

Cushy kennels

Who you goñña call?



photo by Pam Harris

Molly prefers the peace and quiet of home, while Qwincy loves nothing better than to make new friends and play, play play. For Blue, an everyday routine is best, but Apollo enjoys his time away from the daily grind, taking a dip in the pool and going on nature walks.

by Eileen Finan

Pam Tallmudge of Dunwoody, Ga., poses poolside with her Golden Retriever, Apollo, at Pet Lodge Pet Resort.

'...I watched the other dogs in there all wagging their tails. There were no dogs in cages looking pitiful.'

For many pet owners, deciding whether to board your animal or hire someone who makes house calls can be as daunting as settling on child daycare or a babysitter. But, experts say, figuring out if your dog or cat is a habit-driven homebody or an energetic extrovert is the first step in making the right decision.

"It really is on an individual basis," says Dr. Alice Moon-Fanelli, an animal behaviorist at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in Boston. Animals that haven't been properly socialized might find a kennel experience overwhelming, Moon-Fanelli explains. "It would be a new place, a lot of unfamiliar people, a lot of barking dogs," she says. "That could be stressful for them.

Conversely, a destructive or aggressive animal could cause major problems if left at home with just a sitter visiting."

For Clarissa Wolf of Chaska, Minn., the decision was more complicated than usual. She already had a favorite cat sitter for her three felines, but Qwincy was more demanding. When three walks a day didn't wear out the 2-year-old papillon, she knew she'd have to find a special kind of pet care that gave him a chance to burn off excess energy.

She found her answer in nearby Minnetonka at Auntie Ruth's Furry Friends' Home Away From Home, an upscale boarding and daycare facility that provides roomy, cage-free facilities for its canine and feline clients. "He gets to play with other dogs for six to eight hours a day and comes home exhausted, which makes me happy," Wolf says. "A pet sitter wouldn't be able to spend that much time with him."

Wolf readily acknowledges that the cushy couches in the playroom and the \$40-a-night price tag are extravagant. "But I know he gets really good care — and he's worth it," she maintains. "I couldn't stand seeing him in a cage for 24 hours a day. He's like my child."

Kay Stone, who travels extensively for work and pleasure, admits she was initially uneasy about boarding her American Eskimo dogs, Coconut and Sharif, in a kennel near her Avon Lake, Ohio, home. "I heard scary stories about jail-like conditions," she says. "I was very nervous about leaving them."

Offering rooms rather than cages, regular walks and playtime, nearby boarding kennel Inn to Pets was the perfect solution. "I went over there on my own before my first trip and I watched the other dogs in there all wagging their tails," says Stone, who pays \$28 per night to board both pooches. "There were no dogs in cages looking pitiful. Coconut and Sharif are thrilled to go to Inn to Pets. They literally run up to the door to get in."

Inn to Pets owner Dean Koester says he's definitely noticed a boarding trend toward providing more of a



hotel-like environment. "Most pets 20 or 30 years ago were outside almost exclusively, but today most pets are inside exclusively," he explains. "They are used to being treated as part of our family. What's best for them is to mimic their home environment as much as possible."

That can mean color television, piped-in music and extras like nature walks, home-baked biscuits and dips in the kennel pool. "You feel like you are dropping your child off at daycare," says

"Just because your kennel doesn't have color TV doesn't mean it isn't a good kennel," says Jim Krack, executive director of the American Boarding Kennel Association, the trade group representing the 9,500 kennels in the United States. "The kennels with the chain link and concrete are very well able to provide high-quality pet care. It's just that they have neglected to emphasize the public relations aspect."

Gradually getting your pet accustomed to a kennel or an in-home care situation is the best way to prevent stress, advises Moon-Fanelli. "I would do some trial runs," she says. "Take them to the kennel for daycare before boarding or have your pet sitter come over and go on walks with you to see where you walk the dog. You need to understand that a sitter can physically control the animal."

Nancy Miller of Cincinnati found out the hard way what happens when things spiral out of control. Her dog, Buddy, a chow-retriever mix, was recovering from surgery when Miller hired The Good Neighbor, a pet-sitting service in her Mariemont neighborhood. "She wasn't supposed to run at all, and I was very clear that the dog had to be on a leash at all times and that she should be confined to the kitchen," she says.

Miller met with Good Neighbor owner Stephen Katz before she left, introduced the dog and passed along her instructions. But when she returned, she found evidence that Buddy had the run of the house and the neighborhood. "I confronted him and said, 'I'm not sure what happened but I see the blinds are broken and she was jumping all over the front door,'" she recalls. "He confessed everything. He said, 'It was terrible. I never had her on a leash.'"

