

A *fabulous* DOG'S LIFE

BY MARJO VAN LIJSSEL

The autumn sunshine is cheery. In an open area by the water in the Amsterdam park dogs are barking to their hearts content. They splash in the water and swim excitedly after a stick. Dozens of balloons and festoons hang from the branches of the trees. As hostess, I hand out doggie cookies and savory pies to the dogs and their owners. Am I hosting a birthday party? Yes, I most certainly am, but it is not one for a child. My English cocker spaniel Snuit turns five today and that just has to be celebrated.

*Haute couture
and healings
for dogs.
Are we getting a little carried
away here?*



At Sparky's they sell it all: from haute couture to haute cuisine for your dog.



Dogs are the Netherlands' second-most popular pet and there are currently 2.1 million of them in the country. Many dogs occupy a prominent position within their families. Research shows that many people view their darling pet pooch as their own child. And there's money to be made in this humanizing of our canine companions. In countries such as the USA and Japan, doggy spas and yoga centers for canines are anything but unusual. This year in Brazil we saw the launch of the Dog Lover Doll, an inflatable doll for oversexed he-dogs. And in India you can marry your four-legged friend.

And not to be left out, here in the Netherlands the doggy coats, doggy sweaters, doggy sweat suits, doggy swimming trunks, doggy carnival costumes, trendy doggy bike trailers and expensive and flashy dog collars are selling like hot doggy cakes. And should you feel the need to bond closer with your pooch, there are doggy vacations and dog massage services available. Want to get away from it all for a while without worrying about your four-legged best friend? Check him into a four-star dog hotel where he can relax in a homely atmosphere enjoying his favorite music and movies.

"The fact that animals are becoming ever more important to us says something about our society," says Nienke Endenburg, mental health psychologist and expert in human-animal relationships. "Social isolation is a growing problem and dogs often prove

to be a stable and comforting factor in people's lives. Moreover, having a dog helps you meet people. After all, you have to walk your dog every day." A study Endenburg published in 2008 revealed that 95 percent of pet owners talk to their pets. "Excellent," she comments. "I also talk to my dogs. But what I found shocking was the finding that 75 percent of owners are convinced their animals understand human speech."

According to dog behavioral expert Klaas Wijnberg, humanizing your dog does it no good at all. In fact, it is the cause of many behavioral problems. "This culture of pampering is actually born of a human need," he observes. "All a dog actually wants to do is horse around outdoors. He doesn't want to be walked in a small park scattered with 7000 piles of other dogs' dog dirt."

In all honesty, when it comes to humanizing, I'm as guilty as they come. Snuit is everything to me. We have meaningful conversations every day and when it rains he dons a trendy raincoat. Snuit gets to have it his own way a lot of the time. He can lie on the sofa and in my bed, and if I look away for too long, he'll try to slurp up the spaghetti from my plate. All in all, he has a fabulous doggy life! Right?

Turkey balls with vegetables

So, what does a dog's life have to offer in 2010? Snuit and I decide to investigate. At doggy boutique Sparky's in Utrecht I can scarcely believe my eyes. The clothing racks feature trendy T-shirts, sweat suits, cool sweaters,

raincoats and elegant pullovers. Large quantities of various bling-bling collars hang next to each other. Downstairs I spot dog baskets that I wouldn't mind curling up in myself. In the meantime, Snuit tries on all kinds of outfits. "People who buy clothing for their dogs come back each season for something new," says owner Natasja Leeuwis. Sparky's opened its doors in 2007. "Back then the target group consisted mainly of young women with chihuahuas," Natasja continues. "But in the last two years we've been getting the owners of English bulldogs, spaniels, Staffordshire bull terriers and poodles. Both men and women!"

Natasja prefers to stock up on cool clothing as she doesn't like extravagant and pretty-pretty clothing and accessories such as nail polish for dogs. The doggy coats and sweaters are particularly popular. A sensible purchase, according to Natasja. "Times have changed," she explains. "Dogs no longer sleep outside in the yard. My dog Sparky loves lying in front of the fire, which means he feels the cold a lot sooner."

