

Briefs

The **Barkley Pet Hotel & Day Spa** opened Oct. 25 in Westlake Village, Calif.

Go Dogs St. Louis now offers dog running services, the first company in its market to do so.

Intergroom 2011, to take place April 15-17 at the Meadowland Exposition Center in Secaucus, N.J., is shifting back to a Saturday-through-Monday format and rearranging events to better accommodate groomers with busy work schedules.

For example, educational sessions will begin earlier, while the trade show will be open from late morning through early evening. A new grooming demonstration area in the exhibit area will provide instruction to attendees who don't participate in paid classes.

Show organizers have discontinued the gala dinner, where Intergroom's best in show awards and Cardinal Crystal Grooming Achievement Awards traditionally have been awarded. The award ceremonies now will take place in the contest ring Sunday evening.

For more information, go to www.intergroom.com.

"Garfield" creator Jim Davis will help judge the 2010 Pet Sitter of the Year contest sponsored by **Pet Sitters International** (King, N.C.). Additional judges include David Pearsall, vice president of Business Insurers of the Carolinas (Chapel Hill, N.C.), and Cara Armor, PSI's 2009 Pet Sitter of the Year. The winner and four finalists will be announced at the association's annual convention.

PSI's annual convention will take place Feb. 9-12 in New Orleans. For details, go to www.petsit.com.



Services worthy of a five-star hotel help differentiate pet resorts from other boarding facilities. The Tuck-In Service at Morris Animal Inn (Morristown, N.J.), for example, includes a minty treat and a bedtime story.

Top Resort Trends

As more boarding facilities adopt luxury service models, owners of pet resorts continue to step up their games with new ways to stand out. By Allie Johnson

When people take trips nowadays without their pets, they don't expect Fido or Felix to sit in a basic enclosure with a toy and a blanket, waiting faithfully for their return. They want the family dog or cat to enjoy a vacation, too—with luxurious digs, five-star amenities and plenty of fun activities.

Owners of boarding kennels are answering that demand with upscale facilities, more amenities and a wider array of services. "I've seen [the industry] move from mom-and-pop hobby kennels to pet luxury resorts," said Joanne Morris, vice president of Morris Animal Inn (Morristown, N.J.). "Kennels used to be a negative vision in a lot of people's minds because you picture poor puppies behind chain link. But as facilities and services improve, we're moving further and further away from that and becoming

a more sought-after choice."

Of course, as more boarding facilities adopt luxury service models, competition increases. That means owners must continually strive to find new ways to make their resorts stand out. Let's look at some of the top trends in the pet resort industry, as described by industry experts and resort owners.

State-of-the-Art Design

They might not get as much attention as fun services and glitzy amenities, but facility designs that focus on health and cleaning ease are becoming state-of-the-art for pet resorts. "The behind-the-scenes things our consumers don't see—the air systems, ventilation, A/C, generators—these things are so important," said Susan Briggs, owner of Urban Tails, a full-service pet center in Houston,

“ Kennels used to be a negative vision in a lot of people’s minds because you picture poor puppies behind chain link. But as facilities and services improve, we’re moving further and further away from that and becoming a more sought-after choice.”

—Joanne Morris
Morris Animal Inn

and president of the Pet Care Services Association (Colorado Springs, Colo.).

That was a focus for Tom Cope, a managing member of Country Dogs of Blue Mountain L.L.C. (Bethel, Pa.), who consulted the Humane Society of the United States (Washington) and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Norfolk, Va.) when retrofitting a horse barn to house canine guests at his three-year-old facility. The retrofitted barn includes central air conditioning and heating, insulated walls, a sealed concrete floor with a drain system designed for good sanitation, wooden side walls covered with reinforced fiberglass that is impervious to urine and sliding doors that open wide so the entire facility can be aired out.

Outside, horse fencing keeps even climbers and jumpers safe inside (the top 18 inches of wire fencing is loose, so it will curl inward under a dog’s weight should it try to climb out).

“It’s easy to clean, it’s sanitary and it’s safe,” Cope said of his facility.

A number of modern materials and products make it easier to keep pet resorts clean and safe, Briggs said. For example, many higher-end facilities, including Briggs’ own, use K9Grass by ForeverLawn (Albuquerque, N.M.), artificial turf designed for dog play areas. “It looks really nice, it can be cleaned and disinfected, it’s practical and cuts down on mud when dogs are out playing,” Briggs said. “It’s durable and very functional as well.”



