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## **Doggone good life**

### **Today's pet owners are willing to pay what it takes to ensure their animals' comfort and well-being**

By Paul Muschick  
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If Murphy and Ryker would be quiet for just a minute, the two miniature schnauzers might tell you a dog's life today is worth barking about.

There always will be some dog somewhere chained to a backyard tree in the rain, getting less attention than the television.

But today's pets, particularly pooches, partake in plenty of perks.

Many products and services have been around for years and just now are becoming more common, such as acupuncture for ailing animals. Others are new because people are demanding them.

"In a way, it's almost overkill," says Sherri Simon of High Point, Murphy and Ryker's owner. "There's so much out there."

If you haven't owned a dog for a while, things sure have changed.

Kennels aren't kennels anymore, but "resorts" and "spas" with lambskin blankets and classical music. People can take pets shopping at pet supermarkets. They can spend a week together at summer camp for about \$700, learning tricks and romping in the woods.

Groomers make house calls to bathe and brush. In line behind them could be a massage therapist for \$35 a session or a personal trainer. Professional photographers have special pet sessions with the latest digital cameras, so forget those Polaroids or fuzzy photos. Mail order catalogs offer dog couches, heated beds and cages with fans.

Older and sick dogs can get whirlpool therapy for approximately \$15 a session. Puppies can pop pills to dull the anxiety of being left alone all day.

"There's actually pet health insurance. Before, if you couldn't afford it, you had to put your animal to sleep," says Karen Buck, 28, of Greensboro, a dog trainer and dog sitter whose 7-year-old Rottweiler, Chops, rides with her in her red Cherokee on her rounds for Doggone-It!

The Simons try to avoid the flashy side of pet ownership. A tennis shoe or sock is plenty good for tugging and tearing, Simon says. And no sleeping in the bedroom.

Sherri Simon grew up on a farm with dogs that stayed outside, so just letting Murphy and Ryker nap on the couch makes her parents wonder.

“They never accuse them of being pampered,” Simon Says. “They just think we treat them too much like humans.”

But she and her husband, Gary, take advantage of some services they believe are good for the dogs. For example, when the Simons vacation, they don’t want Murphy and Ryker caged at kennel. Five years ago, they started paying someone to come into their home and feed and entertain the dogs.

Pet-sitting wasn’t so widely known then, though. And it took some convincing.

“Like, who would pay someone to come and baby-sit their pets?” Sherri Simon says they thought at first. “Well, we soon found out we would.”

Now, pet sitter Helen Hawthorne is one of the family. For 30 minutes of entertaining and caring for Murphy and Ryker, she is paid \$14.

Hawthorne, 73, founded Tend-a-Pet seven years ago when she retired as an optician. Business was slow the first year, but now she has a regular clientele of dogs, cats, birds and fish that she cares for when people go on vacation.

When the owners are away, she comes to their homes to feed and play with their pets.

“One Memorial Day weekend when I first started this business, I put 500 miles on my car not leaving High Point,” Hawthorne says.

Most pet sitters are bonded, and Hawthorne says it takes time to build a relationship with a family and pet. The Simons interviewed several before they chose her, and Hawthorne was just as picky about selecting them as clients.

“You wouldn’t want somebody just leaving a key under the mat,” Hawthorne says. “People love their pets, but they also love the contents of their home. They don’t know who’s coming in.”

Pet-sitting also is available daily for animals who need medicines, who are likely to claw the china cabinet if left alone or whose owners just feel sorry leaving them alone all day and can afford to pay for their entertainment.

Or people can take their dos to true doggie day care centers, dropping them off in the morning and picking them up after work like they would a child. That cost \$15 a day or \$60 a week at Pampered Pet Too, Greensboro’s first such center.

“There’s no way you could find anything like that 10 years ago” says Buck, who like Hawthorne spends her days traveling from home to home caring for pets whose owners are out of town or working long days.

The money doesn’t matter to many pet owners, Buck says.

“A lot of people are willing to spend any amount on their animals, “ she says.

That’s because they are getting closer to their pets.

“People aren’t just getting dogs to have someone to bark when people pull in the driveway,” Buck says.

Fran Keyes, owner of Nanhall Pet Spa and Pet Resort in Greensboro, agrees. “People today need something, need somebody,” she says. “Many times, that dog is probably the most trusting creature they can be involved with. You don’t have to dress up. You don’t have to put on airs.”

Her family’s pet resort offers indoor and outdoor kennels, some with sand that helps work the dog’s leg muscles as they run through it. Part of the pet resort’s three acres is a field for playing, and all dogs get play time to run free on the grass. Dogs can swim in a whirlpool, working their legs against the current.

At the spa location, Keyes and her daughter, Hayley, offer water massages. The animal is placed in a whirlpool, and Keyes presses a hose against the dog’s fur. The pressure of the water flow relaxes muscles and is especially good for older or injured animals. That costs \$15 a session.

Keyes says she’s been offering the whirlpool service for 18 years, though now it s becoming more popular along with other services, like grooming.

About 30 dogs a day are groomed at the two locations, compared with 15 a few years ago.

When dogs get old or ill, people are more willing to care for them.

Americans spent nearly \$8 billion on pet health care in 1997, nearly double the \$4 billion they spent in 1991.

Hip replacements and acupuncture have been options for years but are more frequent these days.

“Their dogs mean more to them, so they are willing to do more and more to keep them going,” Keyes says.

But as Simon says, there's the danger of making life too cozy.

Rick Schlaginhaufen, owner of Best Friends Bed & Biscuit north of Greensboro, offers music, lambskin blankets, play time and training at the kennel he and his wife opened eight years ago because they wanted a clean and innovative place to keep their own pets when they traveled.

He knows of kennels elsewhere that offer televisions in the cages. He's heard of people making videos of themselves for their animals to watch while they are at the kennel.

"That's getting a little too far for me," Schlaginhaufen says.

People have asked Hawthorne to spoon-feed dogs while they are away.

"That's how spoiled they were. The each one has its own fork," Hawthorne says.

Pet owners say the definition of spoiling differs among those who own pets and those who don't. Nonpet owners may say any perk is too much. Dog owners say they're just doing what they would do for anyone they love, making their dog happy and comfortable. And if that means a few extras here and there, so be it.

"I don't consider them spoiled," Simon says of Murphy and Ryker. "I consider them members of the family."

She considers dog sitter Hawthorne a family member, too, because her visits keep the schnauzers from being caged at a kennel during vacations, which makes both the Simons and Murphy and Ryker happy.

"I wouldn't take part of my family and drop them off somewhere," she says. "It is a luxury, and we understand that."