

**TEST DR IV E HEADS AND TAILS**

**an express reporter takes the wheel and drives off on to roads he or she has not taken before RUTUJA WAKANKAR turns up as a volunteer at a dog hostel and gets a warm welcome**



Let me set the record straight, "I love dogs." Having over eight edgy, homesick canines on your hands can get a little nerve wracking though. But if you are trying to be a caretaker at a dog's hostel, you have to learn to keep your calm.

"Do you love dogs? That's the only criteria I look for in a prospective caretaker," asked Shalakha Mundada, owner of the dog hostel (she likes to be called a pet sitter). I replied in the affirmative, and here I was with over

a dozen dog eyes looking back at me at the sprawling farmhouse situated ahead of Mann village, 30 kilometres off Pune. Shalakha greeted me with a smile.

"You've reached exactly on time. It is time for a walk for the doggies.

Come on, help me get them out of the kennel one by one," she said. I pulled up my sleeves and went inside the kennel. I had never seen such a huge kennel before- it could easily house eight dogs with a room for each. "It's important to maintain the dog's lifestyle when its owners leave him/her at our place. They are used to a particular diet and timings, which we have to keep up to," she explained. I nodded in agreement.

"Please read the chart for the names and the breeds and the food which is to be given," I was further ordered.

Soon I was struggling with a bowl of chicken soup and chapattis in one hand for Jiva (a golden Labrador) and pedigree [dog food](#) for Spiky (a black Labrador). Just as I had got it all together Spiky lunged for the bowl and it slipped from my hand. I did land in a soup too early in the day. But Shalakha was unruffled. "Don't worry, I have some more soup and chapattis in the kitchen I will get it."

We could not let the doggies go hungry because of my clumsiness.

Especially not when the owners have dished out Rs 250 a day for their [pets](#) to be taken care of. But it is not about the money. Shalaka runs the place out of her love for the four-legged creatures. Not only does she studiously maintain all the records of their health and hygiene, each of them goes out with a health certificate by a [veterinary](#). Most people leave their pets at her hostel, as they go out on a family vacation where they can't take their dogs along. So needless to say, summer vacation is peak business time for Shalakha.

Back to the doggie chores, Mr Ferocious (a mixed breed) refused to get out of his kennel.

At the other end, four [Pomeranians](#) that I had quickly nicknamed Miss Coy, Mr Docile, Mr Cry baby and Miss Hottie refused to pay any attention to me and continued to eat their grub interspersing the bites with some energetic barks.

We later took them for a post dinner walk. Shalakha then sat me down to talk to each one of them. "It is important to make them feel at home.

All these doggies are family people, they need personal care and attention," she explained.

That over, it was time for each dog to go to its kennel, snuggle and sleep or play, while Shalaka made preparations for the next day. As I walked out, Mr Docile looked up and wagged his tail even as Mr Ferocious replaced his growls with gentle grunts. I think I had made some friends here. "Woof!" to that. ?