



BARK FOR ME, BUSTER!

By LinDee Rochelle

Cheryl Hornbaker is a specialty professional photographer, so her days consist of “Sit. Stay. Smile,” and her efforts usually go to the dogs ... or iguanas ... or the occasional lemur. Yes, she is a very patient pet photographer. And she loves every second of it.

“I’m up for anything,” says Cheryl. “I’m not even afraid of snakes! I volunteer at the San Diego Humane Society, so have photographed more unique animals, and as her website states, “I don’t care if your pet has an accident in my studio, or if their hair gets on everything. It doesn’t bother me if they can’t focus or sit still, or if they’re behaving ‘like they never do at home.’ It’s all good. No need to stress out about it.”

Why pet photography rather than people or scenery?

It’s true, said Cheryl, “Pets can be very challenging to photograph, and many people are happy with the images they capture with their smartphones, but they may not be quality enough to hang on their wall.”

We don’t think twice to hire a photographer for special occasions or family portraits, but Cheryl wants to provide the same high-quality images of your beloved pets. “I create a true piece of art that you can hang on your wall and will make you smile every day.”

A perk to the job, said the former software programmer: “I always have to be on the ground, so no formal suit for my sessions! Granted, pet photo sessions are generally much more, shall we say, ‘exciting’ than your typical family photo shoots. But that’s exactly what keeps me coming back for more fun photo opportunities every day.”

First, funny, and French.

Cheryl’s first pro pet session is still one of her favorites. A friend asked her to photograph her darling dalmatians. Their sophisticated photo is still on her website. Somehow, she persuaded the one that was just a puppy, to mimic the other more mature, spotted canine, in demeanor and appearance. Voilà. Perfection.

Happy to share more examples of the unique and fun subjects she’s had the good fortune to capture, she told of an eleven-year-old bloodhound named Gracie. The owner wanted to photograph Gracie in a familiar outdoor environment—in a rowboat with her owner. “It melted my heart,” said Cheryl. “Gracie had the biggest head I’d ever seen on a dog! Bigger than her owner’s!”

“And last Xmas,” recalled Cheryl, “I was commissioned to recreate a Donald Roller Wilson (American artist) style of picture—animals in fantastical scenes—dressed up and set in human-related environments. So we sewed a dress, made a flower hat, and the owner gave the art to his wife for Christmas.” What fun!

But a standout that made her laugh all the way through the photo session, is a French bulldog (often called “Frenchies”) named “Chongo.” Said Cheryl, “He had the stubbornness of a bulldog and the playfulness of a puppy”



What’s her secret to stunning finished art of your pet?

In a portrait course Cheryl took years ago, the instructor asked the students, what makes a good portrait photograph? Most students thought to focus on the eyes, but Cheryl took to heart what the instructor advised, “What makes a good portrait is lack of fear.”

Cheryl has found this to be true and it works for people or animals. To do this, she photographs wherever the owners and their animals feel most comfortable—at home, in the outdoors, or in the studio. Whatever works for

them. Also, the majority of pets are on a leash. “I can edit out leashes and people, whatever needs to be done to create a better photo,” says Cheryl.

She even has a jaunty, brightly colored mobile bus as another option for photographing at her clients’ convenience. It’s a completely outfitted mobile studio ready to go anywhere for “Yappy Hours” at apartment complexes, or even provide service as an employee-pet reward for businesses. Adorning the side is a portrait of her handsome, beloved black German shepherd, so though he died in 2019, he’s always with her.



When even “school” can be fun ...

She also continues to hone her skills in trips organized by the San Diego Zoo. Traveling with zoo members, many avid photographers as well, they are able to take pictures of remarkable wildlife in their native lands. “It’s been very rewarding,” says Cheryl. “We’ve done shoots of pandas in China, tigers in India, and chameleons and lemurs in Madagascar, to name a few.”

An especially enjoyable trip to Scotland for a photography retreat not only enhanced her expertise, but she learned from four of the best animal photographers in the world, participating in their camerawork masterclass. Kaylee Greer of Dog Breath Photography and Nicole Begley, both from the U.S., along with Charlotte Reeves from Australia and New Zealand’s Craig Turner-Bullock, of Furtography, showed them how to capture stunning images in unique pseudo-action shots. Cheryl picked up invaluable tips from both artists, but was particularly fascinated by Greer’s techniques, excitedly applying them to her own dynamic style.

Though Cheryl’s principal clients are dog owners, she is eager to focus her camera lens on a wider variety of unique pets, like turtles, tarantulas, even snakes!

As Cheryl’s website says, “I love seeing pets through the eye of my lens, whether they’re sitting temporarily for a studio portrait, or they’re running at me full speed to show their joy of



being outside.”

At a glance:
 Sit. Stay. Smile Pet Photography / Cheryl Hornbaker

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