

Home Sweet Home: Love it and Leave it

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The newly minted American Foreign Service officer can count on three things in his or her future: exciting and gratifying postings to foreign cities, obligatory returns for the career-building tours in Washington, and the joys and pangs of home-ownership in the DC area. Maybe you put the last bit off for a while, but sooner or later you buy.

Overseas, you have a ball, living in posh government-owned or rented housing, getting spoiled by GSO, paying \$50 a month for a gardener and a cook. But then, inevitably ... capital punishment. You come to Washington for two, three, five years—*on the economy*. Where will you live? What prices! And no support! When you do close on that house or condo, you are on your own, a slave to its constant demands. But it is your single biggest investment, so you fill it with fervent love, jealous devotion, and exotic *objets*. You pamper walls and woodwork, scour the gutters, mulch the beds, revitalize dreary kitchen and baths with obsessive attention, originality and taste.

What happens, then, when the next foreign post beckons and—perforce—you surrender your cherished *demeure* to the kindness of strangers? First, of course, you contract a professional property management firm, your own private GSO, which in an ideal world will find reliable renters, collect market rent, keep the books, and watch over the well-being of your property.

But a good manager can also help at the outset, drawing on years of experience to guide you through crucial decisions you must take before you go to market, to make your home as attractive as possible to potential tenants and to insure against ballooning expenses down the road. A specialist management firm will have a sizeable portfolio and a good roster of contractors and pass volume discounts on to you. It will also be flexible enough to work with your own trusted handyman or the neighborhood teenager who mows lawns.

You may need only a lick of paint, a good cleaning, and a bit of sprucing up, but early action or planning in these six crucial areas can help bring maximum return and peace of mind.

Cleaning

It sounds utopian. How can you have a sparkling house free of clutter when you're in the midst of an international move? Actually, anything you can do to make the house appear more spacious and inviting helps marketability. Turn on lights, scatter potpourri, unclutter surfaces, and pack up or clear away excess Arabian coffee pots, West African masks, and Chinese screens.

Painting

If the walls are scuffed or graying, or if every room displays a previous owner's taste for bold colors or funky wallpaper, now is the time to commit to a cosmetic makeover. Get rid of paper. Paint neutral—light beige or off-white, with semi-gloss white for wooden moldings and doors. All this may wait till you vacate, but at least let renters know your plans.

Kitchen and Baths

Here you can make a difference before you market. Tenants want kitchens as up-to-date as possible, and bathrooms can benefit from some simple improvements. Consider painting dark cabinets white, replacing vinyl flooring with ceramic tile, changing scorched or chipped formica counters, changing knobs and handles. In bathrooms, broken tiles or torn vinyl require overhauling, blackened corners regROUTED or recaulked. It's easy to change a shower curtain or toilet seat, but a sink that's chipped or stained can sink a deal. If the new vanity or mirror won't go in till later, show a picture of what you are getting.

Windows

Make sure all windows open and close easily. Screens should be in place and free of holes or tears. Renters expect window treatments, and it's better if you provide them than let tenants do it. Plan to leave curtains unless they are irreplaceable heirlooms.

Flooring

Old, worn, dark, or multi-colored carpeting is a huge deterrent. Of course, you will have carpeting professionally cleaned, but if it's not going to look new, plan to replace it—again, neutral, light beige is best. And let your manager advise on the best quality and padding for extended life. If you can remove old carpet and shine up hardwood floors underneath, way better.

Exterior

For curb appeal, mulch, mow, weed and trim shrubbery. In spring, plant a few annuals for color. See to gutters and downspouts. Clear away climbing ivy. Consider resealing the drive or power-washing decks and siding if you see gray or greenish film.

Of course, the more you can do yourself before the sign goes in the yard, the more you save and the quicker you can take the sign down. But the main thing is to be resigned to the realities of renting in a competitive market and resolve to spend what it takes now to save on vacancy and maintenance later. A property manager can arrange and supervise all of this and more, before you pack out and after the wheels are up.