

Excerpt from *Finding Community: How to be a Great Guest*

Don't Bring Fido

While a few communities do welcome visitors' pets, most ask you to leave them at home. Why would a community insist that we leave Fluffy, Fido, Whiskers, or Rascal at home when visiting their community? Especially since Fluffy, Fido, et. al. are far more loyal, smart, clean, and affectionate than many humans we know?

The don't-bring-pets rule is not personal, and communities are not animal-haters. In some cases, it's because the community already has dogs and cats, and they don't want to upset the balance of power, start a fur-war, or end up with a spontaneous, adventurous dog pack that hunts. In other cases, the community doesn't have dogs and cats (or just a well-managed few), in order not to frighten away or kill wildlife. Other times it's simply that the group has learned through experience that it's demanding enough to host visitors, not to mention the visitors' small friends who might bark, yowl, pounce, scratch, bite, pee, or defecate where the community least wants it.

Sometimes leaving your dog or cat at home is not possible, however. If you have no choice but to bring your dog or cat on your journey and the community says Yes, keep your animal in a pen, dog run, or vehicle. (And please don't assume that your dog will be considered well-behaved by other people's standards.)

—From Chapter 16: "Planning Your Visits"

Asking Questions:

A golden rule of community visits is "asking to ask." The community is the group's home, and often also their workplace, and they might have other things on their minds besides hosting you. Before asking your list of questions while someone is pouring their first cup of morning coffee, ease into conversation by saying something like, "Would this be a good time to ask you a question about your pet policy?" This way you give the person a graceful way to say no thanks if it is not a good time, or if the person doesn't want to be a community spokesperson right then. You can apply this approach many ways:

"Is this a good time to ask you a question about the community?"

"Can you tell me how I could find out more about X?"

"Is there someone here I could ask about X?"

"Is there a time when I could meet with you to learn about X?"

"Would this be a good time to visit so I could ask you about X?"

All of these ways of "asking to ask" demonstrate that you're respecting the person's time and energy, and gives him or her space to say, "No, not now," or "Later," etc. And it gives *you* a reputation in the community for being a considerate and respectful guest.

Don't be offended if the honest answer is no when you ask if you might speak with someone. The person is paying you the courtesy of being real with you. You could always reply, "OK, thanks. Would you tell me when a better time might be?"

If you're visiting for several days or longer, don't ask all your questions on the first day. Let yourself sink into the experience for awhile.

Leave a little quiet space in-between your questions, instead of asking them one on top of the other. Be sensitive as to whether the other person seems open to answering more. We once had a community visitor whose rather intense presence tended to irritate people, even though he seemed bright, well-meaning, and always willing to help. Community members took him aside various times and tried explain that something about his way of approaching them didn't feel good, as if his energy was too penetrating.

"The real secret is to make personal connections," advises community activist Geoph Kozeny in his article about visiting communities, "Red Carpets and Slammed Doors" (*Communities Directory*, 2005). "Let people see that you're not an information sponge, but an interesting person who is sensitive to their needs: someone who wants to contribute and help but who isn't pushy about it."

Work times are excellent opportunities to ask questions. Helping someone wash dishes, peel potatoes, or weed the garden can also be great times to ask questions about the community, if the person is willing to do so.

—From Chapter 18: "How to Be a Great Guest (And Make the Most of Your Experience)"

"Did You Hear About the Visitor Who . . . ?"

Treats the community like a tourist attraction or amusement park.

. . . "A mistake to be avoided is treating communities like a sort of Disney World, put there for the interest of the public," cautions Kat Kinkade. "For the most part, intentional communities are not showcases, are not kept up to impress outsiders, and are not particularly interested in being looked at by casual tourists." (*Communities Directory*, 1995.)

. . . Some people haven't gotten the message, and still think community members are some form of interesting species to be gawked at, commented on, and photographed like pandas in the zoo. For example: In order to share the benefits of cohousing with others, regional cohousing networks often organize bus tours in which people can visit several cohousing communities in one day. "At two different communities where I lived," notes Betsy Morris of East Bay Cohousing Network, "visitors from the tour began videotaping the residents and the buildings without checking with anyone first. I understand that people want to take pictures. But they should ask permission of anyone they want to photograph, especially with videotape, as well as ask general permission of the community host, in case the community has a policy in place about photos." It made many of the community residents quite uncomfortable that people would just step off a bus and start videotaping them without even speaking to anyone. "We are not tourist attractions!" Betsy says. "Please treat us as you would wish to be treated—or even better!"

—From Chapter 18: "How to Be a Great Guest (And Make the Most of Your Experience)"