



Hotel is suite spot for dogs



Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

Golden retriever Riley settled into one of the suites at the Adogo Pet Hotel. The Minnetonka facility offers upscale suites or private rooms for dogs, mimicking the human hotel experience. And yes, there's room service — prepared to the owner's instructions.

By **TODD NELSON**, Special to the Star Tribune

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Former Carlson hotel executive and lifelong dog lover John Sturgess aims to teach the pet industry some new tricks with Adogo Pet Hotel, a premium boarding and day care facility in Minnetonka.

Sturgess is applying what he learned in 23

years in the corporate lodging world, including eight years as vice president of development at Carlson Hotels Worldwide, to offering man's best friend a level of service and accommodations "modeled after four- and five-star human hotels."

"I'm taking my experience in the human hotel business and my knowledge of dogs and love of dogs and combining those two to run a professional hotel," said Sturgess, who devoted much of the past eight years to researching his business plan, including making it a focus of his studies while he was completing an MBA at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management.

That background, he believes, along with his ability to raise capital to start the company and possibly expand, distinguish Adogo from mom-and-pop kennels.

"There are a lot of very good people running facilities that didn't necessarily come from the service industry," Sturgess said. "I want to offer a great experience for the dog and beyond that make sure the owner is confident in the facility when they are away."

Adogo also has a prime location on the Minnetonka-Eden Prairie border and a one-stop, full-service philosophy. In addition to o

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overnight boarding and day care, it offers grooming and training by Canine Coach, a dog training company.

What is a pet hotel?

The pet hotel is licensed as a kennel, with 93 overnight rooms and indoor and outdoor play areas. The renovation was overseen by the same firm that designed the trendy Crave restaurants. The Minneapolis-based firm Shea also helped develop the Adogo pet hotel brand.

Sturgess said his rates -- from \$29 a night for a standard room to \$69 a night for a master suite, with a 20 percent discount for additional dogs occupying the same room -- are competitive with other kennels. Lower introductory rates are now being offered. For an extra fee, the staff will walk pets in a nearby nature area.

The pet hotel opened Feb. 1 with 12 employees and expects to add three this summer. Sturgess projects \$800,000 in revenue this year, rising to \$1.5 million by the end of his third year.

Sturgess said his research indicates spending on pets nationally grew from \$34 billion in 2004 to an estimate \$48 billion last year.

He developed and is operating Adogo in much the same way he helped build lodging brands such as AmeriSuites (now Hyatt Place), which went from a handful of hotels to close to 220 during his tenure.

Bill Sipple, a former corporate vice president at Carlson Hotels Worldwide who worked with Sturgess there for six years, said Sturgess brings a valuable, perhaps unique combination of hotel operations and branding experience to the pet-lodging industry.

"He's worked extremely hard in putting this together and understands the business in ways very few people do," said Sipple, now managing director of HVS Capital Corp., which does hospitality investment banking but is not an Adogo investor.

Looking to expand

Sturgess has looked at expansion sites in and around St. Paul and has an eye on moving into major cities in the Midwest, Southeast and Southwest. Sturgess, Adogo's majority owner, received financing from several silent partners, including Steve Pricco, an Eden Prairie-based management consultant.

Pricco said he has never owned a dog but

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was eager to invest in Adogo because of his confidence in Sturgess, whom he has known for close to 10 years.

"He's taking the best of what he's done at the hotels and the best practices from the other [pet hotels] he's used and putting it into one, which is a smart way to go about it," Pricco said.

Adogo customer Joanie St. Peter said she has been impressed with the appearance and the service when she has taken her Eden Prairie family's two dogs -- Murphy, a 6-year-old Bichon, and Dakota, a 5-month-old goldendoodle -- there for day care.

"Where I used to take Murphy was so much more of a kennel," St. Peter said. "When I walked into Adogo, it was very cosmopolitan but very dog-friendly. It's very first-class and clean and it smells good. Quality is at the forefront of what he's doing."

The expert says: Dileep Rao, president of InterFinance Corp. in Golden Valley and a professor of entrepreneurship at Florida International University, said he is impressed with the way his former student -- they met when Rao taught at the Carlson School -- is carrying out his business plan.

"I think it's a national market," Rao said. "It's a huge industry, he's starting as one of the first organized entrepreneurs getting in, and I think he'll do very well."

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