

# The Purr-fect Vacation

By Fina Bruce

*Fina and Don Bruce are journalists who live in New York. They also sponsor Dotty the cat who lives at Best Friends, and came to visit her and all the animals during their summer vacation.*

My vacation was the cat's meow.

Past travels usually left me with nothing more than an expanded waistline and a shrunken wallet. This time, I took home a special, lasting souvenir—a sense of doing something worthwhile and fulfilling.

I (along with my husband, Don) turned this year's trip into a truly rewarding vacation by volunteering a few days at Best Friends.

"Arriving here is the beginning of a healing process, both physical and emotional," said Michael Mountain, director of Best Friends outreach and editor of the sanctuary magazine. "We feel a spiritual affinity with animals and the earth, and Best Friends is the wellspring for it."

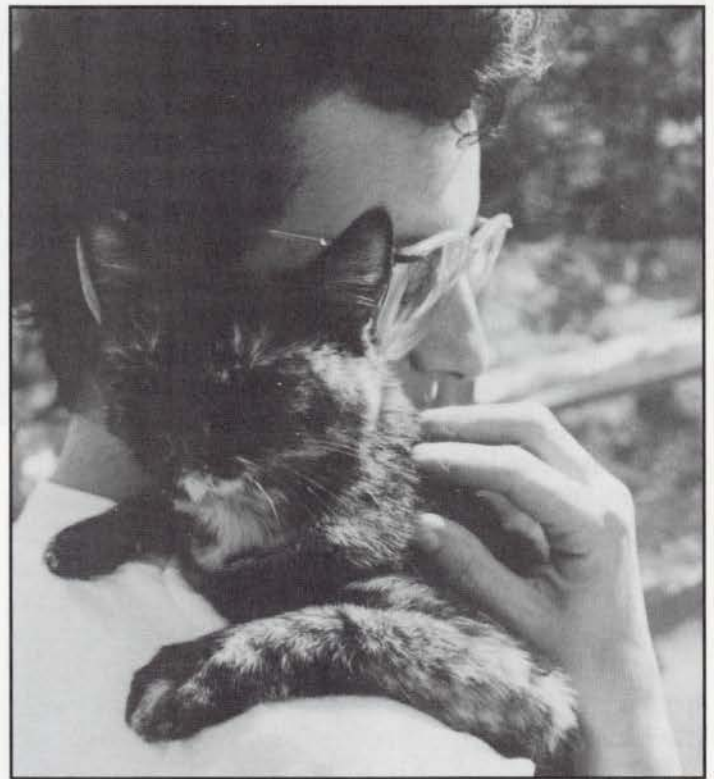
Vacationers from across the nation visit the 100-acre sanctuary, and many spend time working with the animals, giving them the personal attention they would get in a family home. As members of the Best Friends "Adopt-a-Pet" sponsorship program, Don and I decided to make a trip out west to see the place first-hand.

**A chorus of barks and meows** greeted us during our guided walking tour of the sprawling sanctuary. The friendly staff introduced us to dozens of animals by name, explaining the tales of how they came to Best Friends. Sinjin the cat, for example, was found nearly dead of chemical burns. Tammy, a greyhound, was abused because she wasn't a winner at the racetrack. Big Enough the horse narrowly escaped a trip to the slaughterhouse. All are now enjoying carefree lives at the refuge.

"I know you'll want to see Dotty," our tour guide Charity said, leading us to a compound housing about twenty-five cats.

**Dotty** is an unadoptable, feral tabby we've sponsored for about a year. Each month we send a donation to help with her care and feeding, and in return, we receive pictures and letters from "our" cat. The reclusive feline bears scar tissue on her left eye from an infection she contracted before coming to Best Friends.

"Dotty, Fina and Don are here to see you!" our guide called out. The long-haired cat hid in the shadows, seemingly unimpressed with our presence. We, however, were



*A hug from Trudy was one of the highlights of my trip to Best Friends.*

thrilled just to get close enough to see her. Ever-prepared with camera in hand, "Adopt-a-Pet" coordinator Chandra Forsythe captured Dotty on film for us, so we would have a remembrance of our foster kitty to take home.

