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WORK&PLAY

When Mom goes away, it's a perfect time for Fido to play

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When Joanne Robbins of Chesterland seized the opportunity to get out of town over Presidents Day weekend, her 9-month-old puppy Lily went on a getaway of her own. Lily stayed at the UltiMutt Inn & Pet Resort in Burton, a pet resort set on a 17-acre farm in Geauga County.

"It's like being on a vacation for her," said Ms. Robbins, a full-time accountant with children. "She runs right in with her tail wagging. It's a wonderful peace of mind for us."

Traditionally, pet owners turned to family, friends and neighbors to watch their animals for getaway weekends or dropped them off at kennels and veterinary clinics. But for some people, who are tired of imposing on their family and friends or wracked by guilt after leaving their pets behind in cramped quarters, new pet care options are just what the doctor ordered.

"We don't like to leave her alone and were hesitant to leave her at a kennel, but then we visited UltiMutt and saw how much attention and interaction each dog gets. She's not in a crate or being boarded somewhere. If we didn't have this option, we wouldn't go away as much as we do," Ms. Robbins said.

Pampered pets

Pet resorts and hotels are among the newest pet care options. UltiMutt opened its doors in September of last year, owner Sonja Paetzel said, to offer a boarding option that was closer to a home environment than regular kennels. Dogs and cats are kept in 12-by-12 suites at UltiMutt.

The suites each have a television and are made to look like little bedrooms with beds that range from toddler- to queen-size. There are indoor and outdoor play areas as well. The emphasis at her pet resort, Ms. Paetzel said, is making sure each visitor gets plenty of attention and lots of playtime.

"For many people, their pets are like children," she said. "They are willing to spend a little extra money to make sure they are well taken care of."

The newly opened Barkley Pet Hotel & Day Spa in Orange installed plasma-screen televisions and webcams in its most costly "poolside" suites, which can be reserved for \$65 per night. There's also a full-service beauty salon and day spa, a rehab center with indoor pool and aqua treadmills and an artificial turf indoor play area.

Of course, many animals are most comfortable at home and a growing number of pet owners are utilizing professional pet sitters for quick getaways.

Leslie Sabatino—a.k.a. Leslie the Animal Nanny—operates a pet-sitting business in Cleveland. She began sitting for pets five years ago after struggling to find anyone to care for her own cat, which had diabetes and required special attention. Pet-sitting services like hers allow



An oversized likeness of Blue from Nickelodeon's "Blue's Clues" and a bed greet dogs in one of the rooms at the UltiMutt Inn & Pet Resort in Burton.

PHOTO PROVIDED

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— Sonja Paetzel
owner, UltiMutt Inn & Pet Resort

animals to stay in their own familiar environment and receive food, exercise and attention with minimal upset to their normal routines, she said.

"The business has gotten really huge for me," Ms. Sabatino said. "I started out with a couple of names from my vet, and it snowballed." Her once-solo business, in fact, now has one additional employee.

Ms. Sabatino has looked after about every pet imaginable, including a chicken that had to be let out into the yard several times a day while its owners were away.

Unlike bigger pet-sitting services, Ms. Sabatino said, she meets with clients and their pets before the owner takes off so the animal will be familiar when she comes into its home. Once the owner's away, she spends at least 30 minutes on each pet visit and offers additional services such as watering plants, bringing in the mail and even overnight stays. She charges \$15 for each 30-minute visit and between \$60 and \$75 for overnight stays.

"A lot of people who have a dog also have other pets that need to be cared for and having someone come to the house is a more realistic option," she said.

Indeed, boarding facilities are not readily available to hamsters, mice, snakes and other reptiles, according to Tom Muniak of Parma Pets. He said while people have requested such services the risk of a pet visitor harboring a disease that would infect the animals for sale at the store is simply too high. Most people with these types of pets rely on pet sitters or friends and neighbors.

The Parrotville bird store in Brunswick offers boarding services for most feathered friends. Owner Tony Riddle said it's often a good idea to board pet birds to give them the chance to get familiar with people other than their owners. Most pet birds, Mr. Riddle said, don't adjust well to people coming into their homes.

Warm-up sessions

No matter what type of care they choose, pet owners should not suddenly spring new faces on pets, animal experts said. This is especially true for dogs, said Solon-based dog behaviorists Karen Arnoff. She suggested taking dogs to the kennel or boarding facility for test runs that include a short visit first and then an overnight stay.

Or, have the pet sitter come by to play before the owners go away. She also suggested hiring the sitter to look in on dogs at least three times a day.

"Dogs left alone too long have been known to become destructive. The destructive behavior not only results in a mess awaiting owners to return, but often becomes a regular type of behavior," Ms. Arnoff said. ■