

MatchPig

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THE BACKGROUND STORY

MatchPig is effectively a guinea pig introduction agency. Either to find a companion for a bereaved guinea pig or to try and re-introduce guinea pigs which may be fighting.

Guinea pigs are colony animals and should not be kept alone as they are happiest living with at least one of their own kind. Most owners start out with a pair but are often left not knowing what to do when one of them dies. Unfortunately it isn't as simple as just adding another guinea pig to the hutch and leaving them to it as they will undoubtedly fight which could lead to injuries requiring veterinary care to stitch wounds and/or deal with resulting abscesses.

This is where MatchPig helps.

Based in Eastry, near Sandwich in Kent, MatchPig is aligned with April Lodge Guinea Pig Rescue which is a charity set up in 2004 for rescuing and re homing guinea pigs. Val Savage is a Founder of both April Lodge Guinea Pig Rescue and MatchPig. Having qualified at The Cambridge Cavy Trust in courses which focused predominantly on ailments and treatment guides, Val subsequently developed a particular interest in guinea pig idiosyncrasies, psyche, body language, vocal sounds and their meanings. She has almost 20 years experience with guinea pigs, is a Rodent Health Advisor and Cavy (guinea pig) Behaviourist.

MatchPig was established in 2016 because of the increase in enquiries the charity received from bereaved guinea pig owners who wanted to find and introduce a new companion for their lone guinea pig. Matching guinea pigs requires space, personal attention and time whilst the bonding takes place. This is not viable for the charity which relies on volunteers to care for, clean, feed and medicate between 50 and 80 guinea pigs every day.

MatchPig is able to offer this service away from the charity's activities in a separate environment, yet also help find new homes for the many unwanted single guinea pigs which get handed over to the charity.

Over the years Val has paired hundreds of guinea pigs so the leap to apply this expertise for private clients became obvious. No match is bomb proof and there is no one solution or method to fit all introductions but the pairing success rate currently stands at 95%.

Since MatchPig started, we have conducted pairings with over 30 guinea pigs. Many people will tell you that boars cannot be paired to live together harmoniously once past the baby stage. This is not true. Ironically, most of our matchings have been between boars. Only two of these pairings have been unsuccessful. But that means a lot of lonely guinea pigs have found new friends.



"A match made in heaven - Just to let you know - day 3 and they are getting on really well. So pleased for them. Big thank you to both you and Val for making this happen!! It's lovely to see them together".

FAQ

How long will an introduction take?

The average is nine days but it can take twice that long. Sometimes it can be done in a week but rushing an introduction can be detrimental to the objective and it must be done in stages. We don't rush the guinea pigs, even if their owners are on a schedule!

Does the age and gender of the guinea pigs make a difference to how long it takes?

One may expect the pairing of boars to take longer than sows but that's not necessarily the case. We have had some almost instantly successful boar matches and some surprisingly difficult hormonal sows. At the end of the day it comes down to individual temperament.

Why can't I adopt a guinea pig and do this introduction myself?

There is no text book approach to introductions so we can't give you a point by point guide. We must also ensure that any guinea pig adopted from the charity doesn't come to any harm through inexperienced attempts. We often receive calls from people saying they tried a matching themselves but usually they abandoned the introduction half way through because it was too upsetting or they couldn't read the behaviour so ended up with expensive vet bills to treat wounds. Neither of these scenarios is fair on the guinea pigs. We always put their wellbeing first!

Where does the introduction take place?

In Val Savage's own home, in separate rooms with outside time in an enclosed run in her garden.

Can I visit during an introduction?

Yes of course, by appointment.

Can I be updated as the introduction progresses?

Yes, we always endeavour to take photographs at key moments. These can either be emailed or texted to you. And you can always contact us by email, phone or text for an update too.

What if my guinea pig sustains an injury during the introduction?

Everything is done to avoid this situation because the guinea pigs are closely watched and monitored and we understand when they are simply establishing the hierarchy or really 'going for the kill!' Superficial injuries from bites and nips can be dealt with on site. Injuries needing veterinary attention will be your responsibility but to date this scenario has not been an issue.

What is the success rate?

Currently our matching rate stands at 95%. But no match is bombproof and a lot will depend on the care from you once the guinea pigs leave us and the bonding continues. This care will be discussed in depth with you post introduction.

If I need advice once I get the guinea pigs home can I get in touch?

Of course, we would always rather offer advice and answer queries than have the pairing not continue. We provide in-depth After Care and What to Expect At Home notes although most of our MatchPig clients follow up with us for advice in the first couple of weeks whilst the guinea pigs continue to settle and we are more than happy to advise until things have quietened down.

Why is there a charge for boarding the charity's guinea pig?

Because the charity pig is temporarily taken out of the charity's care into MatchPig's care during the introduction, MatchPig pays for the hay, food, veg (not to mention heating and lighting) for both guinea pigs and gives them both the one to one attention which is required during an intro.

