

# Trends

magazine

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# *Putting on the*







# Ritz

Luxurious pet resorts are on the rise  
by Jen Reeder

“DOG GUILT” IS A COMMON COMPLAINT among pet owners—when on vacation, they not only miss Fido, but feel guilty about leaving him behind. A growing number of boarding facility owners, including veterinarians, are catering to those feelings by offering luxury pet boarding.

Take Best Friends Pet Care, which operates 42 boarding facilities in 18 states, including a flagship property at Walt Disney World in Florida. In the 27,000-square-foot facility, dogs can frolic in a water park with an interactive fountain, stay in glass-enclosed suites with flat-screen TVs and raised padded beds, and have a “concierge” read them a bedtime story like 101 Dalmatians.

Their feline counterparts can stay in two- or four-story kitty condos with windows to the outside and private bathroom facilities, while eating cookies and milk at bedtime, or “tuna on a Ritz.”

Michael Biondo, vice president of marketing for Best Friends Pet Care, said since opening in 2010, the Best Friends Center at Walt Disney World has “cared for” over 100,000 pets. He said demand for high-end boarding reflects a shift in the human–animal bond.

“The feeling is there is this transition from being pet owners to pet parents,” Biondo said.

American spending in the pet industry surpassed \$53 billion in 2012, according to the American Pet Products Association, with “pet services” like boarding, daycare,

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## Increasing demand for high-end boarding reflects a shift in the human–animal bond.

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pet sitting and grooming up 9.7% from the previous year, at \$4.16 billion. Dog owners spent an average of \$327 on boarding in 2012, and cat owners rang in at \$337, up from an average of \$166 in 2010.

In contrast, overall expenditures on veterinary care for pets rose only 1.9% from 2011 to 2012. The number-one expense for dogs in 2012 was surgical veterinary visits, at \$621; emergency veterinary visits were tops for cats, at \$393.

Carmen Rustenbeck, CEO of the nonprofit International Boarding & Pet Services Association, observed that, for the most part, boarding facilities have continued to expand despite the recession. “Boarding facilities have handled the downturn in the economy very well. We lost very few boarding facilities,” she said.

And they’re branching out into services beyond the traditional boarding paradigm of dogs in cages that might get the occasional potty walk or a little playgroup time.

“Now the industry is expanding into high-end spa,” she said. “A high-end spa could be as simple as a blueberry mask for your dog who has white fur, because the blueberry mask on the dog’s white fur makes the fur whiter on the face.”

She said boarding businesses can easily add such services as acupuncture or training by hiring certified people to come into the facility, without having to put money into the building itself. Demand for extras is growing.

“The way people feel about their animals, the way they talk about their animals now, is different than when the boarding facilities really got started 40 years ago,” Rustenbeck noted.

“In our common language, we’ve adjusted now to where people really think of their pets as their children. They have pet birthday parties, they invite other pets to have a playgroup, they put clothes on their pets.... The way we talk about our pets has changed, so the way we expect our pets to be taken care of has changed,” Rustenbeck explained.

### **To board or not to board?**

While veterinarians might be keen to capitalize on this growing industry and start offering boarding, she said it’s important to first observe existing boarding businesses to see how running an animal hospital differs from operating a boarding facility. She said it is imperative to hire a qualified manager who will run a staff that is on-site 24 hours a day in case there is an emergency, like an electrical short that starts a fire.

Also, the hiring process can be challenging. “When



veterinarians hire, they are hiring vet techs or somebody who has experience at that level. In boarding facilities, we don't hire a vet tech to go outside and pick up dog poop, to walk the dogs, to clean the cat kennel, to go feed the birds," Rustenbeck said.

"The level of education going into a veterinary business is much different than the level of education you get in a boarding facility when it's hiring," she explained.

Renee and Steve Shanesy, principals at Best In Show Consulting in Madison, Wis., offer consulting services to clients hoping to open moderate to high-end boarding or daycare facilities. They started the company in 2007, when customers began asking them if they could franchise Ruffin' It Resort, a pet daycare and "hotel" Renee Shanesy created in 2006.

She said they work with clients to develop policy and procedure manuals to help ensure consistency of employee service. There are two aspects to this: day-to-day operations and training staff on dog behavior.

Renee Shanesy noted that behavioral issues requiring staff training include how to manage groups of dogs, how to deal with guests that have special needs, such as separation anxiety, how to deal with diabetics that need injections and how to deal with bored dogs barking in their room.

Dogs at Ruffin' It Resort undergo a social assessment to make sure they're suited to group play. Renee Shanesy estimated up to 35% of dogs are not social, so these "private guests" have customized visits that include private walks.

Boarding rates range from \$38.50 to \$69 for the "Pooches in Pajamas" package, in which up to seven dogs sleep in a bed with a human "canine concierge."

"We have things like health checks before bed and tuck-in time, where they get a treat and a cuddle before bed. There are a lot of complimentary amenities—or 'paw-menities,' as we call them—that are included in the stay," she said. "It's just what our clients expect, and it's why they're willing to pay a premium price to board at Ruffin' It."



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—JIM HADDAD, DVM

She said there is a lot of boarding competition in the area, but they are the ones with a long wait list, even though Ruffin' It is the most expensive facility.

Even so, Renee Shanesy noted that her clients have a variety of income levels. "It's certainly not a demographic that's a financial demographic, which is extremely interesting. It's more of the psychographic of 'Do I consider my dog my child?'" she said.

