

## Home Away From Home

### **A basic boarding kennel or a luxury suite: Where will your dog be happiest?**

*Cathy M. Rosenthal*

The first time Sharon Smith boarded her two dogs at a kennel in New York it was “a nightmare,” she says. She found a kennel that agreed to board her dogs together, but when she arrived, she discovered the kennel had been sold to new owners.

“They refused to house them together,” Smith recalls. “I was so upset. We were leaving for vacation and had no choice but to leave them. When we returned, I found a kennel that would keep them together. I used them for 15 years.”

That was 20 years ago. Smith, who now lives in Sharpsburg, Ga., says keeping her two Boxers, Rocky, 9, and Aspen, 7, together remains a priority. She searched through a half dozen kennels before finding one that would keep them together, medicate them for chronic health problems, and maintain a level of cleanliness that her nose told her was acceptable.

“I sacrificed the outdoor run,” she says. “They have to be walked on a leash. But I found what was most important to me.”

Whether it’s for a family vacation or a sudden emergency, every dog owner will eventually have to find alternative care for his or her pet. Most people are anxious about leaving their dogs at a boarding kennel. But Smith says it helps “to learn what kennels are available so you can make the best possible choice for your dog.”

#### Know your options

As anyone searching today will discover, boarding kennels have changed dramatically in the last 20 years as dog owners’ expectations have evolved. “In the old days, a dog’s primary run used to be where he lived while he was boarded,” says Jim Krack, executive director of ABKA. “Today, it’s more like where he rests between activities.”

Krack says searching for a dog kennel today is like searching for the right hotel for your vacation. “Some people choose budget motels, others want full-service luxury hotels, depending on preferences and financial resources,” he says. “It’s the same thing with kennels. If you have a hunting dog who is outside all day, he’ll probably be happy in a kennel that provides basic services. That doesn’t mean the services are less than adequate. Dog owners just want something resembling the real-life care given at home, and people care for their dogs very differently.”

Today no two kennels are alike, although some franchise chains are beginning to emerge. There are, however, four types of boarding facilities that dog owners can consider: basic or traditional kennels, kennels with daycare options, veterinary boarding facilities, and upscale facilities with extended amenities. Overnight accommodations can range from \$12 to \$70 a night, depending on where you live, the size of your dog, and the type of facility you select.

#### Basic or traditional kennels

Kennels in this category vary greatly and range from facilities in rural areas to urban-style kennels in big cities. They provide basic services, including kennel space, exercise runs, regular feeding schedules, bedding, and temperature-controlled environments. Dogs spend most of their days in their kennels except for their scheduled time outside in the dog run.

**Pros:** Less expensive than upscale facilities, these kennels provide basic level care with the option of a few added extras, such as individual playtime or grooming.

**Cons:** These kennels may accommodate some individual requests, but most stick to a regular feeding and activity schedule.

#### Kennels with daycare options

People who use doggie daycare or take their dogs to off-leash parks want a kennel that offers their dog a social life. “It was once considered taboo to let a dog from one owner play with a dog from another owner,” Krack says. “But that concept has been turned on its head in the last decade. Many people now expect their dogs to have community playtime when they are boarded.”

**Pros:** Well-socialized dogs enjoy the interactive format and get more exercise than dogs at traditional kennels.

**Cons:** These kennels often mix overnight boarders with daycare drop-ins, so all dogs require a temperament test before being accepted into the facility.

#### Veterinary boarding

Many veterinarians designate hospital space for boarding or operate a separate kennel facility for their clients. In addition to supervised medical care, veterinary boarding kennels offer basic services, such as overnight accommodations, exercise time, and grooming. People who board their dogs at veterinarians' offices do so because "they feel comfortable with their vet or because their dog is older or has some special needs," Krack says.

**Pros:** A veterinary hospital is an ideal choice for a geriatric dog or a dog who requires more managed healthcare.

**Cons:** Unless dogs are housed in a separate facility or in a room with a different air exchange system, "healthy dogs are more at risk of being around sick dogs," Krack says. Some dogs also may be in crates rather than kennels.

#### Upscale facilities

Whether they are called resorts, hotels, camps, farms, spas, or doggie B&Bs, these facilities offer extended amenities little dreamed of 20 years ago. Dogs can take nature walks, get massages, watch in-room color TVs, sleep on couches, exercise in swimming pools, sign up for group playtime, or brush up on obedience skills. Dogs don't stay in kennels either; they sleep in rooms and suites.

"The frills are mostly for the owners," Krack says. "It helps relieve some of the guilt of leaving a pet behind. But it also can provide real-life comfort for the dogs. If your dog has always slept on the couch, suddenly being left in a kennel may be traumatic. These facilities strive to provide services that closely model care given by today's urban pet owner."

**Pros:** These facilities are willing to accommodate personal requests, from feeding your dog at a specific time to giving him three kisses on the nose before bedtime.

**Cons:** Nothing is free. The basic overnight stay may cost more than a traditional kennel, and the amenities can add significantly to the final bill.

Leaving your dog at a kennel can be stressful for both of you, especially if you wait until the last minute to find just the right one. You know what your dog needs to be happy and content when away from you, but you won't necessarily find what you're looking for right away. Give yourself time to learn about the different kennels in your community so that you can choose one that will care for your dog in the way you most approve.

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