

In doggy heaven

> Pampered pets in Seoul enjoy the best at Irion, a luxurious animal hotel and clinic



CHECKING into one of Seoul's newest luxury clinics just because your companion needs a shower may seem extravagant, but Cho Hang-Min said he had no other choice.

"Other places won't do it," said Cho, a student, explaining why he and his Border Collie have stopped off at Irion.

The two-storey establishment in the city's wealthy Gangnam district is a luxury hotel and clinic for pampered pets – a rising trend in South Korea where dogs were once treated as guard animals or as something to eat.

These days, younger Koreans are spending more on their pets, enabling the rise of a high-end industry out to ensure that canine companions are just as pampered as their style-conscious owners.

Irion, which means "Come here" in Korean, opened in February 2011 as a one-stop complex offering a veterinary clinic, grooming salon, cafe, shop, daycare centre, an exercise area and "hotel" rooms for dogs and cats.

"I opened Irion because I saw the demand in the industry, to keep pace with the growing animal companion culture in Korea as the economy develops," Park So-Yeon, head of DBS company which runs the facility, told AFP.

"These facilities are necessities, not luxuries, for people raising animals. Unfortunately, I couldn't find facilities good enough to feel safe and satisfied before I opened Irion."

Irion offers 36 rooms of varying sizes and high-end clinical equipment including computer tomography, X-ray and ultrasound machines.

At the front door, a shop sells everything from snacks to pet strollers.

Hotel fees range from 40,000 won (RM11) to 200,000 won (RM557) a night.

"People say it's nonsensical to spend all that money on animals, but we provide daily health checkups, a hygienic environment, large hotel rooms and an exercise area and I'm pretty sure this is not a high price," said Park.

"And as for the clinic, we have vet specialists for different body parts, even a herbal medicine vet and high-technology equipment that smaller hospitals don't possess."

Despite the price, Park said about 2,000 dogs and cats come to Irion every month for all sorts of services. During the summer vacation, rooms are booked out.

Cho, 19, was not quibbling about cost after reclaiming his newly-groomed pooch. "The hospital is big and clean ... I like it here and plan to come here once every two weeks to shower my dog," he said.

Another patron, Lee Ji-Hyun, said price was not a problem in return for good care. "Services are great and my babies love the place," she said of her two Maltese terriers and a Yorkshire terrier.

Increasingly affluent and urbanised South Koreans in recent decades have been cherishing dogs as companions. The state-run Rural Development Administration estimates the pet dog industry was worth 1.8 trillion won (RM5.08 billion) as of 2010 and growing at an average annual rate of 11%. Nearly 20% of households have pets, according to official statistics, with about 95% of them owning dogs.

But Park thinks the country still has some way to go. "Korea is relatively slow in pet industry growth because it has unique traditions, such as raising animals out of the house, and some other extreme ones," she said, referring to eating dogmeat.

"But those are changing nowadays."

Eating dogs is a longstanding custom. But growing numbers of Koreans oppose the practice and consider it an international embarrassment.

In June last year, the Korea Dog Farmers' Association cancelled a planned dogmeat festival following protests from animal rights activists.

The Rural Development Administration said Koreans have begun seeing dogs as partners for life rather than toys or food and started treating them as family members.

Park said there is still room for improvement in petiquette (pet etiquette) such as always using a lead outdoors and training dogs to behave.

"What's so sad is that even up to now the largest number of dogs and cats are being adopted at Christmas and Children's Day ... people must consider whether they are responsible enough to raise animals."

Park now operates four Irion multi-complexes and four which provide only veterinary treatment.

She says she plans to open more outlets in the coming months. – AFP

