



Starlight Barking

Have you ever spotted a stray dog while on holiday and wished you could have helped? Tour operators, shelters and a UK-based charity have joined forces so now you can, writes MEGAN HARDING

UK-based charity the Starlight Barking Trust was set up by former holiday reps who had seen enough; change was long overdue when it came to animal welfare in popular holiday destinations. The charity recognises that many holidaymakers feel the same and through their projects, they hope to link up tourists with local rescues.

Starlight Barking works with tour operator partners, staff and tourists to raise awareness of the overseas shelters in need of volunteers, funds or essentials. Many of these are small, overworked, poorly funded shelters pushed out to sparse rural areas, as governing municipalities believe that shelters damage tourism.

Founder Wendy Lyotier first saw the extent of the problem while working as a rep in the 80s but says animal welfare has actually become worse in the last 30 years, not better.

She explains, "Many tourist boards pretend they don't have a stray dog problem. Together with the authorities, they all turn a blind eye to the cruelty going on behind the scenes."

"As the summer season starts, this is compounded by tour operators and hoteliers who know full well that many of the strays have been poisoned. And the 'lucky' strays that have survived are imprisoned 24/7 in hell-holes of municipal shelters in out-of-the-way places, which they're desperate for us not to see. It would burst the bubble."

Much of the charity's focus so far has been on

Top: volunteers at Lemnos Shelter, one shelter the charity works with. Vaggelio (left) sits with shelter founder Fotini (right) and Fotini's niece, Anastasia.

Left: Lemnos Shelter.



popular British holiday destinations, such as Greece and Cyprus, where collection boxes are being placed at resorts and airports to raise money for shelters. Almost 7,000 euros have already been raised for Mykonos Animal Welfare thanks to just one well-placed box at a local airport.

In addition to the charity's website, it has also recently launched Travel Chest, which offers special holiday deals by tour providers who share the vision of more animal-friendly tourism. Their sponsorship provides funds to Starlight Barking's education and animal welfare initiatives including the 'Paws – Model Resort Project', which aims to put a stop to the barbaric culling of dogs using poison. There are currently nine tour operators involved, including cruises, family-friendly adventures and even horse-riding holidays.

Wendy adds, "We believe it's time for change and are inviting like-minded tour operators to join us by sponsoring our website (www.thetravelchest.co.uk) and really getting involved with some PR for the local shelters. The volunteers at these shelters are just desperate for holidaymakers to know of their existence and the different ways they can help by bringing gifts for the dogs."

This summer, Starlight Barking wants to add more tour operators to its site and branch out to further destinations. It is also setting up more collection boxes in hotel receptions, bars and restaurants, to raise awareness and carry the details of local rescues, vets and helpline numbers for animals at risk – so keep your eyes peeled!

Wendy continues, "We want reps to mention these in their welcome meetings to make tourists aware. We want to make it part of the holiday booking process. Book flights, arrange visas and vaccinations if necessary, pack your bags, click on to the website and find your nearest shelter."

Even if you're not jetting out anytime soon, you can still donate and find out more about the dogs currently looking for their forever homes.

Leads to follow

For the latest holiday deals, sign up to the newsletter at www.thetravelchest.co.uk
To find out more about the charity, visit www.starlightbarking.co.uk

Holiday help list

There are a number of ways you can help, and it all begins before you've even left home...

• Research

Contact your holiday provider or rep for details of local rescues. If they don't know, Starlight Barking Trust can help. The charity aims to provide you with the information within the hour.

• Packing

Shelters are constantly in need of items such as flea and worm treatments. Worm pills containing praziquantel are effective and many shelters also need Panacur paste, which is used to treat worms in pups under 12 weeks. Toys, collars and leads are also welcome.

• Extra luggage

As long as you have confirmation that you are helping shelter dogs, some of the major airlines will give you extra luggage allowance to carry your donations. Contact your airline for more information.