Snuit's eyes are fixed on the delicacies and treats on display. Sparky's is also the place to order doggy birthday cakes,



cupcakes, biological dog meals and doggy bonbons. The chef responsible for all these doggy goodies even trained as a dog pastry cook in New York. “During Christmas and Easter and on World Animal Day the biological meals are extremely popular,” Natasja tells us. “An Italian quiche, for example, or turkey balls with vegetables.” Snuit in the meantime gulps down as much as he can. Not good for the waistline, of course, so now’s the perfect time for a sporty intermezzo.

Dogs as fashion accessories

Two hours later we arrive at the Natte Neuzenbad in Waskemeer [in the Dutch province of Friesland]: a covered and heated doggy swimming pool where pooches can engage in therapeutic swimming or just plain swimming for fun. According to owner and resident lifeguard Coby van Weperen, regular swimming is good for the muscles, joints and condition of dogs. And apparently this is equally true for dogs in perfect health.

Snuit is somewhat ill at ease as he is lowered into the shallow end of the pool. Yet once in the water, he swims after the toys — with water rings of course. After all, he is not exactly in peak condition. I watch patiently as Snuit swims some laps. Too bad this doggy swimming pool is so far from where I live; otherwise I could have purchased a ticket for 10 visits.

“It’s amazing how flexible dogs are,” says canine behavioral therapist Simone van der Hoeven. “And it is incredible how well he tolerates us illit-

erates in doggy speak.” According to Van der Hoeven, humanization only becomes a problem if it adversely affects the well-being of the dog, such as dressing up your dog. There are exceptions to this, however, like when the dog is sick. “Dressing up your dog impedes his ability to express himself through body language,” she explains. “While wearing that hooded sweater your dog may still be able to prick his ears and raise his hackles, but his fellow dogs can’t see it. And that can lead to confusion. Moreover, dogs experience being stared at continuously as a threat. And let’s be honest, if you put your dog in a wedding dress or a tuxedo, you know that he’s going to stand out.” Van der Hoeven gets a lump in her throat thinking about the fussing and trifling that goes on with the so-called toy breeds, lapdogs in the craziest get-ups. These owners view their dogs as fashion accessories.

Nice couple

In the meantime I’m rather curious about how Snuit is doing. What does he think about his life with me? Does he love me as much as I love him? After all, he does get rather jealous when I direct my attention to other people. I decide to visit Inge Pauwels near Antwerp in Belgium. She owns Toscanzahoeve, the first holistic animal behavior center in the Netherlands and Belgium. She observes “the complete package of owner, animal and interaction”. Pauwels combines various theories and techniques such as massage, healing, yoga, Bach flower ther-

apy, herbal therapy, wellness, chakra reading and telepathic contact.

She notices fairly quickly that Snuit is an attention-seeker. “And he’s very nervous,” she says. Following a lengthy explanation of the breed characteristics of an English cocker spaniel, we come to the conclusion that a track course will reduce Snuit’s stress levels considerably. “But your own relationship with him causes tension,” Pauwels remarks. We set to work energetically to discover the exact cause of this tension. I am taught some massage techniques. While I sit kneeling above Snuit’s rear, I massage his head, chest and front legs with circular movements. “A simple exercise that is effective in reducing stress,” says Pauwels. “You should do this every day.”

During a chakra reading, she says that Snuit absorbs much emotional energy from his environment. Pauwels tries to tune in to Snuit telepathically. After a few minutes Pauwels receives the first telepathic messages. “Snuit is crazy about you,” Pauwels says to my huge relief. “But...” she continues, “...he doesn’t always find it easy to live with you. You are often very busy and bring home a lot of tension. He would like to help you but doubts whether he is able to. By the way, Snuit and you would make a very nice couple. He actually sees you as his bitch. Emotionally, he would have a very tough time if a man entered your life.”

