ALAYNE BLICKLE

Yes, You Can Take a Vacation

How to find the perfect farm-sitter to provide seamless care for your horses while you're gone

Put your itinerary, daily care instructions, and emergency contacts in writing for your farm-sitter.

ALAYNE BLICKLE PHOTOS

We all know the feeling of returning from a vacation happy and energized. Research shows that vacations are not only good for our health but also increase our post-break productivity. People on a holiday have reported feeling better and having fewer physical complaints. If this is true, why can going on vacation be so difficult for us as horse owners, and what can we do to make it easier to take time off?

Taking a vacation can be especially challenging for those of us who keep horses on our own property because it often involves a to-do-list that's a mile long. So unless the trip revolves around a horsey event like a show or a clinic, vacation time can get pushed to the back burner.

Lori Nevin realizes the importance of vacations. She and her husband, Jeffery Harr, both lifelong horse people, live in the Cascade Mountains of Eastern Washington. They keep three horses, a goat, a cat, and a parrot on their 6.25-acre ranch.

Nevin says getting away gives the couple perspective and improves their relationship. "Jeff and I get a chance to really be present with each other without the typical home and work life business that keeps us constantly on the go," she says. "And when we come back (to the horses and property) we're reminded of how blessed we are with so much that we have right at home."

Nevin and Harr are planning an extended European vacation this year, one that has been in the works since 2015. "A vacation itself is challenging enough, but being gone out of the country for six weeks is a lot to undertake," she says. "You've got to think about all the parts and pieces."

That said, Nevin, a project management professional, is an excellent planner and has enjoyed several extended vacations away from her horse property.

Preflight Preparation

"Once we have an adventure in mind," Nevin says, "we want to pick a time of year for our travels that will work both for where we're going as well as for what we're leaving behind (to manage on the property)."

Depending on the part of the country you live in, this might include

considerations such as not leaving in the dead of winter because of potential winter storm responsibilities, such as shoveling snow, or emergencies, such as a frozen water supply or pipes. Late summer can pose risks such as wildfires if you live in an arid region. Spring storms and tornadoes can make for complicated planning challenges for horse owners in the Midwest and central Plains states. However, realistically, there's no perfect time to leave—emergencies can happen anytime (learn how to be ready for one at TheHorse.com/35909)—so it's best to just think through the contingencies and prepare appropriately.

When planning to leave her property for an extended period, Nevin likes to put everything writing, reading over it many times and adjusting accordingly. "What works for us on our farm is to think about what the minimum tasks are to take care of our place when we're gone," she says. "Then we figure out the new projects we need to accomplish related to those tasks," such as fixing gates so they work easily. "For example, we know we want our pastures set up for rotational grazing before we leave so that the job of manure management will go easier for the caretakers."

Nevin and Harr regularly remove manure from pastures and compost it, both for parasite control and eventual field application. "This means we need to get our rotational grazing areas set up with portable hot wire fencing, put water troughs and hoses in place, and make sure it's all working prior to our departure time," she says. "Some of the things we consider are do we want people handling our horses each day, or would we prefer to have our place set up so horses can be let out just by opening and closing gates?" These decisions might require changes in fencing, gates, latches, shelters, or overall farm layout.

Finding and Training a Farm-Sitter

"Another reason we like to think about the chores and tasks left behind is that it helps us figure out what we need to offer someone for pay," Nevin says. "They are getting room, board, utilities, and some of their food for the time they are here," but they still need to be reimbursed adequately for their time and effort.

"If we decide it should be X dollars per hour, and after looking through our task list we determine that taking care of our place takes so many hours per day, then we (know) the amount of pay to offer," Nevin says.

Pack daily feed and supplements in labeled baggies for each horse, and go over chores and instructions with your farm-sitter before leaving town.

Sheri Clevenger, a lifelong horse owner based in Southwest Washington, recognizes the limitations in finding good vacation help in her small rural community. "I don't have an abundance of choices of knowledgeable, capable, and willing individuals, so I have to pay what they ask. I don't even question their price."

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>
> LORI NEVIN

Compounding this is the need for discretion when looking for a farm-sitter.

"Once we figure out a pay scale, the hardest part is getting the word out to look for a caretaker since we don't want to make it public knowledge that we'll be gone for six weeks," says Nevin, adding that word of mouth among family and close friends is best.

Nevin conducts an informal interview with the potential caretaker. "It gives me insight to their reactions and allows me to assess their overall comfort level," she says.

Interview questions she asks include:

- What experience do you have around horses?
- Do you have horse-handling experience, and can you halter and lead horses safely if necessary (that includes having work boots and gloves)?
- Are you allergic to grass, hay, or animals?
- Do you mind staying alone on a farm or in a house for the duration of our trip?

She also presents key points about daily chores and gives a tour of the farm and an introduction to the animals, to those who meet the first set of guidelines, asking the following:

- If you were looking out in the pastures what would call your attention to an emergency? "Wildfires are a risk in our area so this question is an important one," says Nevin. "A young adult might not be able to answer this, but it gets them started on the thinking process and offers an opportunity to discuss emergency protocols."
- If you have an emergency and need to be gone, what's a good backup plan? "We work together on this one," Nevin says. "We want a plan that will cover the potential of the caretaker being

gone for up to several days."

Also consider if the caretaker needs to have a certain amount of physical strength for tasks such as carrying hay, injured or small livestock, irrigation pipes, or other equipment. Nevin and Harr plan to forego irrigation while they're out of town and have plenty of hay stockpiled to minimize the caretaker's effort.

It is important that the caretaker feels completely comfortable with the situation. "If it's a young adult I'm interviewing, I tell them to bring their parents (to the interview) if they wish," says Nevin.

