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of David Robinson

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December 2009

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**CALLING ALL FURRY, FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS!** This holiday season, Santa Paws (aka GHSA Managing Director and animal activist Tom Netting), welcomes you and your owners to the hotel for storytime. Selected readings include *Cat's Night Before Christmas* and *Dog's Night Before Christmas* by Sue Carabine as well as *The Night Before Dogmas* by Claudine Gandolfi.



# Here Comes Santa Paws

This holiday, put Destination Humane on your Christmas wish list *BY REBECCA PONTON*

**L**IKE MOST pet owners, we think our dog, Belle, is pretty cute, especially when she gazes up at us with those big brown eyes and gives us what we call the “Princess Di look.” We aren’t attracting much attention, though, as we stroll through the lobby of the Grand Hyatt San Antonio (GHSA). Maybe that’s because it’s Friday and people are tired from a long day at work or the drive from other cities. Maybe they don’t realize my son has our miniature Dachshund wrapped in her blanket like a baby, although I would think the long black snout would be a dead giveaway. Or maybe they’re just getting used to seeing other guests arrive with their pets. However, by the end of the weekend, she is transformed from *Cinderbella*, the dog no one noticed, to Belle of the Ball. And my son, Calvin, and I are changed in a different way.

The three of us are at the Grand Hyatt to experience the hotel’s new joint venture with the Humane Society of San Antonio, known as Destination Humane, the goal of which is to provide guests with a volunteer tourism opportunity, while also promoting the Grand Hyatt’s pet-friendly policy. That policy shifts into full holiday mode in November and December with *Waiting On Santa Paws*, which includes a window display promoting Destination Humane, a pet-themed chocolate sculpture by chef Daniel Keadle, who says, “When I create something out of chocolate, I want it to look more like fine art than food,” and holiday readings by “Santa Paws” for pets and their owners.

## Home Suite Home

Opening the door to our suite, we see a lavish welcome spread on the bar. There are cheese and crackers with dried pineapple chunks and spicy pecans next to a huge platter, the center-

piece of which is Keadle’s dark chocolate butterfly perched on a white chocolate frame next to a chocolate “nest” which holds dark chocolate-covered coffee beans. A dozen shortbread cookies in the shape of paw prints and iced in chocolate with white accents are arranged on the platter. Next to the cookies, chilling in an ice bucket, is a carafe of milk. A box, tied with a satin bow, holds Keadle’s signature chocolate truffles. Very little time elapses before Calvin and I decide to sample the goodies.

Not wanting Belle to feel left out, we discover a stash of dry dog bones in the sheepskinned-lined doggie bed. (We also discover the only time she will get in it is to eat her treats and hop back out. True to form, she insists on burrowing under the covers and sleeping at my son’s feet.)

Belle’s treats extend beyond the edible. On the bar, there is a basket containing Cain & Able® toiletries for the pampered pup, including Peppermint/Tea Tree Conditioning Shampoo, All Natural Between Bath Spritz in the same scent, moisturizing Paw Rub, Soap On-A-Rope in the shape of a dog bone, a yellow duck bath toy, and a fluffy, white loofah. Our dog, who loves being in the water, may never want to leave the bathtub!

That makes two of us, I think, when I see the spa-like atmosphere of the bathrooms—one on each end of the suite. The bathtubs have sloping backs that enable reclining and are stocked with generously-sized toiletries, from Portico Spa’s Quince + Bergamot line, that go beyond the standard shampoo and conditioner to include bath salts, exfoliating facial cleanser and body wash. A vase of orchids on the counter completes the spa feel.

## Feline Friends, Canine Comrades

After a relaxing Friday evening, Belle puts the Grand Hyatt’s pet-friendly policy to the test

Saturday morning as Calvin and I leave to volunteer at the Humane Society. We slip the “Do Not Disturb the Dog” sign on the door (courtesy of the Humane Society), but as we walk down the hall, we’re afraid it’s Belle who is doing the disturbing. Her bark follows us until the elevator doors close.

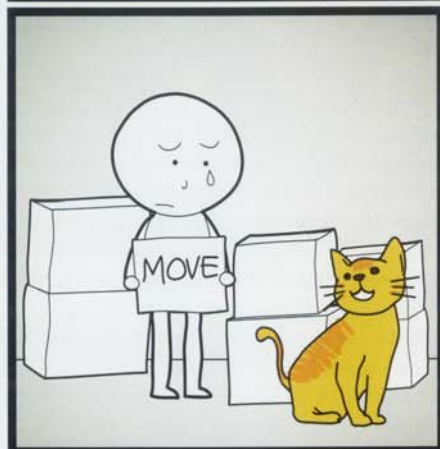
At the Humane Society, we’re greeted by Cathy McCoy, the energetic Director of Public Relations. After she takes us on a quick tour of the facility and explains the basic ground rules, we sign the required paperwork, don our volunteer T-shirts, and are ready to go to work at the Cat Pavilion, Calvin’s location of choice. His immediate reaction: “Can we take one home with us?” (In addition to Belle, we have three cats—Candy, Oreo and Yellow Cat—so my response is no.)