Katz even told Miller that Buddy had escaped from the backyard at one point and was gone for several hours. "I was furious," Miller says. "I said, 'You should

have called me.' I could have had someone else take over at that point if he couldn't handle it."

While Katz admits he was wrong in not calling, he also says Miller didn't tell him the dog was afraid of men. "When I got there, the dog panicked and backed into a corner and started growling," he told Angie's List. "I probably should have called her, but what's she going to do if she was several hundred miles away?"

Like Miller, some pet owners have become wary of trusting a stranger with their home and animal. Others believe kennels can provide better security. "I just feel my dog is safer in a boarding environment than having someone come in and out of the house," says Tallmadge of her pooch, Apollo. "We have a fenced-in yard, and if the sitter left the gate open or unlocked he could get out."

But many pet owners see home care as the best option — in part because of the convenience. That's what sold Brian Craver on a pet-sitting



photo by Wanda Protecu

Tracey Eakin gives Kim Livingston, co-owner of a pet-sitting company in Canonsburg, Pa., instructions about her cat, Oakley.

service known as For Pets Sake in Charlotte, N.C. At 85 pounds, his black Labrador, Blue, isn't easy to move from place to place. "We were trying to make it easier on us and less stressful on the dog," he says.

As the owner of multiple dogs, moreover, Craver found that hiring a sitter to come twice a day was also cheaper than boarding more than one animal. (Pet-sitting prices average \$10 to \$20 per visit, while the daily cost for kennel boarding ranges from \$12 to \$40 per pet.) "Plus," Craver adds, "pet sitters pick up the mail, turn on lights and water the plants."

Mary Cannon, co-owner of Pet Sitters of South Hills in Canonsburg, Pa., says both dogs and cats benefit from being in their home environment. "We're not coming in and creating chaos and disturbing the animal's normal routine," she explains.

Moon-Fanelli and many cat owners also say felines are better suited to care from pet sitters. For example, Hope Schreiber says she couldn't imagine boarding her puss, Molly. "It seems to me it doesn't fit what a cat is," she says. "They are very rooted to their environment and their territory. They don't like change."

When her owner is away, 5-year-old Molly looks forward to twice-daily visits from Under My Wings, which is based in

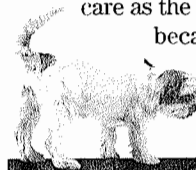


photo by Kathleen Quinn

Kay Stone, with Sharif in her lap and Coconut at her side, is very content with boarding her pooches at Inn to Pets.

Pam Tallmadge, who speaks of such amenities at Pet Lodge Pet Resort in Alpharetta, Ga., where her dog, Apollo, boards for \$20 a day plus extras like pool time. "I always say he hurts my feelings because he walks to the back without a leash. You don't see any tails between legs in this place."

Such luxuries are popular and can provide reassurance for pet owners. And while some clearly benefit animals — for example, studies have indicated that soft music has a stress-minimizing effect — they're not always necessary.



USEFUL WEBSITES

www.abka.com

Website of the American Boarding Kennel Association, offering a service locator tool as well as tips on how to choose a good kennel. Accredited kennels are noted.

www.petsitters.org

This website of the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters allows you to find a sitter near your zip code and lets you know if they are certified by NAPPS.

www.petsit.com

Website for Pet Sitters International, a for-profit trade group with a zip-code locator for sitters and tips on preparing yourself and your pet for your time away.

www.hsus.org/ace/11854

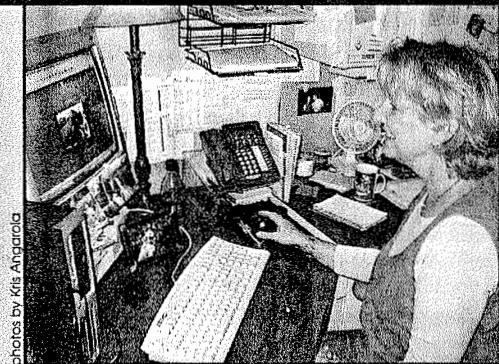
Tips and links from the Human Society of the United States on caring for pets when you travel.

CANDID COMPANION WEB CAMS



Terra Davis happily admits it: she needs her Cody fix.

Whenever there's a quiet moment at her job as a project manager for Roche Diagnostics in Indianapolis, Davis allows herself the treat of logging onto a website and watching her



photos by Kie Angerola
Terra Davis checks in on her dog, Cody, at the DogDayz website.

19-month-old Golden Retriever romp and tussle with the other pups at the DogDayz day camp. "I can't bring [Cody Cheyenne] to work, so I go in on the web camera and watch him," Davis says. "I love it. It is such a pick-me-up to see him having a great time."

