

Chapter 1

Sharing Your Digs with a Dog: A Big Decision

In This Chapter

- ▶ Examining your motives for acquiring a Chihuahua
 - ▶ Caring for a Chihuahua
 - ▶ Focusing on the Toy breed
 - ▶ Making a match with a Chihuahua
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Can money ever buy you love? Sure. Just use it to buy a Chihuahua. Your Chihuahua won't waffle about making a permanent commitment to you. In fact, expect your Chi to envelop you in affection, do his best to protect you, and maybe even improve your health. No kidding! Scientific studies show that a pet's companionship alleviates stress and helps people relax. In many cases, dogs (and other pets) get credit for lowering their owners' blood pressure. However, although most Chihuahua owners are crazy about their pets, a few wish they had never brought a dog (or *that* dog) home.

I don't want Chihuahua ownership to disappoint you, so in this chapter, I talk about the ups and downs of living with dogs in general, and Chis in particular. Is this portable pet with the king-sized heart the right breed for you? In this chapter, you find the answer.

Deciding if and Why You Want a Dog

If you are *dog-deprived*, you know it. You greet all your friends' dogs by name, eye every dog that goes by on the street, and sometimes

even ask strangers if you can pet their pups. Maybe you surf through your favorite breeds on the Internet or browse through the dog magazines at the bookstore. Do you have a list of possible puppy names in your head? You're already a *dog-goner*. It won't be long before other dog-deprived people are asking to pet your new puppy.

Ideally, you're drawn to dogs, and playing with them makes you feel good. But your reason for buying a dog may be less than ideal. For example, maybe you're lonely or bored, and you hope a dog can fill the void. The truth is, a little fur wrapped around a pleasant personality (like Manchita in Figure 1-1) spices up a bland life if you let it. Being loved by a dog is fulfilling in itself, and you can take it a step further and become involved in dog activities (see Chapter 12) that can bring you excitement, new friends, and a sense of purpose. So what's the problem? The glitch is that dogs purchased to relieve monotony often are ignored when the novelty wears off.



Before buying a Chihuahua, you must decide if you'll always appreciate your pet or if you just crave some instant entertainment. Still not sure? Ask yourself this: "Am I ready to love a dog for the duration (possibly 15 years for a Chihuahua), or will a cruise to the Caribbean be just as effective for banishing my boredom?"

Getting a dog is a big decision. After all, dogs are dependent, make demands on your time, cost money, and inhibit your freedom. Is your pet worth it? Absolutely. That's why there are more than 60 million pet dogs in the United States. But just because dogs and people have been best buddies through the ages doesn't necessarily mean you need to run out and get a puppy right away. Maybe Chihuahua ownership isn't right for you; maybe it is right for you, but not right now. Hopefully you'll find out by taking a look at the ownership requirements, the breed overview, and matchmaking tips in the following sections.



Chihuahuas are either smooth or long coated. Smooths have short hair that's soft and shiny (see Figure 1-1). Long coats have (you guessed it) long hair that may be straight or wavy (see Chapter 3 for more).

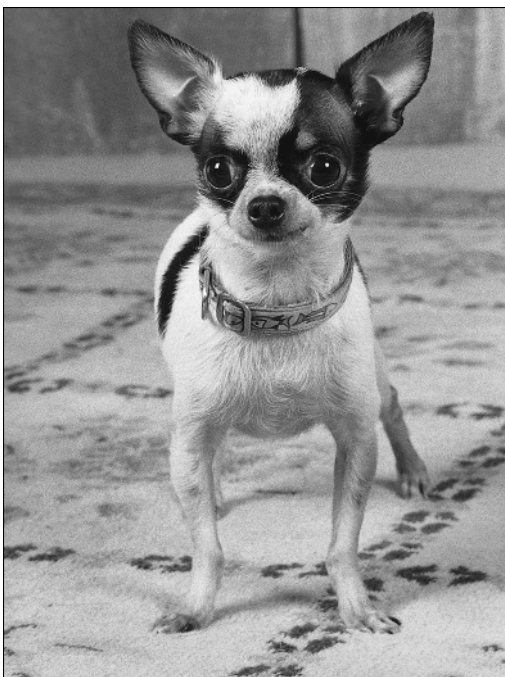


Figure 1-1: Manchita is a smooth-coated Chihuahua.

