



Time for a pet-icure: A dog getting its nails cut by an Irion employee at the luxury hospital-cum-hotel for pampered pets in Seoul. — AFP

Living the top dog's life

Pet hotels thrive as more S. Koreans pamper their canine friends

SEOUL: 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 the DBS company which runs the facility, said.

"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 (RM111.20) to 200,000 won (RM556.20) 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 season, rooms are booked out.



Pampered pooches: An Irion employee taking care of pet dogs at the luxury hospital-cum-hotel for pampered pets in Seoul. — AFP

Cho, 19, was not quibbling about cost after reclaiming his newly fragrant 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 (RM5tril) as of 2010 and growing at an average annual rate of 11%.

Nearly 2% 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." — AFP