• Transport

A hire car can come in handy, as many shelters are away from tourist areas. However, some resorts have donation drop-off points and offer bicycle hire to anyone who wants to get involved.

• Volunteering

After all the routine jobs, there are never enough hours in the day for the volunteers to spend time socialising the dogs. If you can give up one morning by the pool to visit a shelter and walk some of the dogs, the impact would be massive.

However, be prepared for what you may see if you are planning to volunteer. Wendy explains, "Some shelters have only one volunteer for over 150 dogs and in others, the dogs are in tiny broken-down kennels with no runs. They are in there 24/7 and sleep alongside their pee, poo and food. In others, the donations have dried up, so the dogs can only be fed every few days and even then, it's on dried bread or kibble resembling compacted sawdust."



PHOTO © MANOS SPARIS

Koritsi's pups

Through its relationships with smaller overseas rescues, Starlight Barking has come across some truly inspiring stories, such as that of Koritsi-Mou, one very special Greek Shepherd Dog. Named by her rescuer, Amanda, who is founder of Compassion for Greek Paws, Koritsi first appeared one day outside the shelter from a nearby farm. She was timid and clearly underfed, so Amanda left food and water for her.

This became a regular occurrence until Koritsi gave birth and her pups were sold far too early. Good guard dogs are highly sought after, but Koritsi never returned to the farm after that. Instead, she stayed at the shelter. Amanda requested that she be spayed, but the farmer was quick to reject this – her puppies were worth too much.

Koritsi became pregnant again, but winter was approaching and the temperature outside could dip as low as -20C. Amanda and her volunteers extended Koritsi's kennel, but one day she vanished, believed to have given birth, but no one knew where.

Amanda explains, "Then early one morning, freezing snow all around, I arrived at the shelter to find Koritsi sitting very proudly with one pup. My first thought was to get the pup and mum safe and warm. My second thought was that this little pup must be the only survivor, as the weather had been so cruel."

But Koritsi returned the next morning with a second pup. Clearly unsettled, the mum watched her pups reunite, ate a small amount of food then left once more. The next morning, Koritsi returned and this time she had three bundles of fur with her.

Koritsi ate some food and then, once again, walked off, but by now Amanda was getting very concerned. Koritsi was painfully thin and very tired.

"I had to let her go, but that afternoon and evening, I searched for her. I didn't sleep that

night – I kept thinking Koritsi was out there in the snow, weak and cold.

"Early the next morning, with a sorry heart, I headed up to the shelter to make sure the pups were OK and to feed them. And there, sitting on the hill, was beautiful, happy Koritsi, head held high, and three more pups playing happily around

her tail that was now wagging!

Koritsi led her last three pups into the puppy pen and this time she stayed!"

Koritsi remained with Amanda and became her shadow, dutifully following her every morning to the shelter. But her pups still needed homes, and this is where Starlight Barking came in.

Wendy explains, "Greek Shepherd pups are born into a hostile environment and are treated even more harshly than most dogs in Greece. So, when Starlight Barking heard about Koritsi's pups, we offered to help. We brought three of the pups to the UK and found them wonderful experienced homes.

"We were looking for families who understood the breed's strong character. Sierra was adopted by a lovely young vet nurse called Chloe and, as with many adoptive families, we've remained close. Sadly, via another well-meaning rescue, one of Koritsi's other puppies fell into the wrong hands here in the UK.

"It was only thanks to a personal hunch that I got in touch with an amazing network of vet nurses and this pup, plus another perfectly healthy Greek

pup owned by the same person, were saved from being put to sleep.

"Speaking to Chloe and the other vet nurses, this is quite normal. Perfectly healthy dogs can be put to sleep at the request of the owner and the vet can try reasoning but legally can't refuse. In this case, the owner was the rescue and so for this reason alone, the dogs were saved. Chloe is now the owner of two of Koritsi's puppies – Sierra and Delta." 🐾



Top and centre:
Koritsi and her
puppies.

Bottom:
Sierra.

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