Doggy Dependents Aren't Tax Deductible: Chi-Care Duties

Like a child, a Chihuahua relies on you for food, housing, education, affection, toys, and medical care — and the IRS won't even let you declare him. Unlike a child, your puppy won't ever become independent. Your Chi won't fix his own dinner, brush his own hair, or pay his own medical bills. Instead, he'll depend on you for his health and happiness all his life.

Fortunately, most dog owners enjoy the small chores that make up daily dog care. For some, interacting with their dogs is a restful transition from a too-busy day. Others say that their dogs keep the nest from feeling empty and add laughter to their lives. And when you have a doggy dependent, you're always the most important thing in his life. He needs you from puppyhood through old age. He doesn't graduate, get a job, marry, or move halfway across the country.

You should discuss division of labor with your family before getting a dog, but don't expect even the most logical schedule to be carved in stone. In the end, someone — one person — must take responsibility, making sure your dog is fed, watered, groomed, trained, exercised, and taken outdoors when he indicates a need to eliminate. Because you're the one reading this book, I bet that someone is you. Will you relish or resent the responsibility?

Considering the long-term cost

Can you afford a dog? I'm talking not only about the price of the dog (which will probably be \$300 to well over \$1,000 for a Chihuahua puppy), but also the price of upkeep.

Some breeds — Chihuahuas for example — don't eat much, but they still need the following:

- ✓ Quality food (see Chapter 6)
- ✓ Puppy shots, an annual checkup complete with vaccinations, and regular worming (see Part IV)
- ✓ Minor surgery to spay or neuter (see Chapter 13)
- ✓ Medication to prevent heartworm
- ✓ A crate, grooming equipment, a collar and leash, dog dishes, and a variety of toys and treats (see Chapter 5)

And although Chis tend to be healthy, yours may rack up a big bill if he's ever in an accident and requires emergency surgery.

You want my take? Darn right you can afford a dog! As hard as you work, you probably can swing that cruise to the Caribbean — if only you had time to take a vacation. Truth is, people seldom make time for a social life. At least you deserve the pleasure of an adorable dog when you finally get home from work at night.

Placing your Chi in your daily schedule

So you're doing fine financially, but maybe you're working crazy hours to reach the next rung up the corporate ladder. In that case, your Chihuahua's excited antics when you come through the door can be just the ticket to turn your mood from office mania to bemused tranquility. Forget fuming over a frustrating meeting. Your dog needs to be walked and fed, and both of you will look forward to snuggling through a sitcom or two. Just keep in mind that no matter how frazzled you are, and no matter how late it is, your

dog still needs your attention and affection. If you and he live alone, especially, you're his entire world.

Chapter 5 and the chapters of Part III deal with setting up a schedule for your Chi and socializing and training your little guy.



Some offices allow employees to bring well-behaved pets to work. My Chihuahua spent many hours in the office when I worked for the American Kennel Club (AKC) in New York City. Sure, that's a special case, but while we walked to work, we saw plenty of other pooches accompanying people carrying briefcases.

Fitting your Chi into your family's future

Your spouse's feelings about having a dog, your kids' ages, your activity level, and your travel plans are important considerations when deciding whether to make a Chihuahua part of your family. Bringing home a dog when your spouse doesn't want one is unfair to everyone. So is buying a breed your other half hates. Sure, a reluctant spouse, in some cases, comes to love the dog, but often one partner never quite comes around. Having to defend your dog on a daily basis gets old real fast, and you don't need that. Furthermore, no dog deserves to be dumped at the pound because everyone got tired of the hassles at home.

Are you hoping to settle down and start a family in the near (or distant) future? Some breeds (Chihuahuas are one of them) are long lived, so with luck, you can plan on your dog being with you for your wedding and the births of your babies. But as sweet as that sounds, it may not be a good thing. Will your spouse also love your dog, or will he or she consider your Chi excess baggage?



Another potential problem is that some breeds (Chihuahuas included) don't thrive around toddlers. It's a no-fault, lose-lose situation. Tiny dogs are too delicate for young children, and kids under the ages of 6 or 7 still are geared toward stuffed animals. Imagine how long poor Pepe would last if a toddler tripped over him or swung him by one leg like a stuffed teddy.

