



PHOTOS BY ANDREW T. SAWYER, TRIBUNE

OUTDOORS BOUND: Above, Kara Tovar, owner of TLC House & Pet Sitting, walks Perry, left, an Irish setter, and Maxie, a mixed-breed, toward the Scottsdale greenbelt where they'll enjoy the cool grass. Below, Tovar pets Shih Tzus Annie, foreground, and Andy before putting on their leashes and taking them for a morning walk.

4-legged friends, 1 great job

Pet sitters' days are full of wet noses, wags and walks in the park

By GERI KOEPEL
TRIBUNE

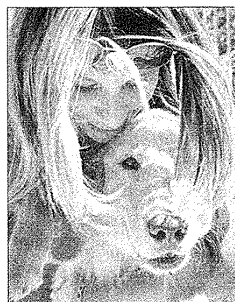
It's hard not to envy those people who are strolling the greenbelts, sidewalks or desert trails on weekdays walking their dogs.

You've seen them. You're sitting in a stuffy car in itchy business attire, and they're gliding along under the blue sky in loose shorts and T-shirts. You're chained to a desk all day, and they've got a leash in their hand and a smile on their face.

What kind of person has the kind of life that allows such freedom? A pet sitter, for one.

"See? Isn't this great? I get to do this every day," says Kara Tovar as she bounds down the sidewalk with Andy and Annie, a pair of Shih Tzus.

Tovar, a Mesa resident who owns TLC House and Pet Sitting Service, steers the dogs to a landscaped walking path. She passes by the bright fuchsia stalks of aloë, bushes of purple sage in full bloom and clusters of baby-pink oleanders on a clear, mild late April morning while Andy and Annie trot ahead.



GLAD TO SEE YOU: Tovar hugs Dewar, a golden retriever puppy, during her midday visit. Puppies need to be let out frequently because they can't hold their bladder as long as adult dogs, Tovar said.

They loop back into the tidy Scottsdale neighborhood and — whoops — Annie makes a pit stop in someone's front yard. Tovar promptly pulls a plastic bag out of her fanny pack and picks it up.

She didn't learn that skill in college.

Tovar has a degree in exercise sports science and media arts. After working in the medical field, she returned to her first love — animals. Her parents bred golden retrievers and she started pet-sitting in college.

"I've taken care of rabbits, geckos, frogs, iguanas, piranhas, birds — I love birds," she says. "I love them all, actually. Guinea pigs, hamsters. I've taken care of snakes, but I don't do venomous snakes."

After treating Andy and Annie to a breakfast of cooked chicken, carrots and cheese, Tovar drives to see her next clients: Perry, a regal Irish setter, and Maxie, an enthusiastic mixed-breed. They're so excited to see her, they nearly stamped through the baby gate that corrals them in the tiled area of the house.

She takes them down to the greenbelt, where they stop and sniff bushes, trees, random spots on the ground.

"It's like reading the paper for them," she said. "They check out what's going on in the outside world."

As the dogs lead the way along the grass, Tovar admits, "This is the fun part of the day." Like any business owner, she has paperwork to file and phone calls to return in between the visits.

"There's days I'll start at 5 a.m. and work until 10 o'clock at night," she said. "Maybe even later than that in peak season," meaning holidays. And her area of coverage is extensive: Bell Road to the north, Chandler Boulevard to the south, Tatum Boulevard to the west and Val Vista Drive to the east.

Tovar heads back to the house and feeds Perry and Maxie, then leaves a log sheet detailing her visit.



Pros of pet-sitting

The Pet Sitters International Web site, www.petsit.com, lists the advantages of using pet sitters.

FOR PETS:

- Reduced stress — Your pet stays in its own familiar secure environment where all the sights, smells and sounds say "home."
- Diet and exercise — Customary diet and exercise routines are followed, with no interruption to upset your pet.
- No travel trauma — Travel in a vehicle to a boarding facility or kennel may upset your pet.
- Health concerns — With a pet sitter, there is minimal exposure to illness of other animals.
- TLC — Your pet receives love and personal attention while you are away.

FOR OWNERS:

- Travel. You won't be inconvenienced or upset by transporting your pet.
- No imposition. You don't have to impose on a friend, neighbor or relative to care for your pet, but instead rely on a pet care professional who will put your pet's needs first.
- Security. Your home is made more secure by the crime deterrent services provided by most pet-sitting services.
- Peace of mind. While you're away, you can feel confident your pet is in capable, caring hands.
- Special services. Pet sitters can provide additional home services while caring for your pet, such as watering plants and bringing in the mail.

Of course, some boarding facilities can keep your pets on their usual diet and feeding schedule, and they're an option for those who are uncomfortable giving a pet sitter a key.

Costs for in-home pet-sitting vary depending on the services. To get more information on pet-sitting and how to locate a pet sitter, visit www.petsit.com.

SITTERS: Career has legs

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Pet facts

Her clients — the ones who walk on two legs and pay the bill — are generally busy professionals. Some travel for business; others put in long hours.

On the next visit, she checks on Dewar, a golden retriever puppy who can't hold his bladder even for the length of a typical workday. He's so enthusiastic to see her, he goes all over the tile floor before he can even get out the door.

"It's not all fun and play," Tovar warns.

She cleans up, then gets the leash.

"Can you sit? Good boy!" Then it's outside again, enjoying the sunshine as they make tracks next to a golf course.

The next appointment is just on the other side of the course, where Roxy, a rat terrier, greets Tovar with hugs, kisses and full-air jumps. Roxy calms down long enough to let her put on the hot pink harness.

"The puppy stage for terriers lasts longer," Tovar said. She knows all the quirks of the breeds, in addition to individual dogs' personalities, schedules and preferences.

"When I meet with the client they show me where their food is and how much they get, what their routine is," Tovar said. "That way I'm not altering or changing it." She also gives medication or injections, and also takes care of daily matters like getting the mail and taking out or bringing in trash cans.

When she has breaks

- As of 2001, there were 61.6 million dogs, 68.9 million cats and 10 million birds in the United States.
- According to a survey by the American Animal Hospital Association, 19 percent of pet owners have used pet sitters.
- 39 percent call home when they're away so their pet can hear their voice.
- 49 percent of people describe their pet as "another member of the family," while 35 percent consider their pet their "child," 12 percent say it's a "companion" and 3 percent say it's "just a pet."
- 51 percent would give "Happy Birthday" to a pet, 33 percent have given their pet a wrapped gift, 9 percent have thrown pet birthday parties and 5 percent have given their pet a greeting card.
- 52 percent include news about their pet or photos of their furry friends in a holiday card.
- 73 percent would go into debt to provide for their pet's well-being.

Source: The American Animal Hospital Association

during the day, she heads home to play with her own dogs, Niko and Brownie. How many people look forward to going home and doing what they get paid to do on the job?

Only the smart ones. "You have to do what you love to do," Tovar says, "because you're going to be doing it day in and day out."

CONTACT WRITER: (480) 898-6574 or gkoepele@aztrib.com