian Made Campaign Limited.

BackSeat BUDDY

Sit! Stay! Relax...!

The *BackSeat Buddy*™ ensures safe comfortable travel and prevents vehicle wear and tear

Pet Avenue
1300 738 283

www.petavenue.com.au



Photo by Animax

Come! Sit! Stay!

Getting Into Pet Friendly Properties Online

We've been to well over a dozen 'pet-friendly accommodation' properties to review them anonymously over the past few years, paying our own way and discovering them through a number of methods. The best is always word-of-mouth from pet lifestyle lovers who are friends or acquaintances. There is also the reliable book "Holidaying With Dogs", now in its 9th edition, which has properties that pay to advertise as well as ones that list at no charge. And they do have a website.

It's trickier when you rely on the Internet to choose from often hundreds of opportunities, filled with incredible descriptions, great photography and often glowing 'reviews' from people who have supposedly stayed there and have been so gobsmacked by the property that they just had to write a report. There is no shortage of sites pointing you to properties, often for a fee, sometimes getting the property owner to pay for a listing—or both—and far too often, the descriptions turn out too good to be true.

When we've looked at regions within three hours of Sydney—Blue Mountains, Central Coast, South Coast, Hunter Valley—we've used a variety of sites to scout locations. In some cases, shire or municipality websites have pet-friendly accommodation tips as do official tourism organisations. After two bad experiences, we had a hard look at what is on offer from commercial pet accommodation referral sites as well as other online sources.

There are a few types of commercial sites, which aggregate properties to offer. The two main types are those who act as an agent and make reservations as well as taking payment on behalf of the property and those that act as intermediaries,

allowing you to deal directly with the property operator. They make their money through a fee from the renter or a commission from the operator and in exchange, they make it easy to select the right property and check availabilities as well as maintaining the website's ad for the property.

Before you use these services or others, you need to be sure what facilities you want. Not all pet-friendly properties give unlimited freedom to the animal or owner to do as they please. Some are 'pet-tolerant' at best while others may only allow pets in onsite kennel enclosures rather than in your room or verandah.

If you choose wrong and find that you have to keep your pet in the car rather than chained up or fenced in, it could make for a miserable time for it and you. And if that castle in the ad turns out to be a catastrophe, so much for the holiday.

First list what you want in a property. Do you want your pet to be inside the premises when you're there? It will make for more limited choices so check that this is allowed. Will your pet be able to be placed in a room like a bathroom or laundry while you might be away at dinner or exploring? See if the facilities are there for this. And what style of accommodation do you want? House, hotel, attached motel unit, caravan park, tent... There are a variety to choose from including an attached room to an owner's house which was the first disaster we had.

We had chosen a property in the outer Blue Mountains area that was owned by a nice older lady who had two yappy dogs of her own and the room was separated from the rest of the house by a simple thin sliding door and included a plethora of curios on the walls and every other available space. Because of her age and the age of the premises, it wasn't clean to our standards and it wasn't comfortable nor attractive enough for us to recommend to our readers.

Another important thing to confirm is that the property is fenced, especially where it is near roads or has farm animals in the vicinity. Plus you need to know how private your premises will be in relation to neighbours. Don't rely on cleverly shot exterior photos that show a great front but doesn't show the neighbour's kitchen window opposite yours and the lack of restrictions to dogs running away.



ANACAPRI WAMBERAL BEACH

**DOG FRIENDLY
DIRECT BEACH ACCESS
OFF LEASH AREA
MODERN AIRCONDITIONED**

e: anacapri@bigblue.net.au
t: 0412-400-572



Another disaster we had was finding a Central Coast hideaway through an agency where we were unable to check a few points with the owners until it was too late. Not only wasn't it fenced, it was close to a sharp curve and there were two sets of neighbours almost on top of us. The only way we could let the dogs out was by building a wall with two rollaway garbage bins and a piece of masonite with an extra trash can and garden chair.

However, in the three years since those two incidents, pet-friendly websites have become more informative and user-friendly in allowing you to view extensive details, with online booking calendars to show vacancies as well as making deposits in a secure manner.

For an experiment, we decided to test out a few pet sites via search engines that have accommodation as one aspect of what they advertise as well as specific pet accommodation websites or general accommodation sites that also feature pet properties. We used the Hunter Valley area as our region of choice and looked for a detached house, fenced, with dogs allowed indoors, but would consider anything above a caravan park or crap motel.

So by using keywords and whittling down the choices as well as cutting through the marketing hype or ads, here's what we found.

Stayz.com.au had 27 properties listed, all with thumbnail photos on the front page with 25 shown on page 1. Each property had prices, maximum number of guests and a short description as well as the town they were located in within the region. Outlined in yellow were last-minute deals for 10-15% discounts.

Click on any property and you would see larger photos, full rates information, a description of the property, the facilities in terms of rooms, beds, baths, grounds, etc. There are also user reviews, but they can easily be manipulated since anyone can make an entry and rate the property, including the owner. This is quite common in general travel sites (as an example <http://www.tripadvisor.com>) and can lead to questionable positive reviews as well as competing properties giving negative reviews by faking usernames and entries.