Picking up after your Chi

What kind of housekeeper are you? Is your home casual and relaxed — the kind of place where friends gather to munch popcorn and watch videos? Or is your house so immaculate that family members remove their shoes before stepping on the cream-colored carpet?

Puppies aren't perfect. Chances are you'll have to clean up some accidents while housetraining your Chihuahua. Not only that, he'll shed at intervals (or constantly) all his life (see Chapter 7). Long after he's reliably housebroken — maybe years after you've moved into your dream home — he can get sick and upchuck on the new sofa. When that happens, will you view the mess as a minor annoyance or a major tragedy? (The chapters of Part III deal with socializing and training your little guy.)



Even though a Chi's poops are small, they can make a big mess on the bottom of someone's shoe. Don't forget to clean up after your dog every time you walk him (see Chapter 8). In many places, it's the law!

Viewing the Chihuahua as a Toy Breed

Say that after reading about the ups and downs of dog ownership, you decide that you want a canine companion. Right on! You're going to love living with a dog — that is, if your dog lives up to your expectations. Humans breed dogs capable of doing an extraordinary number of things, but dogs are specialists in a sense, and no one breed does it all. A wrong match between dog and owner usually brings misery, like a bad marriage, while a good match means years of satisfaction and fun.

Some Toy dogs, such as the Toy Poodle, are downsized versions of their larger cousins. Others, like the Miniature Pinscher, have been around longer than the larger dogs that resemble them. The Chihuahua isn't a scaled-down version of anything. It's a true Toy breed: a breed created for the sole purpose of being companions to people. The following sections give you more details on this breed (for more, head to Chapters 2 and 3).

What's terrific about Toys

What do all the Toy breeds have in common? They're living proof that great things really do come in small packages. Here's the upside of a Toy dog:

- ✓ **Toy dogs are small.** They fit anywhere — sometimes even in your pocket — and can get enough exercise in a small apartment.
- ✓ **Toy dogs are cuddly and love human attention.** They form extremely strong bonds with their people, and many are content to warm a lap for hours.

Toy breeds on parade

The American Kennel Club (AKC) recognizes more than 150 dog breeds and divides them into 7 groups, depending on the function each breed originally performed. The Chihuahua is a member of the Toy Group — a companion breed to us people. The AKC recognizes the following Toy breeds:

- ✓ Affenpinscher
- ✓ Brussels Griffon
- ✓ Cavalier King Charles Spaniel
- ✓ Chihuahua (smooth or long coat)
- ✓ Chinese Crested (hairless or powderpuff)
- ✓ English Toy Spaniel
- ✓ Fox Terrier (Toy)
- ✓ Havanese
- ✓ Italian Greyhound
- ✓ Japanese Chin
- ✓ Maltese
- ✓ Manchester Terrier (Toy)
- ✓ Miniature Pinscher
- ✓ Papillon
- ✓ Pekingese
- ✓ Pomeranian
- ✓ Poodle (Toy)
- ✓ Pug
- ✓ Shih Tzu
- ✓ Silky Terrier
- ✓ Yorkshire Terrier

According to AKC statistics, the top three most popular Toy breeds in 2006 were the Yorkshire Terrier, the Shih Tzu, and the Chihuahua. Toy Poodles also are popular, but knowing where they rank is impossible because all three varieties (Standard, Miniature, and Toy) are counted as one.

- ✓ **Toy dogs are portable.** They're ideal for people who travel a lot and like to take their dogs along with them.
- ✓ **Toy dogs love to show off.** Most of them enjoy learning new things from upbeat trainers.
- ✓ **Toy dogs often are welcome where larger breeds are not.** For example, some condo associations limit the size of pets.
- ✓ **Toys are real dogs.** They're intelligent and affectionate, with bold, fun-loving temperaments. Many of them make alert watchdogs.



In the lingo of the dog fancier, the Chihuahua is considered a *natural dog*. That means his coat isn't trimmed, shaved, stripped, or plucked, and his ears and tail are left the way nature made them — not trimmed or docked (in the style of the Miniature Pinscher, among others). In dog-fancier slang, that makes the Chihuahua a *wash-and-wear breed*.

