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Boarding a pet isn't limited to kennels anymore

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LOS ANGELES – You are spending Thanksgiving with Aunt Nellie in Kansas. Your dog will be staying in a hotel suite called Neiman Barcus with a flat-screen TV. There might be surf lessons, catered meals, a massage, pawdicure, spa bath and photo shoot.



Reed Saxon, AP

Mary Kay Benson gives German shepherd Heidi a surfing lesson at the training pool, complete with colorful beachfront murals on the walls, at the Barkley Pet Hotel and Day Spa in Westlake Village, Calif.

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Boarding your pet has changed a lot over the past decade.

Kennels still exist, but many locales also now offer pet-only resorts, hotels or in-home care. Whichever option you choose, there are some basic steps you should take so that arrangements go smoothly, including visiting or getting references for the facility, reserving well in advance of busy holiday times, and making sure your pet meets vaccination and other requirements.

If money is no object, there is no end to the extravagances you can order for your pet. The Barkley Pet Hotel & Day Spa — which really does have a Neiman Barcus suite — is a one-of-a-kind animal funhouse in [Westlake Village](#), about 40 miles northwest of [Los Angeles](#). You can rent a Serenity Suite for \$44 a night or reserve a storefront suite on [Rodeo Drive](#) or [Hollywood Boulevard](#) (they start at \$72.50 a night). Add-ons include day camp sessions, [limousine pickup and delivery](#), surf

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lessons, charm school, a mud mask, obedience training, holiday fur-dyeing and filet mignon from the **Four Seasons**.

You also get webcams, 24-hour staffing, a veterinarian under the same roof and lots of attention for your pet, said Malia A. Rivera, director of marketing for the hotel.

Daniel Smith and wife Kimberly Mellon-Smith of Thousand Oaks wouldn't leave their West Highlander white terrier Charlie alone for more than three hours

before the Barkley opened. Now he's a regular there.

"Our dog means everything to us. He's like a child to us, our little buddy. He's part of our family," Smith said.

For special needs animals — a senior or ailing dog, a puppy that isn't fully vaccinated, a large collection of pets, a pet that doesn't like to leave home or a new rescue dog that isn't socialized yet — home care might be the best choice. A professional pet sitter can come as many times a day as needed, walk and feed the animals, give medicines, even stay overnight, said Gretchen Rexach, who owns Home Buddies Caregivers in Burbank, a franchise of the national Home Buddies in-home pet care service.

Rexach caters to workers in the entertainment industry with seasonal work and odd hours. In addition to caring for animals, her employees will also water plants and bring in mail, she said.

Her staff specializes in special needs pets — those that need medicine or careful handling — and can also do overnight shifts for pets that are "just not used to being left alone. They are used to sleeping with somebody," she said. Clients pay \$17 for 15 minutes, up to \$32 for an hour, \$100 for a 12-hour overnight.

If you're hiring someone for the first time, "don't go with the cheapest or most convenient" option, Rexach said. "Ask for references." After all, you are not only entrusting your pet to a stranger, but your home as well.

Home Buddies also rents webcams for temporary home use.

Do research before booking boarding facilities, too, advised Deborah Ropes, general manager of [Lucky Dog Resorts](#) in Colorado Springs, Colo. Tour the place, talk to the staff, take a sniff, talk to other customers, she said. And tailor arrangements to your pet's style.

"If your pet is laid back and loves to play, a daycare playgroup will help him burn off energy and sleep better at night," said Ropes. "Is your pet shy and anxious? A low-volume, low-activity kennel might be best, or call an in-home pet sitter."

Some facilities, like the Barkley, will let pets drop in for a visit to see how they like it. Others — like Home Buddies' Camp BowWow, a daycare and overnight program — require that animals be brought in for an "interview" to see how they interact with other pets. Most facilities will refuse aggressive dogs.

Once you've decided on a facility, make reservations well ahead of time. "Our rule of thumb at Lucky Dog is book before Halloween for Thanksgiving, and book before Thanksgiving for Christmas," Ropes said.

Most facilities close on major holidays and many close Sundays. If you arrive home from vacation late on Saturday, you may not be able to pick your dog up until Monday, so be prepared to do without your dog and pay for the extra day. Find out what happens if you're late picking up; holiday plane schedules and traffic can be unpredictable.

Most facilities want proof of vaccinations for rabies, distemper and sometimes bordetella (kennel cough). Most vets can easily print out and if necessary fax a record of shots. Some places require that your animal be spayed or neutered, and some even want your pet microchipped.

Some facilities require collars and leashes, some use their own. The Barkley does not allow any personal clothing, blankets or toys, but some places suggest bringing a piece of owner's clothing. "We encourage clients to bring a T-shirt or other large piece of clothing with the owner's scent well-embedded," Ropes said.

If your pet has special needs, bring the food, medicine or supplements to the resort or kennel, along with instructions and contact information for your vet.

Finally, if available, consider scheduling a bath and other grooming just before pickup. It will save you a smelly trip home.

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