

The Baltimore Sun

July 15, 2007 Sunday
FINAL EDITION

A DOG'S LIFE; A NEW SURVEY FINDS PET OWNERS SPENDING RECORD AMOUNTS OF PAMPERING THEIR POOCHES

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SECTION: MODERN LIFE; Pg. 1N

LENGTH: 1889 words

Today's typical American family is apt to leave their pet-friendly home (perhaps one whose kitchen has a built-in dog feeding station), pack up their pet-friendly car (perhaps equipped with special doggie seat belts) and leave for a pet-friendly vacation (perhaps at Camp Unleashed in the Berkshires, where they can hike, swim and camp with their dog at their sides).

They may, on the way there, outfit the pooch with a pair of "Doggles" - sports goggles for dogs - to protect his eyes when he sticks his head out the window.

They may, before heading back home, drop him off, not just for a bath, but for the "complete line of spa services" -washing, blow dry, massage and pedicure - such as that available at [Olde Towne Pet Resort](#) in Fairfax, Va., where overnight dog accommodations can run \$90 a night.

A new survey finds that the family dog is sitting prettier than ever - more popular, more coddled, more considered, some might say even more human, than ever before.

"I read somewhere that, not too many years ago, 80 percent of dogs lived outside. Today, 80 percent live inside," said Tom Berger, co-owner of The Pretentious Pooch, a dog boutique in Baltimore's Mount Vernon neighborhood. "There is definitely this paradigm where pets are moving from physically outside and emotionally outside to physically inside and emotionally inside.

"What's behind that trend, I don't know - enlightenment?"

Whether it's a matter of dogs finally getting their due, an increasing human need for companionship (in its most loyal, least confrontational form), or another step in the evolution of the always symbiotic human-dog relationship that began with the domestication of wolves 15,000-plus years ago, there is little dispute that the powerful bond between the two has never been closer.

As the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association put it, "If you're worried that you may be obsessed with your dog just because he has his own cell phone, frequent flier miles and page on MySpace, you're not alone."

The APPMA's National Pet Owners Survey, released last month, found that pet ownership is at its highest level ever, with 71.1 million households (63 percent) in the U.S. owning at least one pet. That's up from 69 million households in 2004, 64 million households in 2002 and 51 million households in 1988, when APPMA's research began.

Those numbers help explain the mushrooming number of doggie boutiques, gourmet dog treat makers and, at the other end of the, uh, spectrum, the proliferation of poop-scooping companies who will haul your dog's waste away - Inside Scoop, Doody Calls and Scooper Hero Dog Waste Removal Service, to name just three in the Baltimore/Washington area.

And Americans are spending more on dogs, and pets in general, than ever before, with sales expecting to top \$50 billion annually by the end of the decade, the APPMA predicts.

But beneath those numbers, beyond what we casually discount as "pampering," there's something else at play - another full step, it seems, in the evolution that has seen dogs go from worker to companion to family member, or even soul mate.

Fido is no longer that friendly lump of fur in the backyard; today he's more likely to live inside, have his own bed, his own toothbrush and a more human name. He's no longer an afterthought when it comes to family life; but more often what schedules, big purchases and vacations revolve around.

"Expect the trend of the humanization of pets to continue," The Herman Group, a business futurist organization, advised two years ago. "As more baby boomers become empty-nesters, they will seek to fill the vacuum left by their departed children with the four-legged variety ... [who] will affect how we function day-to-day, take vacations and even choose residences."

"There's no question," said Daniel Rubin, 51, a columnist for The Philadelphia Inquirer, whose recent decision to adopt a dog was influenced by the impending departure of his two teenage sons for college in the fall. "We're going from two boys in the house to no boys in the house."

Getting a dog, he said, was "a way of avoiding the void" - escaping feelings of loneliness, having no purpose or, worse yet, being over the hill.

"The idea of just the two of us - it would make us feel old," Rubin said. The Bouvier Des Flandres he and his schoolteacher wife, Mimi, adopted "totally limits our ability to travel and do stuff. We're pinned down in the home again. But I think we sort of like the job."

Dogs were once valued for the work they did - as hunters, herders, guards and more. Today, people get pets primarily for the company, and they are especially prone to do so when a relationship ends - after a breakup, divorce or the death of a spouse.

On top of boomers feathering their empty nests with dogs, many young couples bring home a dog as practice for raising children - or, increasingly it seems, instead of raising children.

The increase in the dog population, and recent declines in the birth rate nationally, have led to city parks - such as those in Baltimore's more gentrified neighborhoods - where there are more dogs at play than children.

In some American neighborhoods, and even entire cities - Seattle, for one - canines outnumber kids.

Pet-friendly homes

Once upon a time, dogs were dogs.

This was back when we went to pet supply stores, instead of doggie boutiques; before kennels became doggie resorts, before bars offered dog-friendly "yappy hours;" before there were animal acupuncturists, psychics and masseuses in the yellow pages; before the advent of doggie day care, complete with the canine version of the nanny cam.

