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Shop 'Til They Flop

Upscale retailers are welcoming pampered pooches with cookies and play dates. Can their own Platinum card be far behind?

By Barbara Thornburg, Times Staff Writer
March 19, 2006

Cleo is a typical long-legged blond. She loves to shop, so I took her one Saturday morning to the Burberry store in Beverly Hills.

I called ahead to make sure she would be allowed inside, but I shouldn't have worried. When we arrived, a miniature poodle was trying on a sweater. At 110 pounds, my Great Dane isn't exactly in the petite poodle league, but the salesman couldn't have been more solicitous, helping her into a lovely wool jacket (think small horse blanket with snaps at the neck and tummy). By the time we left, Cleo had acquired not only the jacket but a Burberry collar and matching leash. I paid the bill, which I noticed equaled the cost of a pair of Prada pumps I had been longing for. And that I still don't own.

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More and more, people are shopping with their canine companions, and shopping for them in stores that aren't called PetSmart.

It's common in Beverly Hills, of course, to see pooches in purses, 2-pound teacup Maltese with names like Lovie, poking their little heads out of Louis Vuitton carriers. But these days there are very large, Cleo-size dogs blocking the aisles of major department stores. That Saturday morning I saw a mastiff ascending the stairway at Barneys New York, a black lab flopped on the marble floor beside a Saks cosmetic counter and a whippet watching, obviously bored, while his owners shuffled through the sales racks at Neiman Marcus.

When we stopped at Teuscher for a cup of coffee (actually, Cleo ordered a Perrier), Chewie the Pomeranian and ZuZu the Chihuahua were eyeing each other in the outdoor café. "I take



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Chewie everywhere," said Parvin Yonani, who owns both the Pomeranian and Rossini of Beverly Hills, a menswear boutique across the street. "When stores object, I'm offended. This is my baby, and she's very clean—cleaner than most people."

Stores often don't object. "We want the customer to come and spend a leisurely time," said Barneys New York manager Eleni Vaseiliades. "If having their dog with them makes them happy, it's OK with us."

And if any, you know, accidents occur? "We just wipe it up," she said, smiling. Once, a dog chewed some carpet in the lingerie department, she confided, but that's ancient history.

The unwritten rule is that as long as your mutt doesn't bite anyone (or, perhaps, doesn't look like a mutt), he or she is welcome. The reason is clear: Last year, pet owners in the U.S. spent about \$35 billion on their charges.

"People are humanizing their pets," said pet therapist Nikki Reyes of Dog Busters in Thousand Oaks. "They don't want to leave them at home in the backyard. They want their dogs to accompany them wherever they go."

Even in Beverly Hills, some establishments are more fido-friendly than others. At one extreme is Donald J Pliner's Concept Store for Men, Women and Luxury Dogs, where a snow-white Maltese named Baby Doll Pliner rules. "Customers sometimes call in advance to see if Baby Doll is in to arrange a play date," manager Karen Ohringer told me. Photos of Baby Doll and several friends grace the retailer's shopping bags, water bowls are stationed around the store and chicken nibbles are stashed in a drawer under the counter. Before dog-patrons depart, they're rewarded with a cookie wrapped in cellophane with a keepsake picture of Baby Doll.

The enthusiasm at Pliner's can be explained by its line of doggie wear and accessories. Over at Neiman Marcus, which focuses on two-legged consumers, spokeswoman Caran Sealey said she would have to "respectfully decline to comment on store policy about dogs." A clerk who wouldn't give her name let slip that Neiman's hasn't been keen on pets since "the shoe department incident," which apparently involved a dog nibbling on a person.

There are no state or municipal regulations to guide retailers, as there are for restaurateurs, although both are bound by the federal Americans With Disabilities Act, which permits service animals to accompany their owners anywhere. Otherwise, dogs are not allowed in restaurants except those with a patio open to the sidewalk.

As for dog owners, there is a rule: Know your pet—unless you want to get to know a lawyer.

"Some dogs become stressed in a shopping environment, what with all the unfamiliar sights, smells and sounds," said therapist Reyes. Add to that the excitement of buying things you can't afford, and some dogs (not Cleo, of course) react to stress by gnawing on strangers' legs.

Which brings us to dog-bite law specialist Kenneth Phillips. "To avoid liability completely," he said, "keep your dog at home."

Cleo is going to howl.

Barbara Thornburg is a senior editor for West.

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