We join employee, Kaleah Williams, who is already busy scrubbing and disinfecting cages. Adhering to the Society’s strict hygiene policy, we put on rubber gloves as we remove and replace the litter boxes and wipe down the cages with disinfectant, before putting the cats back inside. The gloves are then discarded, hand sanitizer is used, and we don a fresh pair of gloves. Cardboard boxes are provided as temporary holding cages, but Calvin and I develop a system where one person cleans while the other plays with the cat. (Socializing with the animals is a big part of volunteerism at the Society.)

Needless to say, we’re not as fast and efficient as Kaleah; in an hour and a half, we clean 12 cages to her 24. We’ve also each fallen in love with one of the cats. For me, it’s a white, five-month old male named B.B. King, whose most distinctive feature is his eyes—one is blue and the other is topaz. Calvin likes the renegade

# it's not a cat's fault

by TheShelterPetProject.org



## Getaway


of the group, a five-month old, ginger-colored male named Carl, who tries to make a break every chance he gets and who shreds the inside of his cardboard holding box.

Executive Director Kathryn Bice stops by and escorts us to the Dog Pavilion, where she shows us the Society's "ambassador dogs," a Chinese Crested and an Italian greyhound. Most of the dogs are mixed breeds, although it's obvious many of them were people's pets before being taken to the Society for adoption. We take two of the dogs for walks, one at a time, and play with them in the large, grassy runs. Before we know it, our three-hour shift is over. Calvin is reluctant to leave and promises that he'll be back to volunteer again soon.

### The Art of Pet Ownership

By Sunday, it is apparent that we have become known as "the guests with the dog." And, as all pet owners know, animals are great ice-breakers. Bonds are quickly formed over shared pet anecdotes. Other guests stop to pet Belle and, not knowing if they are aware of the hotel's pet-friendly policy, we quickly explain why we have her with us, which seems to intrigue quite a few of them. We then approach the concierge, Thomas Valdez, about taking a few photographs in front of the various art installations in the lobby. After all, we want Belle to be both pampered and cultured!

With Valdez providing knowledgeable information about the artists and their works, we first pose in front of Lloyd Walsh's dramatic 76" x 87" oil painting of a flamenco dancer, then move to Martin Dawe's wall of resin leaves (*Falling Leaves*), and over to Linda Leviton's giant blue shells, with a final stop in front of Anita Valencia's suspended *Perinolas* (whirligigs) created from 4,000 recycled cans. The conversation naturally turns to pets and Valdez shares with us that he is the proud owner of two Cairn Terriers, Gina and Pinky, who recently had their first litter.

In the parking garage, as we prepare to leave the hotel and head home, we put Belle on her leash and expect the worst. She has always been leash-phobic. The minute the leash is attached to her collar, she usually drops flat on the ground and refuses to budge. We have no idea what caused this aversion, as we bought her as a 10-week old puppy. This time, to our amazement, she trots around happily, as if she'd been born wearing a leash. Apparently, a single weekend of pampering at a luxury hotel has cured her of her phobia! And my son and I have gained the sense of satisfaction that comes with being able to help—if only for a little while—animals less fortunate than our own. 

## Spice It Up On the River Walk

On Saturday evening, my son and I venture down to Achiote, the Grand Hyatt's restaurant on the River Walk. Because the weather is almost perfect, we sit outside on the patio and take advantage of the view as we watch people coming and going on the footpaths and tour boats gliding lazily down the river.

The restaurant's name comes from the slightly-musky flavored seed of the annatto tree, found in East Indian, Spanish and Latin markets, and which executive chef Jeff Axell uses in dishes such as *lechón y arroz con gandules* (Puerto Rican yellow rice with pigeon peas and roasted pork). There is a pan-Latino influence with menu items being garnered from South and Central America and the Caribbean. In a city known for its Mexican food, many of the dishes have a Puerto Rican flavor not found elsewhere. Ingredients such as yucca and plantains are found throughout the menu.

Our server, Tina Prado, greets us by saying, "You're the ones with the dog!" Prado is an animal lover and the proud owner of four dogs. She's also extremely knowledgeable about the menu and explains hard to pronounce items, such as *huachinango estilo vera cruz* (crispy red snapper in a vera cruz sauce), in great detail. We follow her recommendations from start to finish—right down to the roasted Rum-glazed pineapple—and enjoy a delicious meal of intriguing new flavors.

As we turn to leave, doggie bag in hand, Prado calls after us, "Bring your dog with you next time. I'd like to meet her!"

**Achiote River Café & Bar**  
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