

PET PAMPERING PAYS.....

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Set up like a hybrid pre-kinder day care and hotel with concierge service, The Palms Pet Resort & Spa may have come late to the high-end pet boarding industry, but it's making up for lost time.

Opening in June 2006, the Northwest Side pet resort launched itself in a city that was a little late taking advantage of the pent-up demand for boarding services.

Pet spas took off about 15 years ago, explains Joseph Lyman, chief executive office of the Colorado Springs, Colo.-based Pet Care Services Association.

"A lot of people that routinely board their dogs were looking for more convenience," Lyman said. "So boarding operators added on services, including grooming, training and day care."

Once primarily an industry with most operators based on the fringe of cities, it's common now to see businesses in commercial retail districts. The total pet economy is \$48 billion a year, of which boarding services now comprise \$7.8 billion, Lyman said.

"Projections are that over the next five years it will reach \$9.2 billion," he added. "One of the biggest trends has been that pet services have become so popular that you see veterinarians add on pet services."

Veterinarian James Peterson had just that idea when he opened The Palms, 12410 Bandera Road. Unlike many veterinarians that provide some boarding services, Peterson sought to keep the operations separate.

"If you share staff between the two," Peterson observed, "the boarding always takes a back seat to the clinic. I wanted it all to be about the pet care."

Peterson and his father-in-law, John McGhee, traveled extensively, researching pet resort operations around the country. The 9,000-square-foot facility they designed has become a model for other entrepreneurs in the pet services industry.

Linda Mallory, owner of Critter Clipper in Mountain View, Calif., visited The Palms to attend a dog training and day care seminar conducted by Mare Shey of Bend, Ore.

"We have a big clientele, so people are always asking us to do other things," Mallory said. "We're hoping to expand in the next year or so."

Mallory said she attended the seminar to learn from Shey and to research The Palms' day care.

"I want to find out from the best, learn from the best," she said.

The day care, called "play care," is available to day-only drop-ins and overnight boarders. The Palms' overnight berths get referred to as suites or cabanas, depending on how much privacy and quiet they provide. Like the clipboard attached to an occupied hospital room, each dog has its exacting list of care instructions.

There is an on-site salon with four groomers. Some rooms have television. Each dog receives one-on-one structured playtime in a private yard. But what The Palms boasts of most is the human touch.

McGhee, the general manager, has a staff of 40 assistants working from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. 365 days a year. And one person is on-site from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m.

"So many facilities are 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., then they all go home," McGhee said. "We also get the dogs out more, a minimum of four times a day, which is twice the norm.

"A lot of boarders have facilities set up to move the dog indoors and out with little or no human contact," he said. "We find dogs have better temperament with regular human contact."

McGhee, formerly a general manager in tractor-trailer truck dealerships, hired some expert help in the course of training himself on the ins and outs of the pet business. But he admits nothing prepared him for the pet resort's debut.

He bought a plush recliner chair for his office because he couldn't go home.

"I slept in that chair for two months," McGhee recalled. "I couldn't get out of here. We had no idea we were going to start out the way we did. I lost 20 pounds."

McGhee, a golfer, eventually found the time to swing clubs again and to put the weight back on.

Monthly gross revenues broke the \$100,000 barrier for the first time in June and again in July, he added.

"The average before that was \$85,000 a month," he said.

Rates start at \$27 a night for a cabana, \$44 a night for a suite. Kitty condos go for \$16 a night.

Pet resorts have so overtaken the industry that Lyman's association changed its name earlier this year. It used to be called the American Boarding Kennel Association.

"The name 'Boarding Kennel' became a smaller microcosm of the pet care industry," Lyman explained.

At one time, most kennels did nothing more than board a dog or cat. Today, 77 percent offer grooming, 50 percent offer day care and 46 percent offer training, he said.

"Since we had been representing those services anyhow," Lyman said, "it wasn't a big step for us to change our name."

INSIDE THE PALMS PET RESORT & SPA Opening in June 2006, the Northwest Side pet resort launched itself in a city that was a little late taking advantage of the pent-up demand for boarding services.



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Monthly gross revenues at the pet resort broke the \$100,000 barrier for the first time in June and again in July, General Manager John McGhee says.



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Veterinarian and owner James Peterson (right) opened the resort in June 2006 with father-in-law John McGhee (left) as general manager.



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Dee Luke, manager of play care at the Palms Pet Resort, gets a friendly lick from a dog in the play area Tuesday.



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Cassidy gets a trim from grooming manager Rachel Georges.



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Animal care attendant Monique Mendez gives treats to a "family" of dogs Tuesday in a luxury suite, which comes with a TV.



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Carmen Alexander leads her dog, Snickers, out the door of Palms Pet Resort, where he stayed while she was on vacation.



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Animal care attendant Monique Mendez writes notes on pets in the luxury suite area, which has a waterfall wall.

