

The fabulous life of ...

Fido

Doggie spas, pooch hotels and Gucci pup totes are all the rage as pet splurging hits the mainstream

By Laura Castle
REDEYE

Tucker loves to spend his mornings splashing in an outdoor pool and fooling around with his friends at the West Loop day care he attends.

But once his 12:30 p.m. nap rolls around, this playful 4-year-old is ready for a little rest under the midday sun. The yellow-haired youngster will spend the rest of the afternoon hanging with his friends.

Tucker, a yellow Labrador retriever, is one of many dogs in Chicago—and all over the U.S.—whose owners are spending up to \$60 a day to pamper their pets in fancy day cares that offer private suites, individual TVs and massages.

Americans will spend \$2.7 billion on pet services such as boarding and grooming—among the fastest-growing components of a pet care industry that will generate \$38 billion in sales in 2006, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association.

“There is a huge population of dogs in Chicago, and more and more people are realizing

that they need to give their dogs a life while they are at work,” said Joel Spainhour, owner of both Tucker and his namesake day care, Tucker Pup’s Dog Activity Center, 219 N. Carpenter St.

Spainhour’s idea is catching on. As pet owners look for alternatives to keeping their dog under house arrest while they are at work, doggie day cares are beginning to pop up all over Chicago.

Besides Tucker Pup’s, pet owners can board their dogs in style at day cares such as Pooch Chicago, WickerPets, and PetSmart’s new PetsHotel centers and, coming this summer, Canine Empire. A day in day care can cost anywhere from \$15 to \$60, while overnight stays can go even higher.

“Dogs are just like children,” Spainhour said. “They need plenty of exercise and don’t want to have to sit in a kitchen all day.”

Pooch Chicago, 2307 W. Belmont Ave., also offers day care, dog training and overnight accommodations, according to owner Robin Tomb. Along with those services, you can pamper your dog with spa options such as massages.

Canine clients also can take a dip in the indoor lap pool and socialize with other dogs.

“Dog owners want a place that is more than just a dog kennel,” Tomb said, adding that offering spa services allow owners to feel that, “while you are on vacation, your dog is on vacation too.”

At one local PetSmart PetsHotel, dog owners can check their pooches into an atrium room for \$23 for an overnight stay or in a private dog suite for \$33. Just exactly what will the dogs get? In the suite, dogs relax on a bed while watching dog-themed movies on their own TV. When treat time arrives, PetsHotel guests indulge in a lactose-free, fat-free ice cream snack served with doggie biscuits.

“We want to give a pet owner total care,” said Sam Walker, manager of the PetsHotel at 2665 N. Elston Ave. “We have the hotel, grooming salon, pet hospital and pet training as well.”

Not all dog owners feel like these booming businesses should be an essential part of a their pooches lives.

“I think it’s all a little ridiculous,” said Andy Ericson, 27, the owner of Leon, a bulldog. “If people don’t have time to pay attention to their dogs then they shouldn’t have one.”

Ericson, who lives in Lakeview, exposes Leon to other canines at local dog parks. “I think a dog is comfortable in its own surroundings,” he said. “It’s good to have the dog interact with other dogs, but there’s no reason you can’t take him to a park when you get home.”

Spainhour of Tucker Pup’s realizes some owners say doggie day care is simply expensive pet pampering, but he doesn’t agree.

“This is not a way to spoil your dog. It’s a necessary aspect of a dog’s life,” he said. “When I was growing up people just put their dogs in the backyard, but they are meant for more than that.”



Joel Spainhour, owner of Tucker Pup’s, shares his lap with some of the smaller dogs while watching over the group play outside.

[JASMIN SHAH PHOTO FOR REDEYE]

BY THE NUMBERS

\$36 billion

U.S. spending on pets (2005)

\$29.4 billion

U.S. sales of children’s clothing, toys, furniture and accessories, (2005)

63%

Percentage of U.S. households with a pet (2005)

\$2.5 billion

Amount spent on pet grooming/boarding (2005)

62%

Percent of pet owners without children.

35%

Percent of pet owners who characterize a pet as a child.

[SOURCES: APPMA, PACKAGED FACTS, NPD GROUP]

TELL US

Is pet spending out of control? E-mail us at rita@redeye.tribune.com. Remember to include full name, age and neighborhood you reside in.



Dog portraiture

The Internet and dog magazines such as Bark, the New York Dog and Hollywood Dog are awash in ads for pet portraitists who do oil paintings and photography. Prices charged by top talent range from a few hundred dollars for a photographic sitting to the high five figures for an oil painting. Two local artists who do pet portraiture are Matthew Owens (owensartwork.com) and Steve Grubman (grubman.com).



Allie Goldberg hired a Chicago photographer to take glamor shots of her Scottish Terrier, Mr. Belvedere.

[PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE GRUBMAN]

Busy barkers

Owners can keep their pets’ schedule with the Pet Master, a \$25.45, paw-shaped PDA (thepetmaster.com) from Excalibur Electronics. The Pet Master is designed to help you organize and store the appointments and contacts associated with up to four pets; has an alarm system that goes off when it’s treat time or a birthday, and an encyclopedia of cat and dog information, from health tips to trivia.

Tote bags

Owners of mini-pooches are snapping up fancy dog tote bags. Anthropologie has the posh Charlotte Doggy Tote that’s decked out with leather trim and a polka-dot lining for \$188. The Petote Metro tote made with gold-plated hardware goes for \$360 to \$600, while a Gucci carrier is \$720.



Specialty beds

King Koil mattress company has launched a new line of pet beds that includes the \$259.99 “Captain’s Bed,” a 4-inch-thick mattress atop a platform frame that comes in pine, cherry or golden oak and has two drawers.

[L.A. TIMES, THE WASHINGTON POST, ORANGE COUNTRY REGISTER, HARTFORD COURANT, ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION]