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J.F.K.'S NEW ANIMAL TERMINAL

The ARK offers luxurious amenities: climate-controlled stalls for horses, and, for dogs, a bone-shaped splashing pool and a spa that gives “pawdicures.”

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Illustration by Tom Bachtell

When the outgoing President warned, in his farewell speech, of the ways in which inequality corrodes the social fabric, he probably wasn't referring to commercial airline travel. But, with its ever-expanding system of subclasses and legroom fees, is there any better symbol of our self-sorting tendencies?

changed this year, with the opening of the ARK at JFK, which calls itself “the world’s first privately owned, 24/7 animal airport terminal.” Situated “airside”—near the tarmac—it offers luxurious amenities, including climate-controlled stalls for horses and, for dogs, a bone-shaped splashing pool and a spa that gives “pawdicures.” Fees for dogs start at around a hundred dollars. Horses can cost up to ten thousand.

Pet travel has always been rough. “You sit in baggage,” John Cuticelli, the ARK’s developer, said last week. “If you have to be there four hours before the flight, the animal has to be there *six* hours before.” Customer service is nonexistent. “We see, in cargo, little cages that say, with tape, ‘Fido eats at two o’clock, three o’clock, and five o’clock, and here’s the food.’ ” The baggage guys ignore it. “They’re not trained! They’re baggage handlers!” Cuticelli was standing outside the ARK: a long gray building with tall windows, by Cargo Area D. A private-equity man with silver hair, he has a cockapoo named Tucker, but his passion is not animals so much as “deals that have very high barriers to entry.” He won the contract to develop the ARK from the Port Authority in 2013.

Cuticelli hopes that when the ARK is fully operational, in March, it will serve five thousand horses a year, and seven to ten thousand dogs and cats. “And there are quite a number of birds that fly,” he said.

Cuticelli’s wife, Beth, the ARK’s managing director, gave a visitor a tour. The first stop was the Pet Oasis, a facility not unlike the Delta Sky Club, with a sleek reception desk. “We’re the lounge,” Beth said. Dogs and cats can stop in for a few hours “if you’ve got a short layover, or you’re waiting for someone to pick you up.” In back were rows of spacious gray kennels, accented

soil themselves,” Beth said. There was a little yard “for relieving” and a kitchen stocked with Royal Canin.

“We don’t have any cats in residence now,” she said, passing the cat kennels. But a fluffy collie sat perkily in kennel SKS-43. His name was Aidan, and he belonged to Joanne O’Connell, the facility’s manager. She reported that the first guests at the Pet Oasis were a group of Korean puppies and a springer spaniel on his way from Atlanta to Bangor.

Back out front, John Cuticelli pushed open a barnlike door marked “Equine Arrivals.” Inside were twenty-four elegant black steel stalls. He noted the fresh wood shavings on the floor, for weary horses to stretch out on. “It’s just like going to a Ritz-Carlton,” he said. “The bed’s made. The horse enters, and here’s the pillow, here’s the little thing at the foot of the bed”—a rubber mat, for traction. Each stall comes with three flakes of Timothy hay and two water buckets. “Then it’s an à-la-carte menu,” Cuticelli added. Owners can request special hay, oats, and nutrients. He picked up a remote control, and the voice of Pavarotti filled the barn. Apparently, horses like opera.

The accommodations for birds seem less luxurious, probably because of the creatures’ potential as carriers of disease. Cuticelli pointed out quarantine and biosecurity features and a room with a concrete feeding pool, where U.S.D.A. officials will examine water birds like flamingos. More exotic furry tourists, such as zoo animals, will remain in their travelling cages. Livestock will be directed to a special pen, which has a built-in “poo chute” to siphon off up to five thousand pounds of manure.

The swankiest part of the ARK isn’t finished yet. For longer pet stays, a warehouse is being converted into a “resort” called Paradise 4 Paws. Cuticelli pointed out an area that will become doggie “suites”: rooms with human-size beds, plasma screens for pets to FaceTime with their owners, art, and a “nightly tuck-in service.” Cuticelli said, “You could say, ‘I want my dog swimming twice a day, massaged once a day, running on the treadmill, let outside x number of times, and served a steak dinner.’ ”

Sadly, he said, the pampering ends when it’s time to board the plane. “The truth is that once the animal’s in the airplane there’s absolutely nothing you can do for it. Because it’s still in the cargo hold.” ♦

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