

# mummy's little helpers

Au pairs are becoming the latest essential accessory for busy Kiwi families wanting to restore a little sanity to their lives

STORY ANKE RICHTER

**T**he day that Monique was due to arrive from Germany and change our lives, no one came. The last passengers passed through the sliding doors at Christchurch airport and my husband Frank began checking with the airline, worried she may have got lost on the stopover in Dubai.

Only the next day did we learn that this first-time traveller to another time zone had simply got her dates wrong. Luckily, this wasn't a bad omen – just a turbulent start to one of the best things that has ever happened to our family.

A nanny who could cook, clean and do the school runs sounded like the ultimate to me – an über Mary Poppins with exotic recipes from her home country up her sleeve and the spirit of a fun, young adult instead of starched-apron stuffiness. The cliché became a running joke between Frank and me after we had Jasper: “A second child? Only if we can afford an au pair!”

Frank works as a urological surgeon with many on-call hours; I freelance as a foreign correspondent and often have to sit at the computer late at night to meet overseas deadlines. There never seems to be enough time – especially not for domestic chores.

But our second child, Quinn, was four before we broached the subject again last year. Until then our lives had been too transient to include an au pair. I'd also seen the problems some friends in Europe had run into with girls from rural Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Russia. Some became sad and moody, another discovered the nightlife and had to be woken every morning still half drunk and was pregnant within three months.

Of course there are just as many horror stories >



German au pair Monique Witthoef (left) has been a godsend to Anke, 42, and her sons Jasper, nine, and Quinn, five.



## how to find the perfect au pair

- ✘ Don't expect to find someone who can come over and start work overnight. Make enquiries at least three months ahead.
- ✘ Invest time in the selection process. You might find an au pair through the internet, but a good agency will run thorough checks and provide a swift replacement if your first choice doesn't work out.
- ✘ Take a close look at the photographs. "Pictures do tell a story," says Suzanne MacKay, a member of the International Au Pair Association (IAPA) in the UK. "I want to see that they are smiling, that they look clean and tidy. I also want a selection taken at different times. Several photographs of a girl wearing the same clothes and cuddling the same child smack of a posed session."
- ✘ On application forms, look for those who have ticked all or most of the boxes (such as, can you swim, ride a bicycle, supervise homework?). "The more positive and open, the easier she will be to live with."
- ✘ Common ground is more important than age. "If she is an only child from a quiet, ordered home and yours is a chaotic household with five children, she probably won't fit in."
- ✘ Talk on the phone before making your final decision. "If she doesn't sound right, walk away," says Suzanne.
- ✘ Be realistic about what you are offering. Send photos of your house and the room she will be staying in so that she knows what to expect.
- ✘ Spell out the house rules – for example, no chatting on the phone or playing on the computer while minding the children.

## TRENDS

about hosts from hell who thrive on a modernised form of slavery – being hit on by the ‘host dad’ included.

The nanny-vixen wasn't my main concern, though – it was having to give up my privacy. The main part of the salary package is accommodation. An au pair has come to live with, not just work for, a family. For her, it's all about experiencing a foreign country; almost like an OE with shelter and meals, plus pocket money and the occasional family holiday thrown in.

The constant presence that makes an au pair so rewarding must also have a downside, I worried. What if you want to walk around in the nude? Don't feel like making small talk? Have an argument?

But all those doubts vanished after Monique arrived. Moni, as we came to call her within hours, is 29 but looks 20 and has worked for years as a professional caretaker of children. When we talked on the phone before she came, she told me that she likes to make kids happy. “I love the shine in their eyes,” she'd said.

We got around the privacy issue by providing her with a renovated railway carriage on our property. When she's with us, we enjoy her peaceful company. Her almost angelic, positive nature, and her willingness to help around the house, hasn't changed from day one.

The fact that her culinary skills are limited to opening cans or boiling water is fine because Moni is the perfect kitchen hand. She's a fantastic cleaner, puts pots away and chops the veges. The lack of mess has renewed my passion for cooking. Our boys seem to be just as happy, especially Quinn, who loves Moni to bits. As I write, he's off with her at the playground. When they return, ➤

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Play time for Monique with Jasper, left, and Quinn.



Monique is a great help to Anke in the kitchen.

**pearl white, 34, an au pair from Hungary, has just finished working for an Auckland family after they moved to Taupo, and hopes to find more work here.**

“I was a travel consultant in Budapest. It wasn't just love for children or housework that led me to be an au pair. It was the desire to travel and learn English.

