

Popular Dogs: Bichon Frise

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Eve Adamson

Driving from church to her Tucson, Ariz., home, Janice Lemon-Ludwick passed a woman riding a bicycle with a baby-carriage trailer attached. She turned to see the cute baby. "Instead, I saw this gorgeous, fluffy little white face peering out," she said. "I said to the woman, 'Don't you think you are spoiling your Bichon just a little?' and the woman smiled and said, 'Well, it is our baby!'"

Bichon Frise (pronounced BEE-shawn free-ZAY) translates roughly as "curly coated lapdog." The breed's powder-puff coat, black button eyes and winning smile make it hard to resist and lead to generous human concessions. Owners frequently confess to sharing their dinners, their beds, even their pillows with their pets. Lemon-Ludwick, a volunteer who coordinates Bichon rescue in Arizona, took in one Bichon that dined on hearts of Romaine and buttered toast. Gail Antetomaso, a breeder, exhibitor and president of the Greater New York Bichon Frise Fanciers on Long Island, takes her Bichons in fancy tote bags when she flies. Rachel Hensley in Moncks Corner, S.C., lets her Bichon puppy, Kernal Bean, sleep on her head.

"I have known many owners who never allowed dogs on the furniture," said Steve Williams, a Bichon owner, breeder and rescuer in Austin, Texas. "It is quite humorous how quickly they succumb to the will of the Bichon and end up sleeping with them."

In some cases, the Bichon takes over. "If you get up in the middle of the night, consider your pillow taken," Antetomaso said.

Lemon-Ludwick's husband, Bob Ludwick, knows this all too well. He patiently consents to sharing his bed with five Bichons who claim the pillow before he can even lie down.

Don't expect privacy in the morning, either. One Bichon, Missy, accustomed to a weekly bath, occasionally surprises Lemon-Ludwick by joining her in the shower.

The Love Dog

Although owners tend to pamper their Bichons, the dogs are tougher than they look. "They are little, cute and fluffy, so people are inclined to treat them like hothouse flowers, which is absolutely unnecessary," said Rick Beauchamp, a Cambria, Calif., Bichon breeder, dog-show judge and author of "The Truth About Bichons" (Premiere Publications, 1998).

The Bichon Frise is related to the Maltese and descended from the Water Spaniel, also known as the Barbet, from which came the Bichon's original name of Barbichon. Another early name was Bichon Teneriffe, taken from the island where French sailors encountered them in the 14th century.

The breed was hardy enough to withstand ocean voyages. "I've been told that the Italian and Spanish sailors would take the little dogs with them on the merchant ships," Beauchamp said. "When they met the ladies in different ports and on the islands, they would give them as gifts. The Bichon became known as The Love Dog."

Later, the Bichon became a favorite of Italian, French and Spanish royalty and appeared in several paintings by Francisco de Goya. Fashions changed; in the late 19th century, the Bichon became a street dog accompanying organ grinders and performing in circuses. "The mere fact that the Bichon survived on its own through two world wars when nobody could afford to keep dogs is a statement in favor of their hardiness," Beauchamp said.

The Bichon quickly gained popularity in the United States after the formation of the Bichon Frise Club of America in 1964. In 1999, it was the nation's 25th most popular breed, according to the New York-based American Kennel Club.

Renowned for their cheerful disposition, Bichons gain friends and devotees wherever they go. "Our first Bichon, Teddy, was a champion," said Ann Jones, a Bichon breeder in Duluth, Ga., and health-committee chair for the Bichon Frise Club of America. "At dog shows, he kept people so entertained he had his own fan club. People came to the dog shows just to see him."

A Bichon doesn't have to be a champion to be charming. "Kernal loves everyone," Hensley said. "He is the happiest dog in the world, even when he gets in trouble. He literally smiles at you until you can't help but forgive him."

Compact Companions

While no facial tissue is safe from shredding, Bichons rarely cause major destruction. Their appetites, however, can lead to trouble. Lemon-Ludwick's Bichon, Percy, liked to wade into the koi pond and drag out the water lilies so he could nibble on the bread crumbs meant for the fish.

Bichons can be silly. When Hensley takes a bath, Kernal Bean goes wild. "He gets this funny look in his eye," Hensley said. "He jumps up on the tub, then runs back and forth in the bathroom with his ears tucked back and his tail under him. He'll keep it up through the entire bath. He also likes to drop his toy porcupine in the tub with me, so it can have a bath, too."

Bichons like to move, even if only within the confines of a small apartment. "They have very sporadic energy," Antetomaso said. "A typical Bichon thing would be to go out into the yard, run two or three laps like a Greyhound, then collapse and spend the rest of the afternoon watching butterflies."

That energy can also translate into a tendency to bolt, so Bichons should be in a fenced yard or on a leash when outdoors. "I don't know how car-smart Bichons are," Lemon-Ludwick said. "They feel like the whole world loves them so much, and they don't think anything will hurt them."

Because Bichons love everyone, rescued Bichons adapt easily to new families. "Bichons aren't terribly loyal," Antetomaso said. "Their best friend is the last person who said 'Hi.' That means they rehome well even into old age." Bichon friendliness extends beyond humans. "This is one of the most compatible breeds I've seen," Beauchamp said. "They get along with Great Danes, Chihuahuas, Rottweilers-big dogs in particular seem to like them. The Bichons usually wind up using the big dogs as their pillows."

Bichons like children more than many small breeds. While a young child needs supervision around any dog, Bichons will play with children of practically any age. The breed is sturdier than many dogs their size and small enough to handle with ease.

Bichons can enjoy romping around a large estate or live comfortably in a modest apartment with people who can't take them outside. Bichons adapt to any environment, as long as they can be with people. "Because of the Bichon's demand for close human interaction, they are not a breed for people who work long hours and are not at home on weekends," Williams said. "They thrive on being with you, next to you, on you-whether you are on the couch, in a chair or in your bed."