
FEATURES - INDYSUNDAY

Love and shelter

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KANAB, Utah -- Little Tux was trying his best to be a good boy. He had been on a few of these sleepovers before without much success.

Not that he was slumming at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary. He had a clean room. Plenty of food and water. Health care. Lots of love. And he was living in one of the most gorgeous regions in the Southwest.

But nothing really beats snuggling up to a warm human body in a real bed, or being the absolute center of attention for 24 hours.

So Tux, a border collie mix, was the perfect gentleman -- a persona matching his elegant, tuxedo-like black coat with white markings. He never barked. Never begged for food at the outdoor cafe. And he slept through the night, cuddled up next to a prospective owner without a sound or stir.

Tux, like his 1,500-plus abused or deserted animal companions at Best Friends, wanted this pampered treatment every day. He wanted a real home with a real family.

Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, the largest animal refuge in the United States, is nestled in the high desert, rocky red cliffs and 33,000 acres of Angel Canyon, about 5,000 feet above sea level in southern Utah.

Approximately 20,000 visitors and vacationers come to the sanctuary annually. Our family is here for three reasons: to tour the sanctuary, volunteer our services for an afternoon, and spend the night in one of the cottages with a dog of our choice.

Founded in 1986, the sanctuary is owned and operated by the **Best Friends Animal Society**, wholly through the donations of members and supporters. It has a "no-kill" policy, which means no animals are put down except in cases of terminal and painful illness, when compassion demands euthanasia.

The shelter takes in cats, dogs, horses, birds, donkeys, pigs, rabbits or any other domestic animal and tries to find a home for them.

Its success rate is about 75 percent -- not bad, considering some of the creatures suffer physical disabilities such as blindness or partial paralysis or arrive traumatized by abuse. While a few of the animals are discarded here by people no longer willing or able to care for them, most creatures come from shelters and rescue groups.

The sanctuary benefits from volunteerism in two ways. The socialization helps the animals become comfortable with humans, aiding their chances of finding a home. And the maintenance helps the staff keep the animal living spaces clean and in running order.

Guests register for one of four daily 90-minute tours and lodging at the Welcome Center.

The tour van meanders through the splendid red-rock landscape of the canyon, once the setting for such films as "The Apple Dumpling Gang" and the 1950s TV western "The Lone Ranger."

The ride continues past Horse Haven, the Bunny House and Feathered Friends and a few more of the 91 buildings on the property. The longest stops are at Dogtown Heights and Cat World, although special tours are available for other areas, including the property's own pet-care clinic.

Following the tour, we dined vegan-style at an on-site cafe. Then it was time to get to work, and the family split in different directions.

My wife headed for Cat World. My daughter, the rider in the family, chose Horse Haven. My son and I drove to Dogtown on a special mission: help with the chores, then find a canine companion for a volunteer sleepover. On a typical day, there are 600 dogs here.

"We've had some beautiful friendships here that start with a walk, and then go to a sleepover and then wind up with a dog finding a loving home," said John Polis, public relations manager at Best Friends.

Since the morning shift has already taken care of feeding and watering the dogs, my son and I spent our afternoon walking the dogs on dusty trails and keeping them amused with tennis balls and Frisbees in their spacious, sandy runs. Our hardest task was cleaning out and refilling a half-dozen doggie pools.

We decided to take the gentle Tux for the night. Someone had left Tux tied up on the Best Friends property last October. He had one black mark on his rap sheet: He doesn't like cats.

Hey, he's a dog.

Tux seemed to know his way around our roomy, two-bedroom cottage, which had a small living room, a kitchen and a long porch overlooking the horse pasture.

For dinner, we took him into town to the pet-friendly Rocking V Cafe. We strolled the sidewalks of downtown Kanab, a quiet town of less than 5,000, before returning to the cottage. He slept through the night, seemingly never moving from his position nestled securely next to my daughter.

Predictably, we fell in love with Tux. But we knew our overprotective Australian shepherd and aging calico back home would not care to share the love.

So, with everyone still asleep the following morning, I drove Tux back to Dogtown. He seemed to know the drill. Only moments after I unleashed him, he entered his pen and vanished through his doggy door and out onto the sunny dog run -- never looking back.

I felt guilty, but Danielle Aymar, adoptions manager, says not to.

"The sleepovers aren't really a ploy to get adoptions," she said. "(They) simply give the dog a break from the craziness of living with three other dogs and from the day-to-day routine. Plus, they crave the one-on-one attention.

"Just as important, from an adoption standpoint, it really helps us to know what the animal is going to be like in a home environment. We learn so much about their personalities."

Tux's good behavior finally paid off. Aymar now reports that after 10 months of sleepover auditions, Tux was adopted in August by a woman in Hurricane, Utah, about 85 miles from here.

Tux has a new best friend. With no cats.

Call Star reporter Zach Dunkin at (317) 444-6079.

If you go

What: Best Friends Animal Sanctuary.

Where: 5001 Angel Canyon Road, Kanab, Utah.

Getting there: The nearest major airport is Las Vegas, a four-hour drive from Kanab. Sky West operates shuttle flights from Salt Lake City to St. George, Utah, which is about a 90-minute drive from Kanab.

Cost: The 90-minute tours are free, but reservations are required by calling (435) 644-2001, ext. 115.

Information and volunteering: [www.bestfriends](http://www.bestfriends.org) [[http://www.bestfriends](http://www.bestfriends.org)] .org or call (435) 644-2201.

Climate: Best times to visit are in late May or June when it's sunny with temperatures in the 70s and 80s, and in September and October for dry, mild sunny days and the fall colors. Hottest months are July and August, with days of 90 to 100 degrees.

Dining: Rewind Cafe for sandwiches, soups, smoothies (435) 644-3200; Amici's for Italian, (435) 644-8424; Rocking V Cafe, eclectic bistro fare and pet-friendly outdoor seating, (435) 644-8001.

Lodging: Best Friends cottages with two bedrooms, living room and equipped kitchen are \$125 per night double occupancy.

Area attractions: Zion National Park, 40 miles; Lake Powell, 73 miles; Grand Staircase, 14 miles; Coral Pink Sand Dunes, 23 miles, Paria Movie Set, 33 miles; Bryce Canyon, 79 miles; Grand Canyon, 117 miles.