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Groom service

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page 80 • Stretch yourself – more get fit tips for you and your dog



Groom service!

Marjorie with her dogs Bull Terrier puppy Mana and 10-year-old Bull Terrier Tapa.



Pics: Cordelia Noble.

CASE STUDY

'She wants to stay and play ball!'
For Malcolm Atkin, of Pershore, Worcestershire, if there's anything more satisfying than being reunited with his Collie Bella, 4, it's knowing she's probably had a better holiday than him.

Bella chills out at Lucies Farm for a few days about four times a year. Malcolm found Lucies Farm on the internet. He said: "I go to historical re-enactments and it's impractical to take Bella because of the gunfire. It is important that she stays somewhere where she gets lots of exercise.

"Bella was rescued and used to be nervous of people and other dogs but coming here has done her the world of good. She really looks forward to her visits. Since she's been staying here, there's been a total change in her behaviour — thanks to staff spending hours playing ball with her she is starting to overcome her fear of young men."

Bella can't wait to start her holiday!



Malcolm said he can leave Bella with total confidence. "The only problem is getting Bella into the car when I collect her," laughed Malcolm. "She just wants to stay and play ball!"



Malcolm thanks Marjorie for looking after his pet so well.

With its comfy cubbyholes, underfloor heating (and air conditioning in summer, of course), indoor and outdoor pools, webcam facility and range of souvenir merchandise for guests to take home, there's no denying Lucies Farm is pretty swanky. In fact, this luxury dog resort, which nestles in 57 acres of stunning Worcestershire countryside, has more in common with a human hotel than a traditional boarding kennels.

But owners Marjorie and Craig Walsh wouldn't have it any other way, maintaining that an increasing number of dog owners are now demanding top quality accommodation for their pets while they are away — and some even regard the farm as a canine holiday destination in its own right.

"Our clients say that they like to stay in nice hotels and they want the same for their dogs," explained Marjorie, who stressed that it's Lucies Farm's core values of fun,

company and high standards of care that appeal most to canine guests and their owners.

Yet undeniably it's those personal touches and quirky little details that set this resort apart, from piped-in background music and home-baked dog cookies at bedtime to the newly-opened Ritz Canine Spa offering discounted hydrotherapy, acupuncture and massage treatments.

Splash out

"People love their dogs so why shouldn't they splash out £42 per night (£55 over the Christmas break) to ensure they get the best?" continued Marjorie.

Craig agreed and added: "We're more like The Savoy or The Ritz but for dogs. We just can't offer the high degree of personal care and attention we do in a first-class facility at Travelodge prices."

Before retiring from running a financial services company with offices in five countries, Craig and

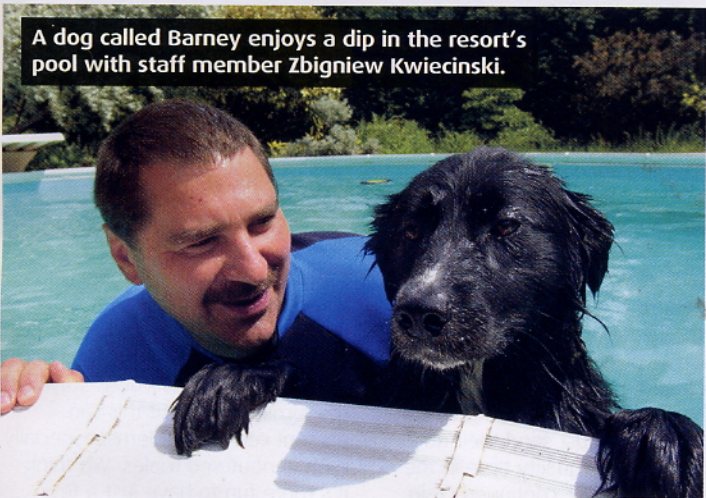
Joanne Bednall pays a visit to an upmarket 'dog resort', where canine guests receive five-star treatment.



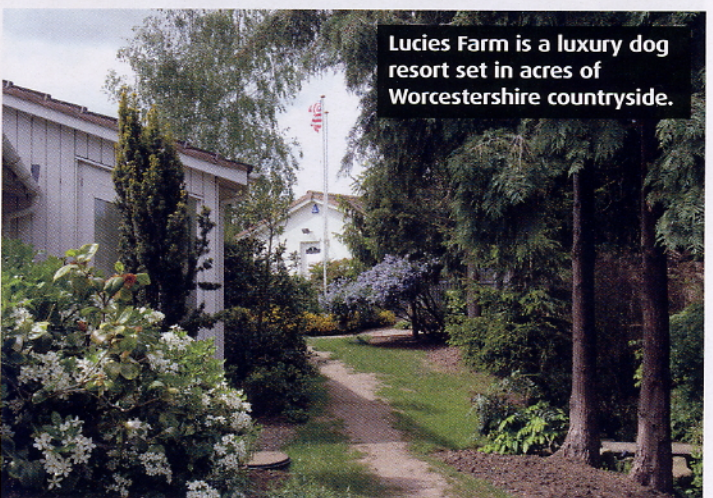
Shar Peis Daisy (brown collar) and Frosty (red collar) survey their accommodation.



Craig and Marjorie relax with their dogs in the farm's sumptuous grounds.



A dog called Barney enjoys a dip in the resort's pool with staff member Zbigniew Kwiecinski.



Lucies Farm is a luxury dog resort set in acres of Worcestershire countryside.

