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YOUR MONEY

A Dog's Life, Upgraded

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Jean Beuning of the Top Dog Country Club, with some captivated guests at its heated swimming pool.

Credit: Ben Garvin for The New York Times

NEW GERMANY, Minn.

ON a sunny day in August, a half-dozen large dogs — mostly Labrador retrievers — bounded in and out of the swimming pool here at Top Dog Country Club. Others lounged on the artificial-turf lawn, or looked on with envy and vocal protests from “time out” pens on the edge of the play yard.

Overseeing the goings-on was a member of the care staff, who served as both instigator, throwing tennis balls and jumping into the pool, and mediator, banishing dogs to time out when they became too rambunctious.

When Top Dog’s owner, Jean Beuning, hired a contractor three years ago to install a tiled, in-ground, heated swimming pool for dogs, the builder initially told her that she was out of her mind, she said.

But Ms. Beuning had heard that kind of comment before, particularly in the fall of 2000 when she left her job as a regional vice president for ExecuStay by Marriott to open a dog kennel, which she describes as a “Club Med for dogs.”

Top Dog Country Club is emblematic of one of the most sweeping changes in the boarding kennel industry in decades, said James Krack, founder and executive director of the American Boarding Kennels Association, in Colorado Springs.

“Twenty years ago, the dog run was where the dog lived when he was in the kennel,” said Mr. Krack, who started the association 30 years ago and ran a kennel for 16 years. “Today a dog run is where he rests between activities.”

And the menu of diversions is growing longer and, some might say, more extravagant. Depending on the kennel — or hotel or spa or resort — a dog’s activities can include hiking, swimming, listening to music, watching television, dining on gourmet meals and getting a pedicure, complete with nail polish.

The kennels’ amenities are becoming more lavish as well. Heated tile floors and high-tech ventilation systems are de rigueur. In many cases, chain-link dog runs have given way to rooms — for marketing purposes, kennel owners refer to them as “bungalows,” “villas” and “suites” — that come with solid walls, windows and custom-made furnishings. And even as the prices for such pampering rise — in some instances well beyond \$100 a night — dog owners are lining up to give their pets what they view as the perfect vacation.

Kennels are not the only pet-related business that’s booming. The American Pet Products Manufacturers Association estimates that people will spend \$38.4 billion on their pets this year; that would mean an increase of \$2.1 billion, or 5.8 percent, over 2005. For services, like grooming and boarding, pet owners are expected to spend \$2.7 billion this year.

The increase is partly a result of rising pet ownership: about 63 percent of United States households now have pets, compared with 56 percent in 1988. But it is also an indication of the changing role of the pet in the family and growing emotional ties between owners and pets.

The trend “highlights the profound love that many of us have for our dogs,” said Patricia B. McConnell, author of “For the Love of a Dog: Understanding Emotion in You and Your Best Friend,” published this month by Ballantine Books.

That love “has not been critically examined as much as it deserves to be,” said Dr. McConnell, who has a doctorate in zoology. “It’s a biological phenomenon. Hurricane Katrina reminded us that people actually risk and sometimes choose to lose their life over their dog. That’s a biologically amazing fact.”

The luxury kennels reflect the complexity of the bond between humans and dogs, she said. “There’s actually one that just opened up in Madison — called Club Bow-Wow — that I would be just perfectly happy to stay in,” said Dr. McConnell, who teaches a course called “The Biology and Philosophy of Human-Animal Relationships,” at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

If a dog stays in the \$50-a-day “ambassador suite” at Club Bow-Wow, a staff member sleeps overnight in the room. Dogs that opt for the “presidential suite,” also \$50 a day, spend the day in the office of the center’s owner and manager, though they aren’t quite interns.

Other luxury kennels offer services from pedicures to parties for pets, charging as much as \$185 a night.

Of course, how much of this is for the dog’s benefit, as opposed to its owner’s, is open to debate. Corey Cohen, an animal-behavior consultant whose business, called A New Leash on Life, works

with dogs and horses in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, says that some services at luxury kennels are more meaningful to people than to pets. “Because it’s away from its owner, the dog is either going to be stressed or not stressed whether it’s in a regular old-fashioned kennel or a camp for dogs,” he said. “Any time there’s change, they’re stressed. From the owner’s perspective, they’re going to want to reduce their guilt.”

