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Day Care, Resorts or Retreats

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But isn't your pet worth it? The new generation of dog day care and upmarket kennels are banking on it as their numbers grow despite a slumping economy. And judging by the number of pets we've seen cavorting in day care centres and lolling around the pet resort pools, there is no shortage of owners willing to give their fur kids a fun time away too.



Pooch Pampering at PawPaws

Dog day care as a concept started in California over 20 years ago. Dedicated dog day care arguably started in Australia with DogZone in Melbourne in 2002 and came to Sydney in 2005 when entrepreneurs sniffed money in purpose-built dogsitting services within industrial areas or commercial buildings. One early indoor/outdoor facility in Leichhardt had to close when Council intervened and the biggest difficulty was to get development applications approved for day care or inner city boarding where the latter was usually confined to country or far-outer suburbs on rural properties.

As empty nesters opting for fur children, gay couples, singles, retirees and corporate workaholics started to demand the services, inner city dog day care businesses overcame council hurdles and soon sprang up to meet the market where owners leave their dogs off to spend their days in the company of other dogs, playing, exercising and receiving training.

A case in point is one of the early Sydney centres Dogs@Play in Surry Hills, which started the inner city trend and opened to much fanfare. It is now trying to expand to larger premises but has encountered hefty opposition from residents to their proposed location due to noise worries. The DA is being contested and the centre may have to remain at its current premises. Another Botany Road pet store that planned to have day care and sleepover facilities was blocked and has given up the idea.


But down the street in Chippendale, For Dogs' Sake, which opened shortly after Dogs@Play is thriving in its highly visible location in a commercial building on Cleveland Street above a paint store and immune to noise problems. French owners Michele and Olivier came from a dog-centric society and created an inner city sanctum for harried pet owners to park their canines for the day, albeit without overnight stays.

Up until a couple of years ago, leaving your dog at home to go to work or taking a day long business trip was a lonely experience for your fur child. Doggy day care facilities have sprung up in the past few years from the inner city to the suburbs and range from the basic to the totally pampering. And for those lucky dogs that get to go, it helps stave off separation anxiety and has no doubt saved a lot of shoes and furniture. The overnight or longer term boarding of pets has also improved by leaps and bounds to the point of an enviable number of pet resorts or retreats as opposed to merely kennels and catteries. They're equipped with webcams tied to the Internet so you can see your dog at play or rest from wherever in the world you are. Spa treatments are no longer a laughing matter and becoming more common at day care and boarding facilities. And of course, the prices reflect the extras you can get when taking Fido for the Big Day Out, a Long Weekend away or a Dog Holiday camp.

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With a capacity of about 40 dogs, it has a variety of areas for various activities as well as a chill out spot. It has a store with prepared foods, cans, kibbles and supplies for their rushed inner-city clientele and also has evening puppy preschool classes. Aside from agility games indoors, your dog can also be taken for on-leash walks twice daily to nearby Prince Alfred Park.

Less than a kilometre away in Waterloo, a luxe day care, accommodation, grooming and pooch pleasure palace called PawPaws opened with a spritz early this year to much media coverage and celebrity red-carpet creeping in a launch to rival a movie premiere. It represents the top end of the market in care and facilities. With Spa Rituals and even a Doggy Detox treatment, it's also taken dog grooming to a salon level.

It's a massive three story affair with a rooftop outdoor play area that has hotel quality bathing suites with granite, marble and porcelain as well as a range of play areas for various size dogs with kennels to match. From a plush entry area to nannies, not carers, it's an over-the-top experience for those who only want the best for their fur kids, and can afford it. No, they won't get chauffeured in prams! Aside from the rooftop play area with pool, they also get walked through the leafy streets surrounding the edifice. And it's also run 24/7 as a fully attended sleepover facility for short or long terms stays.

But there are a range of facilities springing up all over the city once they meet the restrictions of council development, investment capital, insurance, staff and training, all the time trying to balance the load of dogs with the need for profit. If you need a laugh to see how far the concept has gone, check out Internet Interpet in this issue.

The formula is simple. There may an average of 25-40 dogs on premises with trained, insured staff appropriate to the numbers to handle them. Staff are often vet nurses, vet students or dog trainers in courses as well as those who just love pets. It's not an easy job wrangling a herd of howlers when they get restless and walking them in the neighbourhood is a challenge when you've got four on the move and bags in hand to scoop up the remnants.

Dogs are grouped more to temperament than size with snoozers in their own laid-back area facing a country mural while the more active hounds cavort in obstacle courses, chasing balls and each other around large penned areas. They seldom bicker and it's a great way to get dogs socialised as well as happy to be playing in the pack than lonely at home.

There are conditions though. All dogs must have C5 vaccinations that are current. There is an opening age limit of 12-16 weeks or more in most centres, dogs must be desexed (or intact only up to 6-7 months) and they must undergo an assessment as to their behaviour and suitability for being in the group. If they pass this before they enter, usually by a third party behaviourist or qualified trainer, they can still be booted out if they act up. And many require proof of current worming, tick and flea prevention regimens.

You'll have to fill in a multipage form on you and your dog, provide documentation of health and other aspects as required plus sign a waiver and release of responsibility. This would also be the time to check that your homeowners' or pet insurance would cover you in case your dog acts up and comes off second best as could just as easily occur in the park. Liability for dog stoushes extends to these centres just as in a public park if your dog is aggressive.



Lapping up the luxe surroundings

But one engaging aspect of day care centres is that you can use your pet's time their to make them a better dog—mentally, behaviourally and aesthetically.

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