

Pampered Pets

Owners spare no expense to give their animals special treats, treatment

By **CARLY HARRINGTON**, harringtonc@knews.com
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Busy getting ready to go out of town, Brenda Sherrod didn't have time to take her dog, Doodles, to the vet.

No worry. Tissi Smith, manager of the luxury boarding facility Dream Katcher Lodge in Farragut, has made plans to take care of that for her.

"You can't hardly beat that," said Sherrod, who never felt comfortable boarding her 8-year-old Shih Tzu until Dream Katcher opened in 2004. "The personal attention they give is amazing. It's like dropping off your child at day care. They know her. They take pictures and e-mail them to me."

Businesses such as Dream Katcher Lodge are pulling out all the stops for pets and their owners, who are sparing no expense when it comes to their four-legged family members.

From luxury accommodations and day cares to pet sitting and pet portraits, splurging on pets has gone beyond traditional necessities.

"Pet people are their own breed. They don't withhold any expense," said Patty Dennis, owner of Lake City Pet Resort, located on more than four acres 20 miles north of Knoxville.

Dennis, who owns four other pet resorts in Nevada, Florida and California, said people want different services.

At Lake City, dogs go on hikes and cats get story time. In the summer, dogs can look forward to poolside activities as well as ice cream and treats. Owners traveling can call a toll-free phone number and check on their pets.

"It gives people peace of mind. I had one lady call and wish her dog a happy Thanksgiving," Dennis said.

When Lynn Kristich, owner of Dog Days Canine Play School in Farragut, began talking a decade or so ago about opening a dog daycare facility, she said there were a lot of people who thought it was "over the top."

She opened in 2003 and said now, "I don't get strange looks. More people seem to support it or have at least hear about it," said Kristich, who refers to her dog daycare services as "play school" and overnight boarding as "sleepovers."

PetSafe Village in West Knoxville is going beyond its doggie day care and day camp next month to include massage therapy and a singles night.

Beginning in January, singles and their dogs can take part in "Yappy Hour" on Friday nights. Dogs will get three hours of socialized play, while their owners mingle in the lobby and have refreshments.

Two of its employees will be trained and licensed in massage therapy, which will be available for \$45 an hour.

"We've looked into the wellness side of animals and there is a lot of interest, especially with hip displacement and other ailments," said PetSafe manager Justin Wiseman.

Local veterinarian Mili Bass, one of four owners who invested more than \$1 million in Dream Katcher Lodge, said they wanted to offer a guilt-free experience for their customers.

"We knew there would be others who felt the same way about their four-legged kids that we do. We wanted this to be as much as a home away from home as possible," Bass said.

For \$65 a night, a dog can enjoy the luxuries of the Bungalow, which is roomy enough for two large dogs and has a color television, custom bed frame, heated floor, Web cam and a window view of the courtyard.

For \$39.50 a night, a cat can curl up on a handcrafted four-poster bed and drink water from a Neiman-Marcus crystal dish, while listening to soft music.

Others choose to spend their money on more tangible purchases.

Nicoletta Poli started painting pet portraits 15 years ago and said interest in her services has increased over the years. A 3-by-5-foot painting that cost about \$1,000 a few years ago now costs about \$5,000, she said.

"For two years, I was busy nonstop," said Poli, who spends her winters in Knoxville when not living in Providence, Mass., where she has an art gallery with her husband. "I do it because of the love people have for their pets."

Other artists have started painting pet portraits, too. Every year when Poli returns to the area, she puts out informational pamphlets on her services. Last year, when she went to Jerry's Artarama, there were three or four others already there.

"So it really has taken off. It's great. Everyone has their own style," Poli said.

Poli, who has painted hundreds of pet portraits, said they're great because they are one-of-a-kind.

"When you paint a painting of a dog or cat, they come to life," Poli said. "Their memory and soul lives on."

Business writer Carly Harrington may be reached at 865-342-6317.