At Top Dog Country Club, on 42 acres about an hour’s drive west of Minneapolis, dogs check in at a hotel-style front desk in a lobby filled with photographs of dogs that are or have been part of Ms. Beuning’s family. The 5,000-square-foot building has 46 rooms spread over six bays.



At Top Dog Country Club, attendants lead pets through a full schedule of fun, including swimming and running, just steps from their luxury rooms.

Credit: Ben Garvin for The New York Times

The suites have heated concrete floors and textured walls topped with trellises and faux plants. “They’re harder to clean,” Ms. Beuning said of the walls, “but they give the dogs something a little more interesting to look at.”

Inside the suites are custom-made wrought-iron beds with orthopedic mattresses and tapestry covers. (And just like the beds in some hotels for humans, the dog beds can be bought for home use.)

Pampering is certainly part of the package. In the afternoon, when the dogs return to their suites from their daily activities, they get freshly baked biscuits. Baths and massages are available for an extra charge. And before lights-out, around 9 p.m., Ms. Beuning or one of her employees reads a bedtime story over the sound system. The stories, written by local schoolchildren, may tell of dogs “chasing kitty cats in their dreams,” she said.

But Ms. Beuning said she rejected some amenities that might be offered only to impress owners.

“The priority here is always about the dogs,” she said. So her center plays soothing music — classical, with a good helping of Frank Sinatra mixed in — but there are no televisions. Then again, she said, the dogs don’t need TV’s because they exercise so well during the day that they are ready to sleep at night.

Some dogs spend five or six hours a day in one of the three play yards that cover a total of 18,000 square feet, she said. They romp on artificial turf, chase one another and play with the 15 staff members. The supervised group play time, she said, is an important draw for her 4,000 customers who are willing to spend up to \$55 a night to board their dogs.

The notion of play time — having a kennel employee take a dog for a walk, throw it a Frisbee or groom it — goes back about 10 years, Mr. Krack said. It allowed kennel owners to increase their income without increasing the number of dog runs. A kennel that charged, say, \$10 a day for boarding could charge an additional \$5 for play time. If an owner wanted his dog to have two play times a day, the kennel could double its revenue.

“That service really was, I think, the start of this concept of socialization for boarding pets,” Mr. Krack said. At first, he added, dogs from different families were never allowed to mingle.

That, however, soon changed. Customers who were accustomed to taking their pets to dog parks began to expect more: community play. “The kennel operators began to realize that this is what their customers demanded, whether they were comfortable with it or not,” Mr. Krack said.

COMFORT has been the essential business challenge for Emerson Hughes since he became a kennel operator in 1972. When he opened the first of his two Holiday Barn Pet Resorts in the Richmond, Va., area, he was proud of its modern operations. From the beginning, though, customers would drop off their pets and make comments like, “I hate leaving my dog in a place like this.”

Initially insulted, Mr. Hughes said he learned that the comments were not criticisms of his kennel but reflections of the perception that boarding kennels were “doggie jails.”

“We were a necessity that the public had to tolerate,” he said.

For a customer flying off to spend a week on the beach in Tahiti, the thought of a precious pet’s incarceration could put a damper on the entire trip. Mr. Hughes said he knew that no matter how immaculate his kennel was and no matter how well he cared for the animals, the customer could still feel guilt.

“We were providing an institutional service that was just enough for the customer emotionally to get by,” Mr. Hughes said. “We would keep that dog and we wouldn’t let him escape. And they felt like that was enough. We had to learn to present an image that satisfied the owner’s needs, not just the pet’s needs.”

It’s important for owners to feel good about their pets’ stays, he said, adding with a laugh, because “I never could get these dogs to write checks.”

Mr. Hughes decided to convert the fear factor into a fun factor. In the 1970’s and early 80’s, he hired teenagers, mostly girls, to pet the dogs during holiday periods.

“We put them in candy-stripe jackets, and it was their job to walk down the rows and pet every pet that they could touch,” he said. “The public loved it, but we didn’t charge for it. I didn’t know any better.”