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Milwaukee is the best U.S. city in which to find a pet sitter, according to **SitterCity.com** (Chicago). The list, which also counts Colorado Springs, Colo., Tucson, Ariz., Cincinnati and Cleveland in its top five, was based on job postings, hourly rates and availability of dog walkers and sitters.

Tucker Pup's Dog Activity Center (Chicago) was named Best Overnight Boarding/Doggie Daycare Business in Chicago for the second year in a row by Tails Magazine, published by Tails Pet Media Group Inc. (Chicago). Tucker Pup's Joanna Dwyer was named best groomer.

Wipe Your Paws, a pet supply store that offers day care, grooming and obedience classes, held its grand opening Sept. 25 in Mount Kisco, N.Y.

The Zoom Room (Los Angeles) is franchising new dog agility training facilities to Lee Fischer and his daughter Jessica in Boca Raton, Fla.; Marnie Johnson in Longmont, Colo.; and Gretchen Kabler in Milwaukee. The company also is opening a franchise in Monterey, Calif. ■



Pools are the trendiest amenities at some pet resorts. Here, dogs enjoy a supervised swim session in the new aquatic center at Carriage Hill Kennels in Glenview, Ill.

Luxury Amenities

While facility design is important, amenities—from luxury suites to rooftop play areas to swimming pools—add the wow factor to any pet resort.

Major trends now include luxury suites and, at some facilities, cage-free boarding. At Citizen Canine, a dog hotel in Oakland, Calif., each dog stays in a modern-looking private luxury suite that is individually climate-controlled and ventilated. Suites have solid walls, so there's none of the barking and growling associated with see-through barriers. Each suite is furnished with a

raised bed and a blanket—and the dog can bring special toys, blankets or a bed from home, too.

“Every dog that stays here has the same type of room—there's no coach class here,” said Dana Kleveland, general manager of Citizen Canine.

Morris Animal Inn also offers some luxury suites. In the cat suites, “Catnip TV” entertains guests with the sights and sounds of birds and squirrels.

Villa La Paws Pet Resort and Spa, with two locations in Phoenix, offers cage-free boarding: Dogs stay in a supervised, communal environment. When it's time

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CARRIAGE HILL KENNELS

to sack out, they have their choice of couches, stuffed or raised dog beds or even the floor.

One of the trendiest amenities is a swimming pool. As part of a major renovation and expansion project completed about two years ago, Morris Animal Inn added a \$250,000 heated indoor dog pool and whirlpool.

Carriage Hill Kennels, a full-service boarding and grooming facility in Glenview, Ill., this year added an aquatic center with a zero-depth, chemical-free pool where dogs can do dock diving, take private lessons or play in group swim sessions. Pet owners and other guests can watch the fun through a window that looks into the pool area.

Owner Francine Barnes got the idea for the pool after seeing how quickly her son's dog recovered from knee surgery by swimming daily in a pond. "We wanted to do something no one else had and something that would benefit the dogs," Barnes said. "We wanted to do something wellness-oriented."

Barnes' emphasis on wellness puts her in good company. "I see people really getting into fitness and wellness, and



Canine guests enjoy fresh air and room to run in the relaxed rural setting of Country Dogs of Blue Mountain L.L.C. (Bethel, Pa.). Here, managing member Tom Cope joins several guests on an excursion.



Luxury suites represent one of the dominant trends in pet hotels and resorts. At Citizen Canine in Oakland, Calif., each Zen-looking luxury suite is individually climate-controlled and ventilated.

even bringing in some holistic services," Briggs said.

Creative Services and Activities

One important—and possibly less expensive—way to stand out from the crowd is with unique services. Many pet resort owners are doing just that, with an emphasis on outdoor activities, pampering services, and themed parties or other social activities for dogs.

Outdoor activities are especially big right now, and many pet resort owners are putting unusual twists on the popular offerings. At Country Dogs, boarding dogs get to run off leash on farmland—which includes a meadow, a wooded area and a swimming pond—for four to five hours a day. Country Dogs also offers on-leash trail runs. "Our key selling points are that it's fresh air on the farm, the dogs get plenty of exercise and plenty of



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socializing, and they come home happy,” Cope said.

But it’s certainly possible for pet resorts in urban settings to offer outdoor activities. Wag Hotels in San Francisco offers play sessions in a safe, secure 10,000-square-foot rooftop play area covered with artificial turf.