THE PROCEDURE

Pre introduction

It is important that you follow our dietary guidelines with your guinea pig before they are brought in so as to avoid any tummy upset or change when they stay with us during the introduction.

On arrival, the guinea pig(s) will need a health check as any abnormalities could be detrimental to an introduction. This includes a microscopic slide to check for external parasites, skin check for fungal abnormalities or mange; weight, eyes, ears, nose, genitalia, legs, feet, heart, respiration, routine dental and a full nail clip. Each guinea pig may need a bath with a suitable shampoo prior to their first proper meeting, or a course of baths if parasites are found. This will be assessed at the health check but it can also be particularly useful with boars so they are neutral smelling when they first start to interact.

During the introduction

Accommodation:

The pairing is always conducted in large (150cm x 90cm) open top, divided runs. This is their home for most of the introduction and provides them with space to get away from each other, yet they can also interact on their own terms. Only when we are happy with the pairing would we consider transferring them to smaller accommodation if it reflects what they will finally go home to.

Bedding:

We use best quality, farm hay on newspaper and NO woodshavings or sawdust as both can be detrimental to respiration, coat, feet, eyes and genitals.

Exercise:

This is particularly important during introductions. Well exercised guinea pigs will behave better during the introduction than bored, confined ones. Part of the introduction will be conducted in an outside grass run (weather permitting). We try to ensure they go out daily for a few hours at least. When they cannot go out into a grass run, supplementary grass is given. Paper bags stuffed with hay, toilet roll and kitchen roll centres, cardboard boxes etc are cheap ways of providing the guinea pig with entertainment. Other options we use are tunnels, chew-toys, balls, bells, edible grass houses, climbing toys etc.

This mental and physical exercise is also particularly important with fighting guinea pigs and is useful as a distraction.

Diet:

80% of their diet is farm fresh hay. They will also be given a balanced diet of low calcium veg. It consists of a small handful of four small chopped items once daily in the morning so it's not sitting in their gut all night.

We provide dry feed which does NOT contain chemical colourants which can cause catastrophic rises in their blood sugar levels.

Water bottles and spouts are cleaned and refreshed daily and we often use low calcium bottled water for older guinea pigs or those with a history of bladder stones.

Post introduction

This part is possibly the most critical. It will take your matched pair 6 to 8 weeks plus to settle down and we have seen many cases where guinea pigs happy in our care, returned home where they were expected to be 'normal' almost immediately and unfortunately the stress of not being allowed to fully settle resulted in a breakdown (and in one case, physical injury requiring expensive veterinary treatment).

What you need to do

We will provide an After Care sheet and a What To Expect guide. In the meantime, you will need to completely clean any cage, hutch, enclosure, cuddle sacks, arches, toys, fleeces etc so the smell is neutral when the guinea pigs return home. This also applies to any area of the house where the resident guinea pig may have played.

CASE STUDIES

CASE 1: Hob Nob & Chip (companion introduction)

Genders: Boars
Ages: 4 & 2
Duration: 7 days

Their history: Both Hob Nob (cream crested) and Chip (black fox) were well cared for and handled but both were recently bereaved. Hob Nob had become withdrawn and Chip was thought to be a good potential match, even though his true age was only revealed part way through the introduction and he turned out to be a youngster.



The Introduction: This was a lovely introduction. Initially Chip was the more excitable of the two and was keen to see who was on the other side of the divider. Hob Nob was more interested in eating hay and was much easier going. There were very little signs of aggression between them so the divider could be removed after just a few days.

The Outcome: Chip absolutely adores Hob Nob and follows him everywhere now. He even stands guard over Hob Nob whilst he sleeps. They became inseparable very quickly.

CASE 2: Carla & Butter (companion introduction)

Genders: Sows
Ages: 5 & 6
Duration: 10 days

Their history: Both were rescued from an animal hoarder. Butter (cream, brown crested) was living alone but had previously had a companion we think. Carla (black and white) was living in an almost feral group of 6 girls where she was the largest and the bully. Both Butter and Carla had skin and lice problems which had to be sorted first before they could be introduced.



The Introduction: As far as sows go, this was an aggressive pairing. We suspect Carla was hormonal anyway which would have affected her mood but she displayed very aggressively towards Butter and attacked her immediately the divider was removed. It is unusual for sows not to get along and as no blood was drawn and there were no wounds, they were allowed to continue the pairing ritual to establish who would be dominant. The aggression by Carla continued for approx 10 hours almost relentlessly but it was the last few hours which proved to be critical in this pairing when Butter turned the tables and went on the attack. She chased Carla repeatedly. Finally Carla lay down flat in the corner and whistled her submission. Despite initial suggestions that Carla would be the boss because she was larger, more aggressive and used to being dominant in a feral colony, Butter established herself as the boss pig.