Jim Haddad, DVM and owner of AAHA-accredited Avon Lake Animal Clinic in Avon Lake, Ohio, and nearby Paws By The Lake Resort, a 32,000-square-foot "vacation resort,

spa and daycare center,” said there are advantages for veterinarians expanding into boarding.

“One of the benefits of having the veterinary facility associated with the boarding is that you’ve got quick access and availability of the veterinary staff should there be a problem,” Haddad said. “I think that creates a level of comfort on a lot of people’s behalf that is not going to be there if it’s considered a separate entity.”

Haddad employs over 100 people on his Avon Lake pet health campus, which also includes grooming and canine rehabilitation buildings. He said he credits the rapid business growth of the campus to being “full service.” Boarding is a big draw, with swimming in bone-shaped splash pools, walking on a wooded nature trail and sleeping in 8-square-foot suites designed to look like gated homes on New Orleans streets.

It’s common for people to kid that they wish they could stay there themselves, he said. Men will joke, “When I’m in the dog house, I’m gonna come here.” One woman said to her husband, “What’s wrong with this picture? My dog’s staying in a palace and you’re taking me camping.”

Haddad said there was a measure of trial and error to see which features would prove popular when Paws opened in 2008. The “pet taxi” pick-up and drop-off service didn’t take off (though it’s still offered), and a speaker system that allowed owners to talk to their pets proved stressful for the animals, so it was removed.

In contrast, the webcams by which owners can watch their dogs are almost too popular. Haddad said they had to start putting signs in the room if a dog left to be groomed or headed into playtime because worried owners would call if their dogs were absent.

One owner paid extra to buy his dog a “room service” turkey sandwich, and saw the dog wasn’t eating it. So he called to explain that the dog would need it cut into little squares. “So the tech had to go into the room and cut the turkey sandwich into little squares, and the dog came over and started to eat it,” he said with a laugh.

Haddad said the suites are the most popular feature, and that add-on amenities, like private walks, playtime and room service “are where the place supports itself.”



Expenditures for veterinary care for pets rose only 1.9% from 2011 to 2012, while those for pet services rose 9.7%.

“If we were just charging for a boarding stay, the place would be under water,” he said. “The add-on services really make a big difference for that facility in terms of profitability.”

### Consider all the angles

Vicki Pollard, AIA, CVT and a principal at Animal Arts, an architectural firm specializing in veterinary hospital and animal shelter design, said layout is one of the most important considerations for boarding in the design phase. She said a common mistake is to try to have too much capacity, ignoring the need for functional spaces, like food prep areas or even mop closets.



Pollard said architects at Animal Arts, which has been in business since 1979 and has over 600 designs in 40 states and overseas, have embraced the “fear-free practice designs” espoused by “America’s Veterinarian” Dr. Marty Becker, which try to consider the pets’ perspective and decrease their stress.

For example, dog runs tend now to be square, allowing for more defensible space, and cat enclosures have perches. Soundproofing is another consideration for reducing stress levels, as well as operable windows or screened porches so that pets can breathe fresh air.

Client interest in “green” boarding facilities and hospitals is increasing, not just to save energy and water costs in the long run, but sometimes to help with the permitting process, she said.

“The country, as a whole, is increasing energy code requirements, so I think that down the road we are going to be seeing that we have to comply more with all these regulations that are coming up right now,” Pollard said.

She said size requirements for building a boarding facility vary widely, though most enclosures are at least 4 x 4 square feet—and increasingly made with glass. Renovation projects average about \$150 per square foot, and building from scratch averages \$250 per square foot, though it is more expensive on the coasts or in major cities. Typically, projects take 18 months, from purchase to permitting to design to construction and opening doors for business, she said.

Pollard said veterinarians should evaluate whether their clients are requesting boarding services before jumping into the field. “You have to have the demand and the clientele there to make it successful,” she said.

Carmine Bausone, DVM, CVA and co-owner of AAHA-accredited Acacia Animal Health Center in Escondido, Calif., said opening the adjacent boarding facility, All Seasons: A Five Paw Resort at Acacia, in 2006 has been successful, with 20% growth this year and 30% in 2012.

“It is by far the fastest-growing part of the whole hospital, the whole building of Acacia, and it has been since the beginning,” Bausone said.

The luxury boarding offers an agility playground, “Pawsidential suites” with private TVs showing “Animal Planet,” soothing overhead music, special treat menus and kitty cuddle times. Birds, bunnies, reptiles and other exotic pets are also welcome.

Pets can receive veterinary care, from vaccinations to dentals to spay/neutering, while boarding, though practice manager Carol Chaney said they are careful never to “steal” clients from other veterinarians, who often refer clients to Acacia for boarding services.

Chaney said the staff takes care to assuage fears puppy owners might have, even letting children draw on the glass enclosure where their pooch will sleep.

“If we can get owners to let us board a puppy, and make sure that puppy has an amazingly wonderful experience, they’re boarders for life,” Chaney said. “The hardest dog to board is the 13-year-old that’s never been out of the house.”

Acacia promotes the boarding through social media and the website, but word of mouth is so strong that Bausone said the hospital has never spent “even a dime” on direct mailers or advertisements for boarding or the hospital.

He said the key to a successful boarding facility is hiring the right employees, like his boarding supervisor, Joe Bottcher, because they generate ideas and can help identify any behavior or physical issues in pets. “Hire good people and the rewards will come,” Bausone said. ✱



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder plans to order room service for her Lab mix, Rio, when he boards at a pet resort.