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It is 6.30am and four canine guests are enjoying a hearty breakfast in their private suites. Raising their energy levels for a busy day, they are looking forward to country walks, ball games, swimming and body-toning before dinnertime. But, as befits a five-star establishment, there are plenty of other treats to look forward to as well – such as ice-cream, biscuits and plenty of cuddles. For here at Lucies Farm, the clientele are nothing if not pampered.

Craig and Marjorie Walsh, who have two bull terriers of their own, launched the venture in 2004 as a sideline to rearing cattle and pigs in a cosseted way. They were farming exclusive Kobe beef from Aberdeen Angus cattle through a process that included a special diet and beer, and when they discovered that their small black Kurobuta pigs also enjoyed a beer – as well as a swim in the couple's outdoor pool – their idea of a dog resort was born.

Another factor prompting the venture was the heartache that they felt each time they went away on business and had to leave their dogs behind, especially on long trips to Craig's native Hawaii. So, three years ago they called in firms of architects from Worcester and from Colorado in the USA to design a fully secure dog hotel just yards from their house.

Now, from £42 a night, owners can leave their pooches in one of four suites featuring luxuries such as thermostatically regulated under-floor heating and air conditioning.

"Each dog can enjoy the temperature that suits them," Craig tells me. "For instance, we've had a Yorkshire terrier that liked the heat turned up and a husky that liked it low."

Other five-star amenities in the hotel include a dog shower and kitchen, piped soft music and Sky TV.

"We welcome all breeds, sizes and ages of dog – and we give each one four hours of individual attention a day," says Craig.

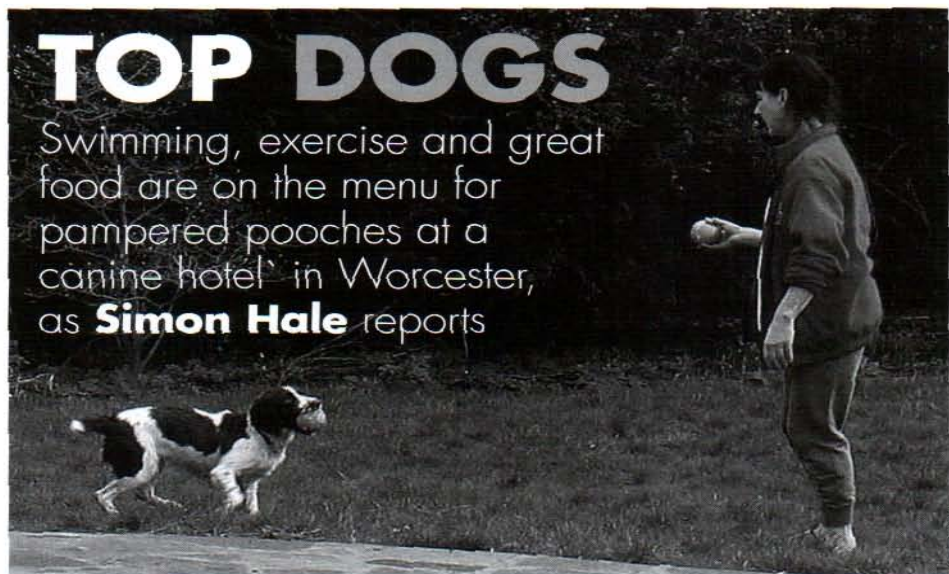
His highly successful resort enjoys an average occupancy rate of more than 80%.

Current guests include Hollie, a Springer Spaniel, Sasha the Alsatian, whose owners have been posted to the Middle East on short notice and Barney, the cross-breed, who is waiting for his permanent new home to be built in Ireland. There are also two Parson Jack Russells, Charlie and Lucy, who have been dropped off by their owners en route to a weekend break in Cardiff.

Hollie lives up to her breed as she leaps into the outdoor pool without coaxing and splashes around for five minutes before being helped out for a massage and biscuit by one of a team of young attendants.

Sasha prefers the ball-play to water, as well as the trails and smells in the farm's 17 acres of private woodland, and making friends with the pigs through the fencing. The regal white Parson Jack Russells look more concerned about preserving the immaculate shine of their coats.

Reassuringly, emergency veterinary



assistance is available 24 hours a day.

Deluxe facilities at Lucies Farm also include a dog spa with a heated indoor pool for swimming and hydrotherapy at a cool £23.45 for 20 minutes. That's on top of the £17 for a 30-minute massage but, despite the high costs, Craig insists that his customers, mostly from London and the Home Counties, get good value:

"They are not the kind of people who are prepared to put a price on what their dogs mean to them," he says.

He explains that most dogs stay over while their owners are away on holiday:

"We also have dogs that are dropped off for just a couple of nights – like Hollie, whose owner called to check up on her on her way to her wedding! Other dogs are boarded with us to aid their recuperation or because their city owners simply believe that their pets deserve a holiday in the country.

"Some owners who have never put their dog in a kennel before find the process a wrench, while others with rescue dogs are anxious that their doggie is not put in anywhere that resembles where they came from."

But even while they are apart, owners with internet facilities can keep an eye on their pooches by making use of the resort's 24-hour webcams fitted inside the suites. In fact, those wishing for a permanent reminder of their pet's holiday can also call on Marjorie and Craig to take snaps and turn them into a photo-cushion or a tote bag in leather or some other material.

Catering in the resort is Marjorie's responsibility. Her canine recipes include choice cuts of free-range meat from the farm, as well as delicacies such as haddock ice-cream, plum pudding (with fresh local fruit) and banana biscotti.

Marjorie also offers a tasty line in dog biscuits that humans can also enjoy, along

Many lively activities are available, but chasing a ball is always a firm favourite

with many other food products that can be ordered on the farm's website.

"All our guests enjoy a variety of healthy home-cooked food," she says. "Our own dogs, Kiko and Tapa, who are aged 11 and 12, are still in great condition, thanks to their diet."

Marjorie has a book of her recipes, *Cooking for Dogs*, due out this autumn.

Catering for all dietary needs, Craig and Marjorie have not been short of unusual demands from their customers:

"We had one lady arrive with a two-pound bag of goodies from Harrods to ensure her 'baby' would be catered for in the style to which it was accustomed," says Craig. He can recall several other amusing requests.

"One owner arrived with a whistle and a complicated set of instructions on how to use it to control his Airedale. After a few fruitless attempts, we decided that the dog needed a holiday from his whistle as much as a holiday in the country.

"Other owners have brought CDs of their dogs' favourite music to listen to. We've had Bach and Mozart and one of our latest recordings has been *Songs to Make Dogs Happy* which includes gems such as *Squeaky Deaky, I'm your Doggie* and *Scratch my Back*."

Craig and Marjorie are determined to maintain Lucies Farm as a real home-from-home for all their guests by offering them all the love and creature comforts they receive from their owners.

"Once the dogs settle in they are extremely happy and rarely pine for their owners, but are delighted to be reunited with them when we return them home." @

● Lucies Farm is at Whitecroft, Colletts Green, Worcester (01905-830380; email craig@dog-hotel.co.uk or visit: www.luciesfarm.co.uk).