The Outcome: It took 2 months for them to settle together. They will probably never be cuddle chums, but they rub along well and it is nice to see these old ladies popcorning in the outside run together.

CASE 3: Bailey & Teddy (re-introduction)

Genders: Boars
Ages: 4 & 4
Duration: 7 days



Their history: Bailey and Teddy had been happy once but had recently started fighting after the 3rd guinea pig of the group died. Their owner had tried to reintroduce them but with no success and their fighting had resulted in bloody injuries.

The Introduction: We had to ask a lot of questions to get the root of the problem. It wasn't that they hated each other, it was more a case that they needed room to expend energy which they hadn't been able to do in their existing accommodation so we had to address this issue before they could be reintroduced gradually - as if starting life from scratch. Thereafter they needed lots more stimulation to keep them cohabiting happily when they returned home.

The Outcome: On our advice, Bailey and Teddy's owners bought a new 9ft long cage to allow these two room to forage amongst the hay on one level as they would do naturally. Because they can get away into their own corner when they want some peace, they actually like each other now.

CASE 4: Mouse & Doris (companion introduction)

Genders: Sows
Ages: 5
Duration: 9 days



Their history: Both recently bereaved, these old ladies were well used to living with another guinea pig. In Mouse's case, she had lived all her life with her 3 sisters in an old chicken coop before she came to the charity. Her sisters had died so she was suddenly alone and became very quiet. Doris had also had a friend and become withdrawn since her death.

The Introduction: When Doris came in for her health check it was obvious she was hormonal with ovarian cysts. We knew from experience this would affect her behaviour during any introduction and could affect the outcome. On our advice, Doris was given a hormone injection (HRT for guinea pigs!) by our vet and we proceeded cautiously with the introduction.

The Outcome: The hormone injection worked wonders and calmed Doris, so we could assess her true personality. Doris was more highly strung but Mouse was patient with her and didn't react whilst she was hormonal. They became a happy pair - even coming on holiday to the charity for boarding. Doris subsequently had another two hormone injections which continued the good work and ensured their friendship would continue.

And some of our other matches made in heaven.....

- ♥ Hugo and Pepsi (boar to boar)
- ♥ Bilbo and Popcorn (boar to boar)
- ♥ Daisy and Hunky Dory (sow to neutered boar)
- ♥ Polo and Ocean (boar to boar)
- ♥ Chewie and Blaze (boar to boar)
- ♥ Elvis and Barlo (boar to boar)
- ♥ Pie and Pumpkin (boar to boar)
- ♥ Winnie, Pumpkin and Brian (2 x sows to neutered boar)
- ♥ Chiquitita and Blue (sow to neutered boar)
- ♥ Marnie and Pumpkin (sow to sow)

A FINAL WORD FROM ONE OF OUR CLIENTS



"The boys are doing marvellously and we couldn't be more thrilled with them.

As far as post intro we definitely learned a few lessons the first of which was that you and Val know your stuff so listen carefully!

The first few days were quite anxious watching every move and listening out for teeth chattering but because you had chosen so well for us, all we had was lots of grumbling some of which was at each other but most of it was at us or the cats for making too much noise. It was difficult not to overreact when there was any nose bumping but they were just testing boundaries and being boys.

They need definitely a 6ft run and outdoor time is essential; we were very sceptical that such small animals needed to run off energy but having seen them playing tag in the garden, running through and around their tunnel, they certainly do! And the large indoor run allows them their own space and room to eat and explore.

They also get cuddles every evening and we swap them between us during the evening so there's no favouritism as Chewie would become jealous.

We've really only had one issue and that was Blaze (now Pickle) becoming very territorial over the hay house and not allowing Chewie into it, so we've removed it as Chewie was becoming aggressive and very nippy over it. They do have a bedding area/nest box which is large enough for both of them.

We feel the main piece of advice we could give is not to turn either pig into a villain when they act up, as there will be a fairly straight forward cause for it as they both adapt to a new pig.

Above all though the real joy has been listening to Chewie chatting away and getting a response and to see him running around and not just sitting on his shelf looking bored. But also to see Pickle, who was really shy and nervous, eating out of our hands, enjoying his cuddles and talking whenever he can get a word in, is amazing. He's now the easiest of the two to catch!

We're so pleased we found you on the April Lodge website"

FEES

Admission healthcheck	£6 per guinea pig (no charge for charity guinea pig/s)
Pre-intro bath (if deemed necessary)	£6 per guinea pig
Boarding for duration of introduction	£3 per guinea pig per day (incl charity guinea pig/s)
Companion guinea pig (if required)	£20 - but neutered boars are £55 which is a donation towards the cost of the charity's castration costs
Successful match fee	£20 (but no fees at all if a pairing is unsuccessful)