Dog Driven: Pooches living the high life

By Millie Acebal Rousseau

In the States, pets are top dog. The American Pet Products Manufacturers Association estimates Americans will spend $40.8 billion this year on their pets. The world is going to the dogs. According to a survey by the organization, there are about 75 million dogs whose owners live in the United States. There's something for Fido to bark about. Companies like Paul Mitchell, Old Navy and Omaha Steaks have noticed, creating products such as shampoo, clothing and gourmet food for dogs.

Pampered pooches are also gaining popularity in South and Central America. Dogs there are begging up the canine ladder, becoming integral members of households.

That's definitely the case for Jennifer Boden, who along with her family, runs a children's clothing store in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Boden owns five dogs: two Chihuahuas, a cocker spaniel, an adopted Labrador and a mutt rescued from the mountains. Lucky for Boden, they all get along.

The Chihuahuas and the mountain mutt live inside the house. Boden buys the two little ones clothes and takes them to the doggie salon. They each have their own bed. Sometimes, they'll sport outfits. "I dress them for special occasions," said Boden. "Last Halloween, they were a bride and groom." The two must have had some honeymoon, since the female was now pregnant. Because of her small size, the dog got an ultrasound to see if it would need a C-section. Boden's concerns resemble that of a mother toward her child. "I love them; they're like my kids," she said. "They're not just animals."

Dog Bar, a sort of Neiman Marcus for dogs, caters to people like Boden. The South Florida-based company sells to celebrities, locals and clients from South and Central America, particularly Venezuela, Costa Rica and Peru. The shops resemble a department store, with areas for bedding, clothing, furniture and nutrition. There's even a full-service spa with an Argentine groomer who comes from a family of dog groomers. Doggie yoga and Reiki massages are also available.

Experts say pets do help people. "Research indicates people who have pets spend less time in hospitals and recuperate faster," said Janet Konefal, Ph.D., assistant dean for complementary and integrative medicine at the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine. "They help a person's emotional state and physical health." They can help lower blood pressure, reduce stress, help fight depression and even protect owners from heart disease.

Steven Cohen, who owns the shops with his wife, explains why dog amenities have become so popular. At one point, "Dogs were second-class citizens, chained up in backyards; but now many people realize the importance of animals to earth," he said. "We realize how much they help us, from saving people from fires to being companions to people who live alone."

People are also taking better care of their pets. Konefal says there's an increase in holistic pet therapy. Pets are receiving vitamins, herbal medicines, acupuncture and massages for medical ailments such as hip dysplasia, a painful degenerative joint disease affecting dogs.

Veterinary care has also made revolutionary strides. "The business has changed dramatically since I started in 1994," said Anjanette Cabeza, D.V.M., a Miami veterinarian who grew up in Panama. She says that a decade ago she was treating mostly contagious diseases and parasites, but education and medical advances have led to changes. "Pain management has gotten better in the last 10 years, and there's a lot more preventative medicine." Dogs are getting blood work with their yearly checkups, allowing vets to check for kidney and liver problems. Dogs can go on special diets to slow down the disease process, resulting in a better quality of life. There's even pet health insurance.

Another niche in pet pampering is daycare and boarding. Many owners are torn about leaving their dogs at home while at work, so they send them to doggie daycare. Then there's those who have to travel often and feel guilty about leaving their animal companions behind. Dr. Cabeza knows where they're coming from, so she built a luxury boarding facility.

The area consists of 3x6-foot individual rooms with a dog bed, and elevated food and water bowls so the dogs don't strain their necks. There's a television for every two kennels. The goal is to reduce stress for the dogs by making them feel like they're at home. "It's designed to look like a house," said Dr. Cabeza. "The background noises comfort them; they seem more relaxed."

Still, some people prefer to travel with their pets. Among them, Danica Steeger from Mexico City, who always travels with her Italian greyhound Giorgio. She recently made a road trip to Miami with her husband and Giorgio in tow. "He's a very good companion and well-behaved," she said, referring to the dog. Steeger does not dress Giorgio, but admits she buys him toys, and even cooks for him. "He won't eat pet food; it makes him sick." The thought of leaving him behind makes her feel sick. "When I travel, I look for hotels that accept dogs. It's changed the way we travel."

More hotels are adopting pet-friendly policies. In Miami, the Four Seasons Hotel welcomes four-legged guests with special dog water, a bowl with dry dog food and a stuffed animal toy. The same goes at the Mayfair Hotel & Spa, where pet amenities include a small rubber matt, two bowls for food and water, dog bones and one large bottle of flat water, all for a small fee.

Cohen best summarizes the people-pet connection, "You stare into their eyes and you're looking into a soul. They're living and feeling ... everything you find in people, but they just can't tell you." It's no wonder dogs are man's best friend.

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