There is a calendar function showing available and occupied dates and you can make an enquiry or book directly with the property. In going through the several pages of contract information, which gives the customer few rights, it was interesting to see that the site is operated by Fairfax.

www.stayz.com.au/pet-friendly-accommodation/nsw/hunter/hunter-valley

Our next choice was Take a Break, which is an independent operation that advertises properties for owners and leaves you to deal directly with the property operator. In their case, the site displayed 43 properties, all with photos within the Hunter Valley and Barrington region. There were 10 displayed to a page.

What was most handy was a map on the front page which could be expanded or moved, making finding the location of properties a snap. Also, each property on the page had a clearly displayed calendar for the following four weeks showing vacancies, which is great if you hate finding after going through four pages that what you want isn't available anyway.

Prices were clearly displayed with a thumbnail photo, number of beds and baths and capacity before continuing on into property descriptions which are just a click away. You could also see specials, star ratings and best deal guarantees.

Clicking onto the property showed an instant map location on Google as well as large photos and a full description of the property and nearby attractions. On that page is a set of three-month calendars and it's easy to click ahead 90 days at a time quickly. You can also contact the owners and ask questions easily through the online form. Payment methods include cheque, credit card and direct debit as well as a gift voucher service, which is a great add-on. There is also a facility to add properties to a shortlist so you can compare and come back to choose later.

What really impressed me though was the rating system. Guest comments and reviews could only be added if you had a previous booking number or the email address you used to book. This keeps unscrupulous property owners from hyping their rentals and competitors from dissing them. There are also extensive reviews written independently, with photos. Altogether an excellent resource that is easy to use, credible and actually fun.

www.takeabreak.com.au/HunterValleyBarrington/accomodation-2.htm

At first, Pets Playground displayed no pet-friendly properties when the menu specified pets inside or outside in the Hunter Valley / Barrington region. Then, by unclicking that preference, it showed only six properties. Each one had some photos and a small description as well as mapping, but several photos didn't work, and the navigation was clumsy and slow.

For example, when I went to Riverwood Downs on Pets Playground, it clicked me through to a page on CountryHolidays.com which, when I wanted to check availability, dumped me to an error page. I also could not access the booking form page and the enquiries page was offline. Useless.



Though it gave direct phone numbers, links to website if applicable and an email interface via the site, it did not have a calendar function and therefore was of little use in planning ahead or judging the property. And with only six, there was little choice.

www.petsplayground.com.au/index.php?option=com_ezreality&Itemid=121

I've used Wotif.com a lot for hotel rentals here and abroad. I didn't realise it also had pet-friendly options until it came time to research this article. But I was disappointed in the results when the 33 properties that came up under pet-friendly search were scattered all over NSW and ACT and the information on each was poor. The photos, if any, small.

www.wotif.com/hotels/pet-friendly-accommodation-nsw.html

We tried PetStays but it just didn't work. It would go to the site but drew a blank page over the four days I tried. Useless.

www.pet.stays.com.au/areas/accommodation_hunter_valley.html

I found a site called Barinya which turned out to be fairly generic. It too only listed names and addresses with websites, none of which were linked. So you would have to paste them into your browser, if they worked, and I found quite a few were caravan parks. Useless.

www.barinya.com/australia/travel/Pet_Friendly_Accommodation_New_South_Wales_ACT.htm

Rent-a-Home had 11 towns listed within range of the Hunter but when I went to Cessnock, there were only two properties. In looking at all the towns, they were the same two and only ones available. Useless.

www.rent-a-home.com.au/stay/pet-friendly-accommodation/nsw/hunter-valley.htm

So as a last resort, I went to LoveMeLoveMyDog which was attractive enough but once I went into the NSW page, it was all over the place with properties. The first one in the Hunter had no photo, and rented for \$2500 a week. But pets stay free! I just had to call the number of the owner listed. It was the owner of the site, not the property and they couldn't tell me if it was available on the dates I asked nor anything else other than they were the agent. Useless.

www.lovemelovemydog.com.au/templates/search.cfm

So as you can see, it's not as easy as you think to book pet-friendly accommodation over the net, but there are outstanding exceptions. The trick is to find those sites which have the most information, variety and ease of use. What we've learned is to scout properties online and then go directly to their sites and compare prices. You will often find that it's cheaper using pet-friendly sites than going direct.

You will need to think ahead to plan a trip. You need to carry your pet's bedding with you so they have a familiar place to lay in strange environments. You should also take their bowls for feeding and some toys to keep them occupied. Did I hear treats? You bet! Pigs' ears, lambs' ears, dog biscuits, maybe even some peanut butter to smear in a Kong or Boredom Buster to keep them occupied. Bring plenty of water to have available for stops along the way as well as to have a container for trips away from your holiday place.

Ensure your pet has an ID tag that has your name and phone numbers on which you can be reached during your trip (like your mobile) in case you're separated. Make sure you have a strong leash and harness and perhaps have a spare lead and collar in case one breaks or gets filthy. And if your dog is used to being crated, have a carrier with you. This can be handy for keeping the dog in a house while you are away without it eating the contents.

Think ahead too to make sure your pet's flea and tick treatments are current and also any worming schedules. It's a good idea to have a pet first aid kit just in case as well as any copies of medical records if your pet has any special needs or is being treated. And make sure you have enough medication, best kept in a sealed container.



Find *pet friendly* holiday accommodation Australia wide

Book online, direct with individual properties so you can ask the questions you need to ask before you book. Select from thousands of properties, easy to search and book. View comments from other guests just like you.

The best place to plan your next holiday Go to www.TakeABreak.com.au/pet-friendly today!