DogDayz, an upscale boarding kennel and doggie day care in Noblesville, Ind., is one of a growing number of high-end pet facilities to offer web cameras broadcasting live pictures of pets at play. "The response we've gotten is awesome," admits owner Brian Cottrell. "Many child daycare companies are doing this now and dogs are like some people's kids. It just gives peace of mind, and for some people that is extremely important."

While the industry hasn't compiled figures on the trend, doggie cams have become big business among kennel owners and they are proving to be hugely popular with pet owners, too, says Jim Krack, executive director of the American Boarding Kennel Association.

"The ones who have it say customers love it," he explains. "Usually

they don't put cameras everywhere, but they find that the [exercise] runs with cameras are reserved first."

A recent DogDayz boarding customer, nervous about leaving the country for 10 days, religiously clicked in from Moscow to check on her pup, Cottrell recalls. "Every night before she went to bed, she would pop on the computer and watch her play," he says. "Even though she was half a world away, she could check up on her."

Cottrell, who installed four cameras in his facility soon after opening last February, says that setting up and running the web cam cost about \$1,500, a small price to pay for such a great customer benefit. "The cost is so negligible, I question anyone who isn't doing it," he adds.

However, he and Krack admit, the web cams can create the potential for customer misunderstanding. Click into a camera trained at a pet's private run, for example, and you may well watch your pet snoozing for hours on end. "In a day or two, the customer will call and say, 'Every time I dial in, my dog is sleeping.

What's wrong?'" says Krack. "But that's what they do! So a lot of the kennel owners think they should only have cameras in exercise areas."

Cottrell agrees there can occasionally be misconceptions. "But it's much more positive than negative," he insists. "Dogs can't tell

you why they like it here." But, he notes, you can watch them have fun on the web cam and feel reassured.

Davis agrees, but also points to another reason for its appeal. "At first I started checking it to see if [Cody] was OK, but now it's more for me than him," she says. "There are days when I am in meetings all day and I don't get to see him. Now that's a real downer!"

— E.F.



Davis' Golden Retriever, Cody, enjoys the spotlight. "I think it's because we took so many photos of him when he was a puppy," she says.

✓ PET-CARE QUESTIONNAIRE

Before choosing between a pet sitter or boarding your animal at a kennel, you might want to consider the following questions:

PET SITTERS

- Are they bonded and insured?
- Have they provided references?
- How much time will they spend with your pet per visit?
- How much playtime and how many walks will they give your pet?
- Have they made a free preliminary visit to meet your pet?
- Have they provided a contract?
- Do they have a vet on call?
- Have they asked you lots of questions about your pet's routine?
- Can they handle your pet on their own?
- Have they provided a backup plan in case of emergency?
- Do they know to call you if there are problems?
- Do they have the name and number of a neighbor?
- Will they leave you a record of their visits?

KENNELS

- Does the kennel mind unscheduled visits?
- Is the kennel clean or are there strong, unpleasant odors?
- Are there solid dividers between your pet and other pets?
- If there is community playtime, how do they decide which dogs play together?
- What type of supervision is there for playtime?
- How often will they check the pets?
- Will they provide food or can you bring your own?
- What is included in your nightly fee?
- Are walks included? Playtime?
- How do they keep records on food intake and elimination?
- What vaccinations are required?
- Is there a vet on call in case of emergency?
- Will they call if there is any problem?

Plymouth, Mass., and charges \$14 per half-hour. "I wanted Molly to have one person who she would recognize and play with and enjoy while I'm away," says Schreiber, who introduced Molly to her pet sitter slowly with a two-night trip before building up to a long vacation this fall. "So far, so good."

For pets with special needs, such as Tracey Eakin's six geriatric cats that range in age from 11 to 16, pet sitters can be indispensable. "They all need special medication, and some of them are not the easiest to administer medication to," says Eakin of McMurray, Penn., who relies on Pet Sitters of South Hills. "I was impressed with them because they leave a daily log of what they did, if they noticed anything, who they played with, who was hiding. They took their job seriously."

Jeffrey Lauterbach, president of the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters, a trade association representing

some of the estimated 10,000-20,000 professional pet sitters in the United States, says it's the sitter's duty to make sure he or she understands the needs of the pet.

"It is really up to the pet sitter to do the preparation," explains the NAPPS president, who also owns Critter Sitters, a pet-sitting service based in Atlanta. "The interview process should be thorough. One way for the owner to tell [if he or she is] dealing with professionals is the level of detail and the extent of the questions."

Likewise, if you are trying to choose between boarding your animal at a kennel or bringing in a pet sitter, your decision needs to be rooted in solid research (see sidebar above). In addition, pet lovers say, you should never underestimate the power of animal intuition. "Watching how an animal responds to somebody is not a trivial matter," says Schreiber. Lauterbach agrees: "The animals always know." ❖