

A week in the life

SECTION F

Globe Focus



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The core of our culture rests in a handful of neighbourhoods along the foothills of the Santa Monica mountains. We all know their names: Beverly Hills, Bel Air, the Hollywood Hills, Glendale, Pacific Palisades, Malibu. And we know the handiwork of their residents: Almost all of the cinema and television consumed in North America is made here, transmitting an ever-changing set of ideas about how to eat, drink, dress, fornicate and construct your private life.

Americans spend \$29-billion annually on goods and services for their pets, not including veterinarian bills, which make up an additional \$11-billion. These numbers have risen steeply in recent years, driven by the expanding range of treats, toys and plush services people are willing to buy, and by an increasingly anthropomorphic attitude toward domestic animals.

CUSTER

Custer's day begins at 7 a.m. sharp, when he and the other dogs are awakened in their wide, comfortable private pens. Gradually, they saunter into a grassy yard, to the sound of a bubbling fountain, for their morning constitutional. There is a koi pond nearby, teeming with the colourful Japanese fish, and carefully tended flower beds. Dogs are not usually too fussy about scenery, but you can tell they are mellowed by the shady landscaping and rolling valleys here in the Malibu Hills. A few sprawling villas pepper the skyline, and a lot of grassy, open space, filled with horse-riding trails and wilderness.

Custer is a golden retriever, one of two owned by Jay Wolpert, a successful Hollywood screenwriter. While Wolpert is away, Custer and his fellow retriever Locksley stay here at the Canyon View Ranch, a canine spa, boarding retreat and training centre that advertises itself as "a country club for dogs."

Its owners, Joe Timko and Randy Neece were TV-industry figures who developed a ken for dog training, and a desire for better canine services. To stay at Canyon View and receive its training sessions, owners of dogs like Custer pay \$70 a day, or almost \$500 a week.

"There was nothing like this available, and people had to put their dogs in noisy places in industrial neighbourhoods," Timko says.

When Custer is at home, in the Hollywood Hills, his life is at the centre of the household's activities: meals of gourmet dog food tailored to his delicate digestive system, daily drives along Mulholland Drive to the Laurel Canyon dog park, where the show-business elite give their pets long walks through stunning scenery, often after dressing them in the city's latest dog fashions and grooming them, at considerable expense, at one of the exclusive parlours along Santa Monica Boulevard's dog-care strip. Whenever Wolpert, 59, leaves town for business or vacation, he first makes the hour-long drive deep into the hills to drop off the dogs.

Many of Custer's playmates at Canyon View are dogs belonging to show-biz owners, who have led the way in bettering their pets' lives. Custer has probably met Daisy, the Jack Russell terrier belonging to the singer Lou Rawls, and the bouvier des flandres belonging to the actor Christopher Lloyd, who has his dogs picked up and dropped off in a liveried stretch limo.

Hollywood figures like to drop by the spa to see the dogs cavorting in

plush surroundings. "It's like getting your kid into a private school," says the comedian Sinbad, whose two pugs are regular guests.

After his morning meal, Custer is led out to the ranch's main training-and-play yard, for a series of activities the dogs clearly look forward to. An employee is paid to work in the play area all day and keep the dogs entertained by throwing balls and hosting games. In small groups or individually, the dogs are led out for intensive training sessions lasting 20 to 45 minutes, twice a day.

At the centre of the yard is Canyon View's most famous feature, the bone-shaped in-ground swimming pool, in which the dogs eagerly romp. A bone-shaped fountain sits next to it. Up on a hill is an elaborate play structure, which the older dogs shade themselves beneath; a nearby tree is rigged to provide a fine mist of cool water, to cool down play-heated dogs. It is a delightful scene of canine happiness, free from barks and boredom.

The dogs must first pass a consultation session, and demonstrate their sociability with other dogs. After all, this isn't for everyone.

At 5, after an afternoon of training and play interrupted by cool-down breaks in an air-conditioned room, Custer and the rest of the dogs are led inside for their evening meal. This is no simple ritual. The standard Canyon Ranch diet is top-of-the-line dog food, containing only lamb and rice, but few of the clients stick to the standard.

"We get every kind of special food request you can imagine, and then some," says Timko. "We get vegetarian diets, and raw foods [a dietary movement in which people, and apparently their pets, eat only uncooked fruits and vegetables], and we get up to six supplements at a time that have to be crushed and mixed up and blended. And some people want the food heated up." Or garnished with the latest pet-food fad — dog gravy.

Custer and Locksley are no exception. "The joy of golden retrievers is their wonderful personalities, but the downside is that they are known for their sensitive stomachs," says Wolpert. "We have them on a special diet, and it costs us a pretty penny."

After dinner, sated with food and exhausted from a day of happy play, the retrievers are ushered into their private pens, given freshly laundered towels and blankets, and given another night of quiet sleep. Canyon View Ranch eschews some of the gimmicks of other luxury dog services — humans paid to share a bed with company-starved dogs; video-screening sessions for the animals — but it does offer a standard of habitation that would satisfy many humans.

Wolpert concedes that he spends lavishly on his dogs, but he is far from dog-centred by current L.A. standards. Aside from the Canyon View extravagance and the diet, his dogs' indulgences are limited to monthly trips to U-Wash Doggie in Hollywood (about \$40 for a luxurious, self-administered wash), and to medical expenses that would be the envy of many American citizens — up to \$100 a month, even when the dogs are healthy.

"They really do lead pretty good lives," Wolpert says of his retrievers. "It costs a little more, but it means that when we go away we can truly have a vacation without guilt. Just ask the dogs — you can tell how excited they are when they come here."