“When I came to New Zealand I looked after two girls who were eight and 12, in an isolated part of Auckland. There were more cars than people, and buses rarely came.

“The girls were angels in the first week and the housework was easy. But girls are girls everywhere in the world, and so there was screaming and arguments. The main food was chips, and my best friend there was the cat.

“After a trip to the South Island I realised how beautiful this amazing country is, with lots of lovely, friendly people.

“When I arrived back in Auckland, I found another family who live on the North Shore. The



house overlooks the ocean, and the work in the kitchen became a pleasure with this splendid view.

“The girl, who's 10, was friendly from the first moment. One day I realised how lucky I was – my work consisted of playing with her, riding to the beach on our bikes, swimming in the ocean, having pillow fights, dancing, watching TV and making my favourite meals. She always liked all of them.”

## TRENDS

I will make tea and Moni will fold the washing and weed the garden, leaving me more time to enjoy my work and my children.

This might sound one-sided, but if Moni was a 'WWOOF-er' (Willing Worker on Organic Farms), as a lot of her peers are, her working hours would be the same or more. As an au pair, she gets pocket money and her own car. It seems to work both ways. I'm more relaxed and don't feel like I'm constantly running out of time any more. But most of all Moni has given me the freedom to go where my work takes me.

Two friends who watched my transformation desperately raised their hands for the next au pair to come their way. Through Nelson agent Birte Feldmann of Au-Pair 4 Kiwi Kids, both found German au pairs. In each case, it's worked well, and Moni and the other girls have formed a little social group in Sumner.

I dread the day when Moni's visa expires. She's become a friend. And as for arguing in front of her, of course we don't. But then, you shouldn't fight in front of your kids, either. Which goes to show that an au pair can even turn you into a better parent. ☑

## ☞ They also understand that I need free time outside the family, with my friends ☞

### facing the facts

An au pair is entitled to her own room, meals and pocket money, which ranges from \$70-\$200 per week. On average, a family will pay \$100-\$150 for 30-35 hours per week (including babysitting at night), depending on the agency and the arrangement. (Note that if an au pair works for more than 30 hours per week, the host has to register as an employer and pay her tax.) New Zealand does not have an official au pair programme but offers Working Holiday Visa arrangements for young people aged between 18 and 30 from Canada, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and the UK. They can stay for up to a year and must have enough funds for a return ticket.

**where to find an au pair** Most agencies, like The Kiwi Connection ([www.kiwiaupair.com](http://www.kiwiaupair.com)) or Aupair Connect ([www.aupairconnect.com](http://www.aupairconnect.com)) match applicants and families through the internet or their overseas agents. There is a finding fee for the host. Au-Pair 4 Kiwi Kids, a new agency for au pairs from Germany, does not charge the host. The agent interviews every girl in her home country, and each host family. Visit [www.aupair4kiwikids.co.nz](http://www.aupair4kiwikids.co.nz) or ph 027 338 2764.



Annie, left, gives a lesson in French baking to the Lahatte children (from left) Thomas, Henry and Alice.

### annie marseault, 23, from France lives with the Lahatte family in Auckland looking after Thomas, 13, Alice, 10, and Henry, seven.

"I was an au pair last year in Ireland and had such a great experience that I decided to do it again. New Zealand seemed so beautiful – how could I resist?"

"I came to live with a family in Devonport. The mother had just had a baby and followed me around constantly. It became very tense, we had an argument and she kicked me out after only two weeks. Luckily the au pair agency found me a lovely family outside of Whangarei as a replacement.

"I really enjoyed the traditional 'under the sun, barbecue, pavlova Christmas' with them but it was too rural and quiet there, so after two months I asked to be transferred. Now I am living in Auckland with a teacher, a lawyer and their three children.

"It's easy for me because they are quite independent, they trust me, feel happy to leave their children alone with me and know they can ask me for help at any time. They all go to school so I am free in the morning once I have done my share of housework. In the afternoon, they all have activities, but we often cook and bake together. I love making pikelets for them. They even gave me an *Edmonds Cookery Book* for my birthday.

"They also understand that I need free time outside the family, with my friends. I've met a few other au pairs in the area and we enjoy going out in the weekend or shopping in the morning.

"Being an au pair is a very enriching experience. I have learned a lot from my adventures here and I know that I will go back home a stronger and more confident person."