

Five-Star Luxury for Your Four-Legged Friends

By Anna Smolchenko

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MTCat's Dream hopes to introduce a webcam pet-watch service for vacationers.

David Stewart travels a lot for business, and before leaving town he always checks his two cats into a feline hotel.

He has never seen their lodgings -- hotel staff pick up his Styopa and Marusya and drop them off again when he returns -- but he feels sure they are comfortable there.

"They provided me with a photograph of my cats there, and it looked fine," Stewart, a senior executive at Basic Element, wrote recently from Mongolia. "The people I deal with there really seem to like cats."

Stewart's pets stay at Cat's Dream Hotel (<http://www.cat-hotel.ru>), one of a handful of pet hotels in and around Moscow. About 20 cats were staying there during a recent visit, and for the most part they appeared comfortable, although the newest arrivals looked a bit lost, hiding in their tiny houses made of upturned cardboard boxes.

A sheet of paper was pinned to the door of each cabin for staff to keep records of the cats' appearance, psychological state, appetite and bowel movements; owners are also encouraged to leave tips about how their pets should be treated.

The number of guests is set to grow as the vacation season heats up in the coming months, said Maxim Kivva, who together with his family runs the hotel located about 16 kilometers southeast of Moscow in the settlement of Vyunok, near Zheleznodorozhny.

The hotel opened in late 2004 and has seen its number of furry guests triple as Russians learn about the service and become more relaxed about boarding a pet in a kennel rather than leaving it with a friend, Kivva said.

The hotel is particularly busy during the winter holidays and summer months. It had a full house during this past New Year's holiday, when 68 cats checked in and another 40 had to look for other accommodation.

"For New Year's, you have to book in August," Kivva said.

Pet hotels in Moscow are few and far between -- and even fewer of them are located within the city limits. Most are family-run businesses in the countryside, where land is cheaper. Some offer to bring your pet to the hotel and then return it to you, as is the case with Kivva's hotel, where three-quarters of clients take advantage of the 750 ruble (\$28) service. Regular customers get a discount.

Cat's Dream Hotel prides itself on being an exclusively feline territory. A girl once asked if she could leave a python, and somebody else wanted to board two lynx cubs. The owners had to refuse.

"The beauty of it is that it's a cats-only place. This is very important for the owners," Kivva said.

Other pet hotels, such as Gankhor (www.zoohotel.ru), accept both cats and dogs. Located closer to the center than most of its competitors, near the Kashirskaya metro station, Gankhor charges 250 rubles per day for cats and 400 to 500 rubles per day for dogs, depending on size, plus a 500 ruble advance-booking fee. Suites go for 600 rubles.

At Cat's Dream Hotel, the prices depend on the category of accommodation, from standard cabins at 250 rubles per day to professional cabins costing 360 rubles per day to luxury cabins for 580 rubles per day.

The kennels differ in size and amenities. For example, each professional and luxury kennel is individually ventilated, which means that unlike the standard cabins they lack the odor of a dozen cats living together in one room. The cat boxes and food bowls are disposable, so each guest gets its own fresh set.

Luxury cabins offer such perks as heated floors in winter, toys, premium cat food and fish bowls -- either real or on a flat screen.

The business is so successful that the Kivva family is building another kennel exclusively for kittens. By the end of the summer, they hope to install video cameras linked to the Internet so that pet owners will be able to see their furry friends anytime, from anywhere, said Kivva.