"If I decide to offer them the job, I also tell them to think about it for a few days before they accept," Nevin says, acknowledging that farm-sitting comes with a lot of responsibility.

She also sets clear ground rules, providing them in writing. "I have a philosophy that anything in the home is yours to use, but put everything back as you found it," she says. "No tobacco, alcohol, drugs, firearms, or pets, and no overnight guests."

If you do decide to allow a pet, make sure it doesn't have a penchant for chasing unfamiliar livestock or wandering onto neighboring property, for instance.

Nevin suggests the caregiver keep a diary of anything out of the ordinary he or she notices while staying at the farm. This might include a person coming to the door or a horse looking a little off.

Make the caretaker's job easier by having plenty of supplies stored in convenient places.

"It's helpful to know when it was first noticed," she says, so she can follow up if needed when she returns. (Wildlife or closed-circuit cameras with live video feed can also be useful for documentation.)

In addition, Nevin secures another resource for while she is gone; a horsey neighbor and good friend is available to answer questions or provide input on what to do in an emergency.

About a month before her departure date, Nevin has the farm-sitter out three to four times—as well as on the night before they leave. "I have the caretaker come do chores with us," she says. "Once or twice they just watch us, then we ask them to take the lead and we coach them as needed. I am willing to pay for this, for their time. If we just leave them with written instructions, we may not be able to explain how a specific sticky gate works. Plus, they need to observe what's normal behavior for our horses and what's not."

Providing Horse Care Details

Before departing, Nevin says she puts her itinerary, daily care instructions, emergency contacts, and maximum financial authorizations for all animals in writing. She contacts her veterinarian to find out what is needed in terms of approval and financial limitations for each animal while she is away. "Make sure that if your vet needs something in writing that you get it for them."

Clevenger says she prefers taking her three horses to a friend's property when she's out of town. But whether she does that or finds a farm-sitter, she prepares horse feed and supplements in labeled baggies, one for each charge's meal.

"I want to set it up so the person feeding or coming in has minimal work to do," she says. "I load hay up into the areas where the horses will be, type up clear instructions for each horse, include contact info and preferred vets. I provide access to the tack room, show where first-aid supplies are, talk about when to call a vet. I explain about blankets, fly masks, grazing muzzles, I ask them to clean the paddocks

What Your Farm-Sitter Wants to Know

Diana Johnson, a Western Washington horse- and landowner, has been farm-sitting for 10 years, sometimes traveling to properties several hours from her home. "I make sure that everything is written down for me, including veterinarian contacts, feeding directions, and emergency instructions," she says. Specifically, Johnson likes to have/know:

- A detailed written feeding routine, especially if there's more than one or two horses.
- Each horse's name, preferably on a stall card with feed/medications.
- If there's enough feed (hay, grain, etc.) on hand.
- Feed store locations for supplies.
- If any horses need medications and where those are stored.
- First-aid supplies and emergency management protocol in writing.
- Expectations as far as handling the horses—feeding, cleaning stalls, longeing, turnout/no turnout.
- The veterinarian's name and phone number and if he or she knows I'm going to be there. Also include dog and cat vet information.
- If I have authorization to contact the veterinarian if something happens. Do I need to know how to pay for this?
- What horses get turned out and when, where, and with whom.
- The farrier's name and phone number.
- If I'm expected to stay on the property 24/7. Is it okay if I'm gone during the day?
- If I should contact the owners in case of an emergency. Clarify what constitutes a "real" emergency and their contact info during the trip.
- All contact numbers, including those for neighbors, in one place.
- If there are boarders, contact information as well as special instructions for those horses.
- The house address in writing, posted both in the house and in the barn, in case I need to relay it to emergency professionals.
- Enough (human) food on hand for at least a few meals. I can shop for myself after I get the routine figured out.
- If there's a grocery store, gas station, restaurants close by.
- If I'm expected to perform household tasks such as vacuuming, changing the bedding, etc.
- If I'm responsible for getting the mail and taking out the trash, or if those services have been held.—*Alayne Blickle*

regularly and sweep mats before feeding," adding that she also chooses a caretaker who'd know if a horse is colicking or needs veterinary assistance.

In Case of Emergency

Rebecca Gimenez, PhD, published the first textbook on technical large animal emergency rescue (TLAER) in 2008. She teaches TLAER techniques across the United States and internationally. Because Gimenez is a Georgia horse- and landowner who travels extensively for work, she knows how to set things up to avoid potential issues or emergencies while she's gone.

She also ensures the barn is stocked with plenty of grain, supplements, medications, and hay or forage for the caretaker to use. "They also have one of my credit cards to use to purchase anything in an emergency, such as fencing supplies, medical supplies, veterinary care, and feed or hay if needed. Sometimes I am out of town for four to six weeks, so they need to be flexible to be able to take care of any challenge without having to attempt to contact me."

Be sure your caretakers have quick access to resources and professionals. "My caretaker has the cell phone number to my veterinarian, so that they can be reached night or day," she says. "They have the key to my spare truck, which is always left hitched to my horse trailer, facing down the driveway, with fuel in the vehicle and registration in the console. If there is a medical emergency or they need to evacuate animals, and they only need to load the horses to leave—it is ready to go.

"For medical emergencies I have first-aid supplies all in one place—with emergency medications in the refrigerator, as well," Gimenez adds.

Take-Home Message

"When we leave on vacation, we are willing to accept that whatever happens will happen and we will deal with it," says Nevin. "When you are leaving horses behind and one ends up injured or lame, you can't blame your caretaker; you just have to realize that horses can do a crazy thing when I'm there, or they could do it when I'm 5,000 miles away."