

Spoiling our pets is now big business

The humanization of our fur babies, from expensive accessories to organic food, funds a growing market worth billions.

BY JUSTINE GRIFFIN | *Times Staff*

They have their own beaches. Their own parks. They can come with you to dinner and even to the spa. You can pay a little extra for some of them to sit with you on an airplane.

We're not talking about your infant. We're talking about your fur baby.

We spend more on our pets these days — a projected \$60.5 billion in the United States this year — than ever before, from outfits to organic kibble to matching diamond-studded collars and bracelets. Our dogs and cats have always made us feel good about ourselves and played a role in our family — that much hasn't changed. They're happy, cuddly friends that doesn't care when you vent about a bad day at work, as long as you pet them and fill their bowl with food.

But at what point did Fido move out of the doghouse in the backyard and claim an expensive Tempur-Pedic bed that matches the decor of the master bedroom?

"Over the last decade, we've truly humanized our pets," said Bob Vetere, president and CEO of the American Pets Products Association. "We're no longer satisfied to reward them in 'pet terms' with something like a tennis ball. Instead, we reward them in human terms, with expensive diamond-

studded leashes or something, in a way that we think is rewarding."

It makes us feel better even though they'd probably rather have the tennis ball.

But this "man's best friend" relationship is more complex than that.

More young people are delaying starting their own families and are opting to have pets instead. So not only do millennials have pets, their empty-nester parents are also replacing the grandkids with granddogs. Combine

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that with newfound spending money, thanks to a slowly but surely improving economy, and our pets are off the Publix-brand chow and now eat gluten-free organic food from an ecofriendly specialty pet food company.

If it's good enough for us, it's good enough for our pets.

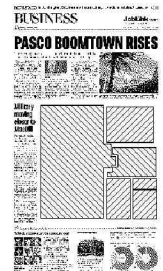
Even tourism bureaus are jumping on the pet lovers bandwagon. Visit Florida, the state's tourism agency, launched a social media campaign around the hashtag #DogsLoveFL this summer to promote pet-friendly beaches, hotels and attractions in the Sunshine State. The news release alone reached 8 million people online.

We love our pets so much that niche companies have grown out of our willingness to spoil them. Take FairyTail Planning, a Tampa-based company that launched last year and specializes in planning your dog's role in your wedding.

"We have one client who bought her dog's outfit for their wedding before she even started looking for her dress," said Ilana Mobley, co-founder of Fairy-Tail Planning with partner Kelly Maronpot.

As experienced petsitters, Mobley and Maronpot will help plan your dog's role as a ring bearer, plan pet-friendly wedding photos and be there to watch your fur child during the reception and on your honeymoon.

"So many companies are pick-





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For many people, a pet, or a fur baby, is a constant companion.

ing up on how obsessed we are with our pets. I saw a dog in a shopping cart at Michaels last week,” Maronpot said. “Restaurants have menus specific for dogs. There are happy hour events centered around your dog.”

Sure, we use our pets as a socialization tool sometimes. They make appearances in Tinder dating app photos and lead to conversations at bars, at concerts or the farmer’s market. The dog park has become a popular spot for a first date.

But in other ways, our pets become an excuse to isolate ourselves. When Rex is at your feet while you’re browsing Facebook on a Friday night, it’s easier to replace him with true human interaction, Vetere said.

“But you still have to get up to take him outside, almost forcing interactions with other people that would not have otherwise taken place,” he said. “We’re starting to see that more and more.”

At the end of the day, our pets do more for us than we do for them, said Kristen Levine, a Tampa-based pet expert and blogger. The former Tampa SPCA spokeswoman owns and operates a public relations firm for pet-related companies.

“We’re willing to pay money

to get dog DNA tests not necessarily for the benefit of our dogs, but for us,” Levine said. “What it comes down to is human nature. We crave that interaction we get from them, but we can’t get through text messages or email, like how we communicate with our loved ones now. It makes pets more accessible and more meaningful, in that way.”

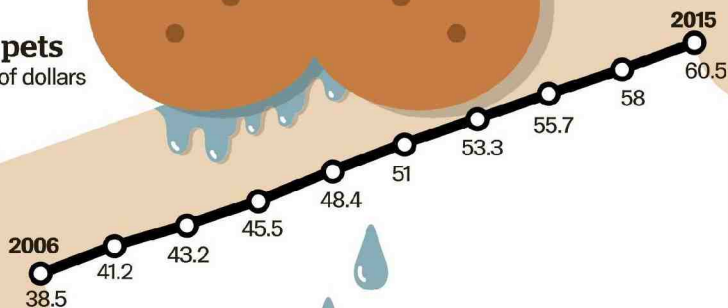
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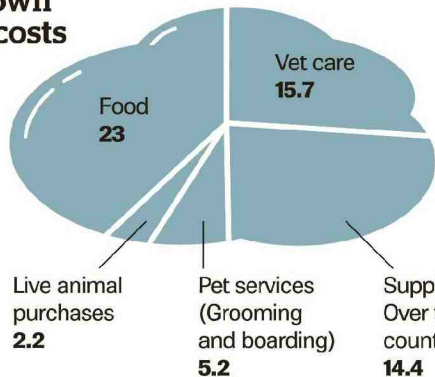
Spending on pets

Annually in billions of dollars



Breakdown of 2015 costs

In billions of dollars



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