While I slowly absorb this information, Inge Pauwels mixes various Bach flowers. Four drops a day should lower Snuit’s stress levels and his feeling of



Inge Pauwels shows me how to massage Snuit for stress reduction.

responsibility. I am also given some calming esoteric oil with which to massage Snuit every day. Before we go to the massage salon, Pauwels wants to pass on a message from Snuit. I am asked to hold out a deck of cards in front of him. He points to a card with his nose. “Dogs never just randomly choose a card,” she assures me. “And this is a really good one. It symbolizes the joy between you, the lightness and learning to step back.”

Together we drive to Pranamayah, a duo massage practice for people and animals, some thirty miles away. We are met by owner Mick Bonné. The interior is stylish and warm and we are greeted by the fragrance of incense. Snuit and I are both treated to a massage and a healing. I shut my eyes and try to relax. During my healing I

During a healing session, Mick Bonné tries to improve contact between me and Snuit.



hear Inge Pauwels say that Snuit is becoming agitated. I am awash with a variety of emotions.

While Mick Bonné tries to restore some balance in my emotions, Snuit flops down under my massage table. “Voilà,” I hear Pauwels and Bonné say. “We have got it out of him.” It appears that Snuit had taken my emotions to heart. “A tough job, my boy,” Pauwels says to Snuit. And to me: “He will probably distance himself from you for a while until he’s recovered.” I am told to take frequent walks with him in the woods, where he will be able to find himself again and lose the tension. On the way home I am seized by a feeling of guilt. I don’t want to burden Snuit with my stress. Maybe I should see a psychiatrist.

Doggy car wash

I feel I could do with some behavioral therapy. The next day I phone canine behavioral therapist Simone van der Hoeven to book a consultation. I have to fill out a long questionnaire about Snuit and his behavior, from his puppyhood and doggy toddler days up to the present. Simone makes a house call. “It can often take some real detective work to find out what’s actually going on,” she explains. She says there is nothing

mysterious about dog behavioral therapy. “You can compare it with the behavioral therapy people receive from a psycho-therapist,” she continues. “I look for the cause of the undesirable behavior, the context of the problem and the environmental factors.”

Thankfully after a number of exercises and observations, she is quickly able to determine what is wrong with Snuit. “He’s not stressed in any case,” Simone explains. “His behavior is very relaxed.” The possessive behavior he exhibits by jumping up against me when I direct my attention to other people is, according to her, a question of excitement and conditioning. “You are often together. He doesn’t see you with other people every day. In his perception, touching or larking about with other people means that something alarming is going on.” I am given a number of useful exercises I can use to teach Snuit to behave differently.

Behavioral therapist Klaas Wijnberg holds five-day workshops on the island of Ameland on the “Step Contact Method”. This is a method that teaches you to communicate with your dog in a natural and doggy fashion. “Eighty percent of beagles spend their lives on a leash,” he says. “This is only because the owners fail to understand what motivates the animal genetically. It took us 15,000 years to get dogs to be as they are now. But in the past 50 years we have suddenly changed and now we don’t want the beagle to hunt or the sheepdog to tend or drive the herd. The dog’s *raison d’être* has shifted from the necessary to the su-



After a trip to the doggy beach, Snuit and I visit the doggy wash.

perfluous. And if behavioral problems occur, the dog is blamed. A dog does not feel as people do, nor does he think or rationalize as people do. The dog has a different perception of his environment because it is an animal. And a dog does not love its owner in the same way a person would. The supply of food is the number one motivator for staying with the owner. We really need to burst that romantic and sentimental bubble as soon as possible.”

I drive Snuit to the doggy beach in Noordwijk where he can have a ball swimming and running along the shore. On the way home I swing by the gas station and car wash in Aalsmeer. Snuit gets a bath at the Doggy Wash, a real car wash for dogs. And very handy I must say; at least I won’t have all that sand in my house. While I dry Snuit with a hairdryer I find myself admitting shamefully to myself that I understand very little about dog behavior and what Snuit himself actually wants. Do I really love him? Or do I just have him to fill a need in myself? ■