

Boston Sunday Globe

JANUARY 21, 2018

SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE JANUARY 21, 2018 | BOSTONGLOBE.COM/TRAVEL



Canine guests at the Topnotch Resort in Stowe, Vt., are allowed time on the tennis courts to play fetch.

Pampering dogs is latest pet project for resorts

By Jon Marcus
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The travel industry is going to the dogs.

They're being greeted, at the elegant Sherry-Netherland Hotel on Fifth Avenue in New York, with neatly packaged gift boxes of treats even nicer than their owners get, and have personal walkers on call.

They enjoy, aboard the Queen Mary 2, a refurbished kennel with a water view and custom art, Barbour accessories, fresh-baked bis-

cuits, stainless-steel water bowls, and embroidered fleeces to protect them from the ocean chill.

They're lavished, at the Topnotch Resort in Stowe, with 25-minute in-room spa treatments and tennis court time for playing fetch.

And they're offered, at the boutique inns of the Noble House chain, not only dog, but also cat room-service menus, pet beds, and designated concierges.

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SPRINGING FORWARD

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city is abuzz

with new energy.

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Resorts cater to dogs to fetch more business

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This is no imagined fantasy world of animated talking pets. It's a new reality among travel companies trying to nose in on the \$63 billion pet industry and lure the 65 percent of American families with pets by making it easier for them to come and stay.

And sit. And roll over.

"This is a big part of the traveling public," said Lorraine Sileo, senior vice president for research at the travel market research firm Phocuswright. "As a society, our pets have become part of our lives. Why would you want to exclude that population from being potential guests?"

Especially considering how big that population is. Sixty-five percent of American households include at least one pet, up from 56 percent in 1988, according to the American Pet Products Association. And more than half take their pets with them when they travel, Needham-based TripAdvisor reports. (That includes 4 percent of bird owners and 2 percent of cat owners, a separate survey by the pet products association found.)

Not surprising, then, that the proportion of hotels accepting pets is up over the last 10 years from less than half to more than 60 percent, according to the American Hotel and Lodging Association.

The sharpest increase has been among luxury hotels, 80 percent of which have gone pet-friendly.

"If the upper end of the market dictates that they want to bring their pets, we'd be foolish to say you can't do that, because they'll find a place that will," said Michael Ullman, executive vice president and chief operating officer at



the Sherry-Netherland. "So why not make it easy for them?"

It's more than easy. The Sherry-Netherland's "Lap of Luxury" package includes a box of toys and treats from the pet-subscription company BarkBox, a dog bed, and dog-walking services. (Humans get a box of Louis Sherry chocolates and mineral water.) The Gates Hotel Key West and a few others have also teamed up with BarkBox to provide arriving dogs with gifts.

The "Serve, Fetch, Love" package at the Topnotch in Stowe makes the tennis courts available for dogs to chase a ball around, and when they're worn out sends a therapist to give them in-room reiki massages.

"It's very calming and nurturing for the dog," said Topnotch spa director Alexandra Sharpe-Keene, herself a dog owner.

"Dogs are a very important part of people's lives," Sharpe-Keene said. For owners, she said, more and more, "The idea is that you come and enjoy a vacation involving your pet. This is a proper vacation for people. It's not just a matter of bringing your dog and leaving them. We're not looking for you to come and leave your dog with dog-walkers or dog-sitters."

As for the trend of catering to pets across the travel industry, "It's definitely on the upswing," Sharpe-Keene said.

That includes aboard the Queen

The Sherry-Netherland in New York City offers a "Lap of Luxury" package that includes a box of dog treats and toys, a dog bed, and dog-walking services.

Mary 2, whose parent company, Cunard, has been giving pets the royal treatment since the Duke and Duchess of Windsor set sail with their pugs and Elizabeth Taylor exercised her dogs on the sports deck of the original Queen Mary.

The Queen Mary 2 has refurbished and expanded its kennels, added a "pet playground" with ocean views, and decorated the owners' lounge with a specially commissioned original series of illustrations called "Posing Pooches," depicting dogs afield in London and New York.

The Hotel Derek in Houston has a newly opened "Wag Lounge," just for pets. The Woodmark Hotel near Seattle just debuted its "Yappier Hour" for dogs and their owners to socialize together. L'Auberge in Del Mar, Calif., last year lifted its size restriction on dogs and welcomes them with minicupcakes.

There remains the delicate balance of appeasing other visitors who may not be so thrilled about this. "Not everyone wants to stay at a property where there are pets," Sileo said.

But Ullman and others report few or no dogfights. "I haven't had one negative reaction," he said.

About half of hotels still charge extra for these services, the American Hotel and Lodging Association reports. The cheapest pet-friendly room at the Sherry-Netherland starts at \$699 a night, L'Auberge charges an ad-

ditional \$125 per stay, and the Derek, \$100 per stay — though a portion of that fee goes to the local chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The cost of crossing the pond with a dog aboard the Queen Mary is \$500 to \$700, depending on the animal's size.

But owners' enduring pet peeves have nothing to do with price. Their biggest concern is that, since most hotels won't let them leave their pets alone, there's seldom anywhere to stash them while they're out for meals or to sightsee, TripAdvisor says. More than a quarter want hotels to offer pet-sitting, and a fifth want on-site kennels.

"When you look around at places that call themselves pet friendly, the reality is it's still not that easy to bring your dog with you," Sharpe-Keene said.

But it's a lot easier than it used to be.

Among the reasons for that is to encourage pet owners to not only come in the first place, but stay for an extra night or more, Sileo said.

"People can make all kinds of excuses for not traveling," she said. "You want to bring down barriers to travel, including not having to worry about your pet."

More than a third of owners take shorter vacations, and a quarter take fewer of them, because of a reluctance to leave their pets behind, TripAdvisor found.

When hotels accommodate their pets, people on vacation "stay longer," Ullman said. "And they're more relaxed about it."

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