

SMALL PARENT INVESTMENT

BIG STUDENT RETURN

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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At This Hotel, Even a Pooch Can Live in the Lap of Luxury

Customer Service Is Everything; Please Don't Use the Word 'Kennel'

By ANA CAMPOY

FORT WORTH, Texas—The exclusive suites in a hotel opening here later this month will offer custom upholstered beds, chenille and satin blankets, 18-inch flat-screen TVs—and a dog treat on the pillow.

This \$4.4 million hotel is exclusively for dogs and cats.

Fort Worth, which is known for its stockyards and often called Cowtown, may be going to the dogs after Janice Ford Grimes opens her pet resort, where pooches and cats can expect to be in the lap of luxury. There will be facials, Swarovski-crystal collars (for sale in the boutique) and turn-down service every night in the rooms.

"There isn't another hotel like this. It's a hotel like you and I would stay in," says the 57-year-old Ms. Ford Grimes.

Going to the Dogs

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Matt Nager for The Wall Street Journal

Champion, a Shih Tzu, showed off his bow after getting groomed at The Grand Pet Resort and Salon in Fort Worth, Texas.

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Ms. Ford Grimes, whose four cats drink Evian, is gambling animal lovers will think it's worth every penny for a room that can cost as much as \$200 a night.

The event hall at the Spa Paws Hotel, as it is to be called, will play host to pet weddings and birthday parties, and guests can sit for a portrait by a professional photographer.

The 20,000-square-foot complex will be anchored by a wellness center, where pets can heal their bodies and minds via Eastern medicine. The best suites will overlook an atrium, where robotic squirrels will be the floor show.

The luxury-pet-services race is on all around the country, taking the anthropomorphizing of dogs and cats to new extremes. Cages have given way to pillow-top beds, in some cases human-sized, and pet food is a *very* fancy feast. The most pampered dogs these days get their hair colored and their paws exfoliated.

"In this industry, nothing is really too outrageous anymore," says Gretchen Meienburg, vice president of the board of the Pet Care Services Association.



A PAMPERED PET

Her trade group, formerly known as the American Boarding Kennels Association, stopped using the word "kennel" two years ago to better reflect the services that dotting owners have come to expect.

The industry has more than doubled in size since 2000, to \$4.4 billion in 2008, according to the latest consumer-expenditure survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Michael Dillon, an industry consultant, expects that figure to grow to \$5.10 billion by 2011.

Still, pet luxury can be a dog-eat-dog business. In Dallas, a \$10 million dollar indoor park, where dogs could run in an air-conditioned environment by day and sleep together in a king-size bed at night, closed earlier this summer. Owner Kelly Acree says the recession forced her to scrap some of the services she had envisioned, including a restaurant. Without that revenue, the overhead was too high, she says, although she hasn't given up on the idea. She's now looking into smaller neighborhood parks.



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Matt Nager for The Wall Street Journal

Sadie, a Shih Tzu mix, received a blueberry facial at The Grand Pet Resort and Salon.

Even shelters are upping their standards. At the SPCA of Texas, in Dallas, potential adoptees lounge in rooms with human furnishings; one room is called "Chateau Chardonnay."

"You want to be able to show these animals in a better light," says James Bias, the shelter's president.

The switch to more human-friendly digs required some tinkering. After dogs chewed up the couches, Mr. Bias bought heavy-duty outdoor furniture.

At the Grand Pet Resort and Spa, Ms. Ford Grimes's main competitor in Fort Worth, owner Steve Hotchkiss had to adjust the programming shown on the pet suite TVs after dogs attacked

the screens. Apparently they found the squirrels and birds too realistic.

Dr. Hotchkiss, a veterinarian, says he invested \$1.5 million to build his hotel, and lost \$200,000 over the first two years. Now he's making a return on investment of 10%, he says.

What has kept him in business, he says, is service.

Terri DeSio, a 51-year-old attorney, says she is happy to pay for her Great Dane-Labrador mix, Beau, to stay at the Grand. The hotel went to such lengths as changing him into his "swimsuit," a sturdy red collar, on pool day, and arranging for a cake and treat bags for his birthday party earlier this year. "It's kind of silly, and I do have a life, but I have this dog and I'm very fond of him," she says.



From fashion boutiques and swimming pools to luxe suites with flat screen TVs, pet hotels are offering the kinds of amenities once reserved for the animal at the other end of the leash. Ana Campoy reports.

If providing good service means fetching chicken salad from Whole Foods for a finicky eater, the Grand staff does it. Other services he offers are 10-minute PDAs (personal displays of affection) for \$8 and, for \$20, a 30-minute swim in the dog-bone

shaped pool.

Ms. Ford Grimes, who wears a diamond-encrusted Hello Kitty ring and a matching gold watch, scowls at the notion of charging for affection. Love is included, she says, in the \$65 or more guests will be paying for a room at Spa Paws Hotel.

Fashion-minded dogs can choose from a variety of pricey European couture offerings at the hotel's boutique. Ms. Ford Grimes, who made her money from leasing cars, recently tried some of the outfits on her Imperial Shih Tzu,

Shawnee Spirit. The hairy little dog seemed indifferent to a \$400 pink argyle cashmere sweater, but appeared to enjoy strutting her stuff in a \$3,000 wedding gown, its white train dragging on the floor.

But the heart of the hotel will be the wellness center, inspired by Ms. Ford Grimes's beloved cat Dakota, who died of a brain tumor. Ms. Ford Grimes is prepared to subsidize the clinic with earnings from the hotel. Her business plan has her making money within the first six months, with occupancy at the hotel and salon at 30%, but she's ready to be in the red for a year.

A feasibility study required by her bank showed that the demographics to support her business—high-income empty-nesters, gay couples and what Ms. Ford Grimes calls the "Paris Hilton girls"—were present in Fort Worth.

Ms. Ford Grimes says she has already heard from several people hereabouts who promise to be regulars. One, the owner of a Yorkshire Terrier named Coco Chanel, requested that a suite be decorated with a replica of the French designer's brown-suede couch and a picture of the Eiffel Tower.

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