Marjorie travelled frequently and were sometimes away from the farm for months at a time. Both admit to feeling guilty at leaving their beloved Bull Terriers but this was tempered by the fact that the dogs were in luxurious surroundings, being cared for by skilled and attentive people they knew.

It occurred to them that there must be other owners who felt the same way and in 1996, the Lucies Farm dog resort was born.

Boasting just four 'suites' with inter-connecting doors and two 'double suites' in converted stables, Lucies Farm has the capacity for just 11 dogs at a time, meaning that canine guests are guaranteed lots of one-to-one attention. But while many bookings are last-minute, owners going away during the busy Christmas period, August or the first week of September, are advised to book well in advance.

A Colorado-based architect designed the cubbyholes to be raised off the ground to guard

against draughts and offer a safe and secure cave-like environment, favoured by wild dogs. Depending on whether they are long or short-haired canine guests can adjust the temperature to suit themselves by moving backwards or forwards.

"We have a fair number of Dachshunds stay with us so we provide ramps to help those with bad backs get in and out of their cubbyholes more easily," added Craig, whose premises are both fire and intruder alarmed.

Staff on hand

Each 'kennel' also benefits from its own inside area and outside fenced, locked run and is cleaned every day and disinfected between guests. Staff are on site 24/7 and veterinary assistance is available 24 hours a day.

After a leisurely breakfast (prepared in the kennels' own kitchen to owners' specific requirements) dogs can take an

accompanied stroll round the vast grounds, which include two acres of gardens and 17 acres of woodland. Then canine guests may indulge in a massage or acupuncture session with a qualified vet or a little hydrotherapy. Perhaps the more energetic might choose a game of fetch instead while those who are more advanced in years may decide on a short nap.

After lunch or dinner, dogs can return to their 'kennel' before the 10pm cookie run and retiring for the night. Craig and Marjorie stock most types of dog food, and make their own brand of dog food and biscuits. Organic beef from the farm's 14-strong Highland herd plus fresh vegetables and eggs are available.

Marjorie, the author of the soon-to-be-published book 'Cooking for Dogs', also bakes and decorates special canine birthday cakes, which can feature pets' own pictures. She also handmakes poi (from the Hawaiian taro plant) dog treats, aniseed (described as 'catnip for dogs') dog cookies, aniseed or

"Our clients say that they like to stay in nice hotels and they want the same for their dogs."



Canine guests can enjoy hydrotherapy sessions during their stay.



Old English Sheepdog Lucy gets some attention from Marjorie.



A leisurely walk back to the cubbyholes after a swim.

◀ banana-flavoured dog biscotti, oatmeal and carob dipped dog cookies, canine plum Christmas puddings and haddock-flavoured ice cream which all go down a treat with both human and canine guests and can be ordered on the Lucies Farm website.

And if owners are ever in any doubt whether their dogs have settled in or are being well looked after, they can opt for a nightly text service or an emailed daily diary and photograph. Alternatively, they can simply log on to the 'kennel cam' that charts their pet's every move.

"Owners can take remote control of the camera and move it around," explained Craig. "It's so powerful that your dog's eye can fill the entire computer screen. When they're in their kennels, though, dogs mainly sleep but it's reassuring for people to see and hear their pet."

Craig confessed that Lucies Farm's customers are typically those who "don't have to worry about their credit card limit" — they range from a Polish model in London who has a Yorkshire Terrier and likes eating the dog cookies herself because they don't contain any sugar, to a retired Birmingham builder with two black Labradors who only takes cruises on ships with an internet connection.

"Eighty per cent of our customers live in London," said Craig, who can

arrange to pick up and deliver dogs anywhere in the UK. Their most northerly client lives in Glasgow, which involves a 775-mile round trip to pick up her two Rottweilers.

"Some folks don't even go on holiday — they just send their dog away for some quality time in the fresh country air," continued Craig.

"One guy travels with his Labrador from London by train and we collect the dog from Worcester Shrub Hill railway station. The dog stays for a fortnight while his owner concentrates on finishing work projects at home.

"Then there's the antique dealer on the south coast who doesn't want friends to look after his Norfolk Terrier in case something happens to the dog and he loses both the friend and his pet!

"Half of owners leave us instruction sheets and many give us spreadsheets with various commands to follow."

Varied guests

These sheets include instructions of what to say to the dogs, such as "Come, Alfie, come" (happy excited voice), or "Tell me I'm beautiful. Ask for a kiss."

According to Craig, the canine guests are just as varied and range from a 17-year-old blind and deaf Staffordshire Bull Terrier to a Bull Mastiff and his Chihuahua

companion. Craig, who originally hails from Hawaii, added: "As far as we're aware, there's nowhere else like this, certainly not near London — some places have dogs staying in the family home but this can present certain problems, especially with unneutered males. We think it's more fun to have just a few dogs to spoil."

Fun is certainly high on the agenda at Lucies Farm and no one could accuse Craig and Marjorie of not having a sense of humour. Realizing they had eight Labradors staying with them last summer they decided to organize an impromptu Labrador party complete with party hats and nibbles around the pool. "We did ask all the owners' permission first though," insisted Craig.

Contented guests leave clutching a goody bag of cookies (humans) and with their tails wagging (dogs). For those who want a memento of Lucies Farm, a high quality customized hardback book with 20 pages of colour photos recording a dog's stay is available, while women can order handmade leather handbags featuring a photo of their dog on the side.

As Craig summed up: "Where else would offer your dog unconditional love and such an attentive personalized service, just like your dog receives at home?"

Contact

For more information on Lucies Farm, visit www.dog-hotel.co.uk or contact tel. 01905 830380.