

Expat Entrepreneurs in Mexico: Solving the House and Pet Sitting Problem By

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You have just planned a trip to return to your home country to visit family and friends and will be gone for a month and need someone to look after your pets and your home. How do you find a reliable house sitter? Ajijic's Alexandra Gordon's new business aims to help solve the house and pet-sitting problem for expats in Mexico.



Alex Gordon

Gordon launched HouseSitMexico.com in November 2016 to bring homeowners/renters together with reliable and trustworthy house sitters. "In some ways it's like a dating website," Gordon explained. "Our website brings people together to solve the house and pet care problem. We provide a lot of information to help homeowners in this process and show them how to check a reference and create an agreement, among other things." Gordon was born in New Jersey but was raised in Los Angeles, Huntington Park to be specific. She graduated from UCLA in 1976 with a bachelor's degree in international relations and a second bachelor's degree in television production. While attending UCLA, she fell in love with Mexico.

"My love affair with Mexico started in my first year at UCLA," she said. "I had a really wonderful trip in a Land Rover going down Baja, all 1,000 miles of it at an average of 15 miles-per-hour on a dirt road. We also visited Puerto Vallarta. I really fell in love with the country. I went back to school and even though I had taken high school Spanish I started all over again in college."

The following summer Gordon spent three months in Mexico, traveling by trains and buses. "When you're a woman traveling alone in Mexico," she said, "people see you as approachable, and they *talk* to you. My Spanish improved and I met a lot of other travelers. Really dear to my heart was Isla Mujeres. It's still one of my favorite places."

She worked hard to get into the television business and became a television producer, working on informative types of shows, like cooking, but also sports shows. She produced two “how to” video series for ESPN. Gordon also was a pioneer in interactive technologies, which led to the development of a portfolio of patents for attaching CDs to products.

Gordon’s career took her to the San Francisco Bay Area and then to New York for nearly 30 years before she and her husband decided to move to Mexico. “It was always on our minds to go to Mexico,” she said, “but we also checked out Costa Rica, Ecuador and even Nova Scotia. We always came back to Mexico because my heart was really in Mexico from that first experience traveling here when I was 18 and 19.”

During one of their trips to Mexico, she asked a taxi driver, “Where is a place in Mexico that is like what San Miguel was like 40 years ago?” The driver wrote “Patzcuaro.” She and her husband sold their home in New York in 2009 and found a house sitting opportunity in Patzcuaro. They quickly became friends with many of the estimated 300 expats who live there. A year later, they moved to Ajijic on Lake Chapala’s northern shore.

“While in Patzcuaro we discovered a website that became the forerunner to HouseSitMexico.com,” Gordon said. “It was more like an electronic bulletin board that was designed to help homeowners/renters connect with house sitters. When I was a member, I gave the owners some input on how to improve their website. Then six years later I bought their business after the husband passed away.”

She had the experience and relished the opportunity to build a new business. Gordon kept the brand name but took the website down and spent over six months creating a new one. She beta-tested the new site in September 2016 and launched in November.

“House sitting is really a win-win relationship for both homeowners/renters and house sitters,” Gordon said. “Having your pets cared for is by far the most common reason to want a sitter. A lot of people refer to it as the sharing economy, kind of like Airbnb.”

The concept is simple: Match those who need someone to house sit while they are away with people who want to experience Mexico. Both homeowners/renters and house sitters register on the website and pay US\$79 for a one year membership. Visitors to the site can sign up to receive listings via email.

“The site itself offers two kinds of interactive maps and filtered searches that refine the results,” Gordon said. “At the core of the selection process is our Private Messaging. Because messages go through the website, direct contact information is kept confidential until the subscriber wants to share it with a house sitting candidate.”

Gordon said HouseSitMexico.com does not do vetting of potential house sitters but tools are provided that allow homeowners/renters to screen candidates. “Once people have applied, we provide the means for homeowners/renters to communicate with them,” she said. “We tell them how to check references, create an agreement and get in touch with candidates. We also strongly recommend reference checks.”

Homeowners/renters can be full-time or part-time residents of Mexico who are taking a long weekend to another city within Mexico or extended stays out of the country. Most have pets that need care, which is a major motivating factor. Security and emergency response are also concerns.

House sitters fall into a number of different categories. “Just as my husband and I house sat when we first came to Mexico, a lot of people house sit because they want to get to know Mexico, and figure out where they will be happiest,” Gordon said. “I call staying in a real home as a sitter ‘experiential research’. In comparison, staying in a hotel is like being in a bubble. House sitting gives you a chance to get to know an area and what part of it you might like to settle in.”

Another type of house sitter is the “sequential” house sitter, who is often a mobile worker. This type of sitter works online and often travels the world. They are generally looking for longer-term house sitting opportunities. And then there are sitters who are expats already living in Mexico. They enjoy house sitting as an inexpensive way to visit other parts of the country.

How is Gordon’s new business doing? In its first six months of operation,

HouseSitMexico.com has filled over 100 house sits and has nearly 170 house sitters that are registered members.

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