And Citizen Canine offers off-leash adventure hikes at regional parks. Staff members often take videos of the hikes and post them to Facebook. “People love to see their dogs romping,” Kleveland said.

Many pet resorts—especially those that model themselves after high-end human hotels—also offer special services designed to pamper their canine guests. For example, Morris Animal Inn offers Pampered Pet Sessions, customized to the individual pet, which can include anything from playing Frisbee to a dip in the wading pool to quiet cuddle time. The inn also offers Tuck-In Service, which includes a minty treat and a bedtime story.

Another service-related trend is themed

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Stand Out From the Crowd

AS COMPETITION INCREASES, pet hotel and pet resort owners look for creative ways to differentiate themselves. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Lend a paw to a cause.** Helping a good cause can be good for business. For example, Wag Hotels (San Francisco) holds adoption fairs and offers a 15 percent lifetime discount on services for every pet adopted.

Villa La Paws Pet Resort and Spa (Phoenix) houses rescued dogs and creates YouTube videos to help get them adopted. This not only creates goodwill in the community, but helps build relationships with customers—more than half of whom have rescued dogs at Villa La Paws. “Building relationships is key,” said Tom Murray, president and chief executive officer of Villa La Paws.

- **Offer paws-on activities.** Pet owners love getting something tangible that was “made” for them by their pet. “One thing that’s getting more attention than even our parties is our art activities,” said Susan Briggs, owner of Urban Tails, a full-service pet center in Houston, and president of the Pet Care Services Association (Colorado Springs, Colo.). With a little help from staff members, dogs at Urban Tails make paw print art for their people.

- **Go gourmet.** Offering gourmet treats is one way to lend a high-end feel to a pet resort—and appeal to pet owners’ own tastes. At Morris Animal Inn (Morristown, N.J.), for example, canine guests may be treated to gourmet goodies made in the inn’s own kitchen, stuffed into sturdy rubber toys and delivered by “room service.”

Other pet resorts offer entire menus of gourmet treats. At Aunt B’s Pet Resort & Spa (DeForest, Wis.), owners can choose everything from S’more Cookies to Lucky Lolli Pups to Clam Chowder with Cat Nip.

- **Add a personal touch.** Personalized services attract customers to pet resorts and make them feel good about leaving their pets in someone else’s care. That’s why some pet resort owners recommend paying a lot of attention to special requests. For



Dogs staying at Urban Tails can—with a little help—make paw print art for their pet parents.

example, Briggs’ staff has, in response to requests, put pajamas on a dog each night before bed and displayed postcards sent by dogs’ owners so the dogs can see them. “We have some high-maintenance clients and we take great pride in making sure their pets have great experiences with us,” Briggs said.

- **Offer a homey experience.** At home, some pets are couch potatoes while others are always on the go. Some get groomed and pampered regularly, while others are no fuss, no muss. Recognizing this, many pet resort owners offer a la carte menus of services so clients can pick and choose. “We offer a lot of services in different packages so people can simulate what their pet’s lifestyle is at home,” Morris said.

- **Focus on quality of care.** Flash and glitz mean nothing without high-quality care, according to Briggs. “It’s really the quality of care behind the door that’s important,” Briggs said, noting that that’s what the Pet Care Services Association emphasizes with its accreditation program for facility owners. “We’re trying to push that in the marketplace—the emphasis on doing things responsibly, and that the health and safety of the pet does come first.”

—Allie Johnson



Bay Area dogs can romp safely in the 10,000-square-foot rooftop play area at Wag Hotels in San Francisco. Its artificial turf is durable and easy to clean.

parties. These are especially common around holidays, and sometimes benefit a pet-related or human-related charity. For its Puppy Prom in springtime, Morris Animal Inn fixed dogs up with “dates,” took their photos and crowned a king and queen, while encouraging owners to donate gently used prom dresses to a charity that helps girls in need.

Morris Animal Inn also has done a Muttster Mash party for Halloween, a Sweetheart Soiree for Valentine’s Day and a Labradoodles and Leprechauns party for St. Patrick’s Day. Staff members always take plenty of photos and video for owners to enjoy.

Morris Animal Inn is doing what just about every pet resort needs to do today in order to stay competitive in the marketplace: “We are trying to create other reasons why people want to use our services and bring dogs here. People want more opportunities for dogs to be social and interact,” Morris said. “We’re all trying to expand the services we offer.” ■

Allie Johnson is an award-winning freelance writer based in Kansas City, Mo. She frequently writes about pets.

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