In the mid-1980’s, Mr. Hughes began to hire managers who had more business experience than dog-handling experience and encouraged his staff to try new things.

After adding activities for dogs, he said, “our animal health improved because these animals weren’t stuck in a pen all day — they had human contact.”

Now he offers community play and swimming, along with special events like turkey barbecues for Thanksgiving and weekly tailgate parties during college football season.



At Top Dog's front desk, Sue Bohlmann is surrounded by pictures of Ms. Beuning's dogs. In the large portrait is Kivi, a Shetland Sheepdog.

Credit: Ben Garvin for The New York Times

When customers are confident that their dogs are having fun, Mr. Hughes said, they can better enjoy their own vacations.

Even pet owners who choose just the basic boarding package seem more confident that their dogs are getting good care.

Where it will stop is anyone's guess, said Mr. Krack of the boarding kennel association. "You can always do more," he said. And unlimited fun appears to be leashed to unlimited revenue enhancers.

At Mazzu's Canine and Feline Hotel in Philadelphia, Jenee Mazzu offers a luxury pet hotel for "the discriminating pet owner." A night in a suite costs \$155 to \$185, depending on the size of the room. (The largest is 7 feet by 7 feet.)

The daily rate includes the "personal suite, platform bed, comforter, toys, TV/DVD, two walks, one 40-minute jaunt to the dog park, feedings, unlimited bottled water, climate-controlled facility, daily maid service, 24-hour on-site care," the Mazzu's Web site says. For an additional \$25, Mazzu's will serve the dog a filet mignon dinner.

The hotel can accommodate up to seven dogs, Ms. Mazzu said, and since it opened about eight months ago, occupancy has averaged about three dogs a day.

The response to the hotel runs to the extremes, she said. "Either people say, 'Thank God you started this company,' or, 'This is crazy,'" Ms. Mazzu said. "There's not a lukewarm response."

One man kept his Doberman at the hotel for nine days, she said, and ordered a filet for it every other day.

A DOG'S experience in a boarding kennel depends largely on the dog's personality, said Mr. Cohen, the pet behaviorist. "People are trying to push dogs into Stepford dogs," he said, noting that many dogs enjoy socializing with other dogs but that some do not. "I think they're individuals."

Beyond being companions, dogs serve different purposes for different owners, Mr. Cohen said. In some cases, a dog can be a surrogate child. In others, the dog is a source of entertainment. And it is important for owners to be aware of the function the dog is being asked to fulfill.

When it comes to luxury kennels, he said, “dog owners need to understand that it’s not necessary.” But he also said that there was little harm in most of the special services and amenities.

“I dress up my own dogs for Halloween,” Mr. Cohen said. “But I’m aware that I’m doing it to entertain myself, not because the dogs need to dress up.”

Carol Boerio-Croft, who has two locations in the Pittsburgh area for her Cozy Inn Pet Resort and Orchid Spa, has built her kennel business on what she calls canine feng shui. “Cozy Inn’s mission is to create and provide a loving, sensitive, healthy, safe naturally controlled environment for our guests; take care of them completely: mentally, emotionally, medically, spiritually and physically,” she says on her Web site. “And to always treat them with love and respect.”

With that in mind, she offers an indoor swimming pool and whirlpool, a choice of full-body, Swedish or sports massages, and hot-oil treatments. “Our clientele are not dog people,” Ms. Boerio-Croft said in a telephone interview. “I always correct that because normally dog people go to kennels. But our clientele is above average and elite. And we are an environment where the pets are very anthropomorphically treated like little people.”

KENNEL operators are not the only ones profiting from dog owners’ separation anxiety. Blake Walliser of Denver runs Online Doggy, a business that uses Web cameras to let dog owners peek in on their pets whenever they wish, from wherever they are; Mr. Walliser said his pet business grew out of a failed plan to offer the same service to day care centers for children.

Online Doggy has four full-time employees and provides Web camera services for 200 pet care providers, he said.

As trends go, the luxury kennel seems here to stay. Joe Timko of Canyon View Ranch in Topanga, Calif., near Malibu, said, “From the day we opened the doors, we filled up.” And Canyon View Ranch is already fully booked for Christmas 2008.

“Isn’t that something?” he said.



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