**I was a bit nervous** about the last stop on the feline tour, the TLC Cat Club, which houses disabled cats. "Their bodies may be impaired, but their spirits fly high," said Faith Maloney, sanctuary director. My initial apprehension was immediately eased when I saw how happy and affectionate these animals are. An indoor-outdoor area, TLC has ramps for cats with mobility problems and separate nighttime accommodations for those who have trouble getting to the kitty litter.

The disabilities don't seem to deter the cats from enjoying any of the usual feline activities. Blackjack, a three-legged cat, whirred by us at breakneck speed as another approached us for petting. Some napped in the sun. Other cats meowed for attention and affectionately attached themselves to our legs and backs.

About a mile from the cattery are the dog kennels, where many of the canines live in octagonal houses with large outdoor runs. Some dogs wander freely, greeting



visitors with barks and wagging tails.

**Working with the cats.** Since we share our Long Island lives with two cats, we opted to work with animals of the feline persuasion during our stay. Our two days as volunteers were intense. This was not a sit-back-and-relax vacation—we were an active part of the team. Although staffers began at eight each morning, we opted to sleep a bit later. (After all, we were on vacation!)

Even so, we were enthusiastically greeted by Cattery Manager Judah Nasr and his wonderful staff, and started our rounds of helping to clean huge compounds and feed and water several hundred cats of assorted colors, sizes and personalities.

The physical work was demanding, mostly because we both work in offices and weren't used to the desert heat and heavy lifting of food and water. By the end of the days we were sunburned and exhausted, but agreed it was "a good kind of tired"—a rewarding break from our desk jobs back home.

Whether you plan to stay a day or a week, volunteers are welcome to do any type of care—be it strenuous or simply petting and grooming—with their choice of animals. We wanted to be in the nitty-gritty of things at the cattery, and did just that. It was tough to tear ourselves away for the mid-morning tea break, but we quickly learned it's wise to take a breather.

**Lunch-time with the staff.** At noon we joined the sanctuary employees for delicious vegetarian lunches at their staff-built Angel Village residence, where we enjoyed a serene canyon view.

We found we were anxious to get back to the animals after the lunch break, and the work days sped by. Although we were strangers to the cats, many boldly approached us for massages behind their ears and belly rubs. I'll always remember how Trudy, one of the chronically ill, unadoptable cats, wrapped her front legs around my neck like a big hug and purred loudly the first time she saw me—and every time after that.

**Tea-time with the cats.** Four o'clock signaled a special event at the cattery—"treat time," when the cats received an afternoon snack of feline-delectable cuisine. (Care was taken to ensure that even the cats on special diets were able to safely partake.)

As we approached the runs with treats in hand, just a few cats were visible. Suddenly, a curious thing happened—the cat population seemed to double in an instant. Dozens of cats emerged from their napping and hiding places, many meowing in anticipation. They didn't need a clock to tell them it was time for treats!

Each run held the same image: Dozens of colorful cats gathered at food bowls, tails raised like furry flags (which, in cat language, signals happiness). With the final task of

the day complete, we headed back to cook dinner at our lovely rental cottage a short distance from the office.

**A Sunset Dinner.** On our last evening, we attended a sunset dinner at Angel Village, where staff and visitors gathered for an elaborate vegetarian and vegan buffet, entertainment and news about the animal world. Michael shared letters and photos from sanctuary members. Poetry was read. A singalong of Angel Canyon Tour Director Cyrus Mejia's gentle, compelling verse was accompanied by guitar and keyboards. A few moments of meditation concluded the upbeat evening.

**Where all the tails have happy endings.** It was wonderful to get to know the dedicated, compassionate staffers of all ages who devote their lives to this cause. From the moment we arrived, the staff took a sincere interest in us and made us feel welcome. "This has become a calling for many of us," said Michael. "However people learn to treat animals, they learn to treat people."

"The overall feeling is that we're doing the right thing," said Faith. "We can fall asleep knowing we've done our best."

As we prepared to leave the sanctuary, I found it impossible to say a dry-eyed goodbye. Even Dotty seemed to realize something was different that day, as she allowed us to get close. I managed to sneak a quick touch of her plumed tail.

On the way out, I bought a T-shirt of smiling cat caricatures. It reads, "Best Friends—where all the tails have happy endings." As my husband and I headed back to Long Island life in the "fast lane," we made plans for a return trip—very soon, I hope—to serene Angel Canyon and our new best friends. 🐾



*Don Bruce gets to know O.J. and friends.*