Then, most only rarely came into the house. Now, not only are there more pets - 74.8 million dogs and 88.3 million cats, according to the APPMA survey - but the vast majority are nearly full-time indoor-dwellers, often with a door of their own, a nook of their own, sometimes even a room of their own.

More homeowners are incorporating the needs of their cats and dogs into their home design - installing lower windows that allow pets to see out, built-in sleeping nooks and see-through pet doors.

Cat-lover Lierra Lenhard, who designed her home seven years ago, included pet-friendly features such as a feeding area, fans in closets that would contain litter boxes and numerous cat doors, one of which leads from the second floor onto a catwalk that spans her open great room.

"I thought it would be fun, knowing how they like to climb on things and be high up," said Lenhard, of Phoenix.

The catwalk matches the rest of the house's cherry-colored trim, contains lighting and serves to break up the vast space, which has a 24-foot high ceiling. Mainly, though, it's for the cats - Chloe, Toes, Boo Boo and Sammy.

"I think people are thinking more about making their pets' lives enjoyable," Lenhard said, "though maybe not as obsessively as me."

Some carmakers - most notably Volvo and Subaru, have taken steps to make their vehicles more pet friendly, with cargo doors big enough to put a kennel crate through, special slings and seat belts for dogs, space dividers, stain resistant fabrics and hoseable rubber floor mats.

Nearly 50 percent of American families consider their dog's comfort when buying a car, according to the American Kennel Club's 21st Century Dog Owner Survey - and 30 percent say when they go on vacation, the dog goes, too.

Go, dog, go

An increasing number of hotel chains are accepting pets, and some families are opting for vacations built around the dog - like a trip to Camp Unleashed ("Where City Dogs go To Ruff It") in western Massachusetts. There, or at Camp Dogwood outside Chicago, vacationers can hike, swim, camp and enjoy a host of dog-oriented activities.

And for the dog who is left home alone, there's now music designed for canine listeners - soothing, animal-friendly CDs such as Skip Haynes' recently released Ask the Animals: Songs to Make Dogs Happy! which includes the singles "You're a Good Dog" and "Scratch My Back." There is custom-made cat music as well, including the five volume set Music for Cats and Friends, (available at petsandmusic.com) that was developed by an animal behaviorist in Vienna who says the songs help cats relax.

Dogs still aren't allowed in movie theaters, but they've dominated the marquee this year, with major releases that include Year of the Dog, Firehouse Dog and, coming soon, Underdog, a live action remake of the cartoon superhero dog's adventures. A Dog Year, a movie based on the Jon Katz book of the same name, is due out in 2008.

According to Box Office Mojo, an online movie publication and box office reporting service, dogs have dominated the movie animal sweepstakes, being the subject of 44 live-action, big-studio films since 1974. Horses come in second, with 20 films.

Pet-health products

The biggest boom, though, is in dog-related products - not so much "froufrou and bling," says Charlotte Havelly, lifestyles director for PetSafe, but items that promote the animal's mental and physical well-being.

"The dog is now truly another member of the family, Havelly said. "There has been a shift in social attitudes, with people marrying later, if marrying at all, and having children later, if having them at all. What we're seeing is pets really become like children."

PetSafe manufactures backyard play-sets for dogs, heated pet beds and a new "cat veranda" that fits in an open window to create an open-air "sunroom."

The buyers of pet products aren't always pet owners, said Berger of The Pretentious Pooch. "A lot of customers come into the shop to pick up something for their 'grand-dog' ... because their children are not having children."

Despite the name of his shop - it opened two years ago - Berger says most of what he sells aren't cute and frivolous items, but products aimed at improving an animal's health and well-being.

"I don't see it as 'pampering,'" he said. "There's just so much more information available now, Animal Planet and the like, and people are becoming more aware of the emotional side of their animals and how to better care for them."

Berger acknowledged that humans get something out of the deal as well. Studies have shown having a pet can lower your blood pressure and help deal with stress and depression. On top of that, Berger said, it satisfies our need to nurture - at least it did with him.

Berger and his partner were trying to adopt a child in Baltimore - a tedious, drawn-out process that they eventually gave up on, settling instead for an American bulldog they named Chai.

Soon to move into a new home, Berger plans to devote a full room to his dog, furnished and decorated specifically for Chai.

"He deserves it," he said.

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Dogs by the numbers

44.8 million

-- number of American households with dogs \$176.00

-- amount the average dog owner spends annually on grooming at a salon 6

-- percentage of dog owners who hold parties for their pets 10

-- percentage of dog owners who say they would be interested in poop-scooping service (9 percent for small dogs, 12 percent for big dogs)

Cats by the numbers

38.4 million

-- number of American households with cats \$18

-- amount the average cat owner spends annually on grooming 15

-- percentage of cat owners who plan to buy an urn, headstone or casket for their cat when it dies

[Source: 2007-2008 National Pet Owners Survey, America Pet Products Manufacturers Association Inc.]