

# Simply indulgent or barking mad?

BY JAMIE FIRST

Diamonds, fine food, massages, photo shoots, parties, even six-star accommodation – it is all part of the glamorous life of... a dog.

Not just any dog, but pampered, preened and prized pooches, in many cases held in higher regard than children.

What would typically be associated with the lifestyle of a Hollywood celebrity is now a regular occurrence for Australia's favourite companion animal.

From pet photographers and magazines to specialist bakeries and hotels, dogs appear to have their owners just where they want them.

Director of The Pets Hotel Alan Hill, who opened the luxury suites in Port Melbourne almost a year ago, says customers want to spoil their animals by giving them everything they could possibly desire and more.



Standing in the hotel foyer, one would never know it was strictly for pets. Boasting a large crystal chandelier in the reception area, Mr Hill says "everything is razzle dazzle and state of the art".

With almost 200 rooms, the facility is soundproofed, climate-controlled and features raised mini-beds and flat screen televisions.

Protection hasn't been overlooked either, with an overnight security guard on duty and "dog and cat cam" operating, so owners can keep an eye on their loved ones around the clock via the internet.

The price of a one night stay ranges from \$40 for conventional rooms to \$70 for presidential suites (which have views of the indoor, open play area, known as "Central Bark").

For an additional charge, The Pets Hotel also offers a valet "pick up and drop off service", a soothing massage (from a certified therapist), an essential oils spa and beachfront walks.

"We want to give people's animals the best possible experience so that the pets are dragging their owners through the door on their second visit," Mr Hill says.

High points of the year include "themed days" for the "footy furrnals (finals)", "howlloween" and Christmas, which involves a visit from "Santapaws".

But Mr Hill doesn't think he is going too far in providing creature comforts.

"It is a different world in here and if it was too

much, there wouldn't be a market for it," he says.

As it is, The Pets Hotel appears to be doing a roaring trade, with the phone ringing constantly.

A report by the Australian Companion Animal Council (ACAC) reveals that Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world, with 63 percent of households having a pet.

The research also shows that Aussies spend more than \$6 billion each year on their animals, up almost 40 percent over the past decade.

Owner of Diamond Dog Food & Bakery Alice Needham says it is human nature for people to want to spoil their dogs.

Her shop – which opened last November – looks like a delicatessen or health food store, but pet noises resonating from speakers and a wall of plastic chew toys, collars and leashes are giveaways that her products are not made for people.

Even though she sells items such as biscuits, muffins, doughnuts and cakes – without preservatives, sugars, salts or added fats – that are safe for human consumption, Ms Needham says "it is all about the dogs".

To emphasise this, she says she also caters for canine birthday parties – creating hot dogs, pepperoni pizzas, ice cream, plum puddings and shortbread.

Doggy Party Plan is another business specialising in canine celebrations.

Alicia Hawke started it in 2003 with the intent of pampering animals and making their owners feel as though they "deserve the love that their pets are giving them".

A party can cost as much as \$400 and includes games, toys, food served on silver plates and doggy gift bags.

Sometimes professional pet photographers are on hand to capture the special moments for owners.

After moving to Melbourne from the UK, long-time photographer and the head of Papparazzi Simon Woodcock began taking pictures of animals three years ago.

Describing his customers as "enthusiastic pet lovers who quite often treat their animals like their kids," Mr Woodcock has photographed baby crocodiles, Tasmanian devils and platypuses, as well as dogs.

He says that pet photographers are in hot competition, with more and more people wanting pictorial records of their beloved animals.

Photos are one of the mainstays of online magazine Pooch that hit the internet earlier this year and has now built up thousands of followers.

The independent publication for "dog lovers around the globe" offers tips, news and views about "all things doggy".

It dedicates a page to the "top dog of the day", encouraging readers to send in pictures of their pets and vote for the cutest.

Social networking has joined the animal obsession, with

sites such as "meet a pet lover" and "dog tree" (whose slogan is "helping your dog branch out") springing up and finding favour.

Animal fashion is also booming.

Owner of exclusive pet accessory shop Puppy Phat – that sells products manufactured primarily in Australia – Leeann Joseph doesn't believe a dog can be over-indulged.

"If someone gives you that much love, attention and devotion, you can never pamper it too much," Ms Joseph says.

Her shop, which sells "funky street wear for dogs", includes "hoodies" adorned with expressions such as "Diva" and "Spoiled and Loving it", as well as bathrobes, diamante collars, Swarovski crystal carry bags and day spa products like "Relaxing Spritz".

Ms Joseph says she "would find it an insult to a pet to go and buy something with velcro and a horrid pattern that has been made in a factory in China."

In spite of Ms Joseph's view that no pet can ever receive "over-the-top" treatment, the former CEO of the National Dog Trainers' Federation Boyd Hooper says trying to humanise a canine is not only ridiculous, but counter-productive.

"It is not what a dog wants and it is not what a dog chooses to do. I don't think it is servicing the dog's welfare," Mr Hooper says.

The Petcare Information & Advisory Service (PIAS) promotes socially responsible pet ownership.

PIAS consultant Susie Willis says research suggests pets are treated differently to how they were a generation or two ago.

"In uncertain times, people look for things that make them feel safe, secure and good, and pets very much do that," Ms Willis says.

She doesn't have an issue with pampering pets "as long as it does not compromise the animals' welfare".

However, Mr Hooper says people need to find a middle ground.

"Turning dogs into dolls and dressing them up and carrying them around in baskets is just silly.

"I really think people need to examine their own behaviour because it is not normal to do that sort of thing," he says.

But, if the increasing popularity of eclectic pet businesses is anything to go by, many think otherwise.



Retail "therapy" for dog owners.