



Actress Hilary Swank with her rescued dog, Karoo

To the Rescue

Nearly 20% of dogs and cats are adopted. Here's how to streamline your search for the perfect pet

BY LINDSY VAN GELDER

Many people wouldn't buy a used car when they can afford a new one. But a pre-owned pet can be the best deal in town. "There's a misconception that animals at shelters have something wrong with them," says David

1,200 local organizations. "With the Internet, that pet can be seen by hundreds of thousands of prospective owners and therefore has a much greater chance of being adopted." If you're looking for a Chihuahua, for

Meyer, executive director of 1-800-Save-A-Pet.com, a nonprofit rescue Web site. They're often great pets but may be homeless because their owners died, moved, or are serving in the military. Unlike, say, a pet store puppy, a rescue dog usually has all the necessary shots and is house-trained and neutered.

Rescuing an animal has even become trendy, with celebrities photographed strolling through airports with their adopted pets. Consider celebrating Adopt a Shelter Dog Month by giving an unloved pooch a home. Here's what you need to know:

■ **The action has moved to the Internet** These days the question might as well be, how much is that doggie in the Windows XP? You can shop for a pet online and even view it via a Webcam.

"In the traditional shelter, maybe a handful of people walk by a cage on any given day," says Meyer, whose network includes more than

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example, and none is available, 1-800-Save-A-Pet.com might either have a Chihuahua mix or two to show you or can e-mail you when one is available. Most local shelters charge a small fee; some also ask that you pay any accrued vet bills.

■ **It's not just mutts anymore** At least one in four adopted dogs and cats is purebred. If you don't find what you're looking for at your local shelter, contact a breed-specific organization. Some of these groups may keep their adoptees in foster homes rather than cages, which makes for a calmer, happier animal. There are also separate rescue groups for animals from ferrets to turtles.

■ **Your pet might be a jet-setter** Although millions of healthy animals are euthanized every year because no one wants them, many survive because the Internet has made it possible for dedicated volunteers to go to extraordinary lengths to save them. Take Siamese cats, for example. A Web site sponsored by Siamese Cat Rescue Center, www.siamese-rescue.org, accesses five organizations and has an e-mail network of 800 volunteers, who will transport a cat to its new home. "If we have a hard-to-place cat, like an 18-year-old in Florida, and we find a home in Maine, we have volunteers whose husbands are pilots," says executive director Siri Zwemke.



■ **Education is part of the process** Rescue groups' Web sites typically have lots of information to help you choose a pet and care for it, and the more you know, the better the odds of a successful adoption. For instance, potbellied pigs don't do stairs and need time outdoors.

■ **And there may be a quiz** Many Humane Society branches and other shelters have counselors who will help you select a pet. Some go even further, doing a home check and making you sign a contract promising to return the animal if things don't work out. Golden Retriever Rescue of Northern Illinois, www.asgoodasgold.org, for example, has a 45-question application that inquires about family life, future relocation possibilities, vacation plans, and finances. Some applicants are turned away. "We are in this for the dogs," says executive director Robin Sweeney. "We want the families to be happy, and, ultimately for each dog to have a good life."

Lindsay Van Gelder is a writer with a colony of eight formerly feral cats in her yard in Florida.