Potential problems with portable pets

Toy dogs need careful owners. Depending on your nature, that's one potential downside of owning a Chihuahua. Although most Chis think they're tough, they're more vulnerable to injury (especially being stepped on or tripped over) than larger dogs. Here are some other concerns:

- ✓ When Toy dog owners overdo carrying and cuddling and skimp on the training, their pets become spoiled. And that turns them into tiny tyrants or nervous wimps.
- ✓ Toy breeds are social creatures. Developing that typical Toy spirit means they need plenty of social interactions with a variety of people from puppyhood on.
- ✓ Toy dogs that are neglected during puppyhood, or that come from inferior stock, may suffer myriad physical and/or mental problems at maturity.
- ✓ Some people dislike Toy dogs and may make rude remarks about your Chi when you walk him. If you answer at all, smile and say something like, "Shhh. He thinks he's a tiger."
- ✓ Toy dogs are real dogs. Like every other breed, they need training and guidance. In other words, if you don't train your Chi, your Chi will train you.

Digging up the Mexican connection

Chihuahuas are lap warmers, and their purpose is companionship. But in tougher times — before people owned pets for pure pleasure — every creature had to have a function. “Just for fun” didn’t cut it. Historians are still uncertain about the precise origins and uses of the earliest Chihuahuas, but legends about their beginnings abound — a combination of fact and fantasy that makes the dog world’s littlest breed one of its biggest mysteries.

Relics from ancient Mexico include sculptures of small dogs that archeologists discovered while studying the remains of the Mayan, Toltec, and Aztec cultures. Although some of the statues (you can see them at the National Museum in Mexico City) don’t look much like modern Chihuahuas, and little is known about the Mayans, some relics from the Toltecs have aroused researchers’ attention.

The Toltec Indians lived in Mexico during the ninth century, and possibly even earlier. They had a dog called the *Techichi*, which some historians believe is the ancestor of today’s Chihuahua. Stone carvings of these dogs exist at the Monastery of Huejotzingo (on the highway between Mexico City and Puebla), and they look much more like the modern Chihuahua than the statues that are believed to be Mayan.

Making a Match with a Chihuahua

All the Toy breeds make exceptional companions, but they aren’t interchangeable. The 21 breeds come in a variety of shapes, coat types, and colors, and their temperaments and activity levels vary from lazy and laid back to extremely active and irritable. (Oops! I don’t know any breed that I’d characterize as “irritable.” Some individual dogs of any breed may be irritable, but definitely not the entire breed.) Is the Chihuahua the right breed choice for you? Here’s a synopsis of what a Chi can and can’t bring to a relationship. (And for more on the Chihuahua look and disposition, see Chapters 2 and 3.)

✓ **Pepe is the perfect pet — for some people.** Because he thrives on togetherness, a Chihuahua is the ideal dog for someone who’s home a lot and spends some time sitting. That’s because Chis love to sit beside you, or better yet, on your lap. If you work from a home office, or if some of your favorite things are watching television, reading, or surfing the net, your dog will be in puppy paradise. He’s also an excellent family dog, provided the children are gentle and older than 7. But if you’re on the go all the time and can’t make space in your schedule to accommodate an accomplished lap warmer, this isn’t the breed for you.

- ✓ **Pepe tires easily.** He enjoys a brisk walk around the block when the weather is nice, but if you want a jogging or hiking companion, check out some of the larger breeds. No, a Chihuahua isn't wimpy when it comes to walking. He just gets tired because he takes several strides to keep up with just one of yours.
- ✓ **Pepe is an alert watchdog with a bark much bigger than he is.** But he isn't a guard dog or an attack dog, no matter what he thinks.
- ✓ **Pepe is loyal and loving.** He believes in family first and is vigilant and discriminating when you have visitors. Your friends *may* become his friends after he gets to know them.
- ✓ **Pepe is easy to groom whether he's a smooth or a long coat.** If you're looking forward to fussing with hair, many other Toys have thicker, longer coats.
- ✓ **Pepe is a housedog.** He can't tolerate cold or rainy weather, garages, or drafty basements.
- ✓ **Pepe is super short.** That means you, your family, and your guests must watch where you walk. Don't worry. It becomes second nature in a day or two. But when you or your children have friends over, you must remind them to be careful.
- ✓ **Pepe plays games with you (you can find some in Chapter 8).** He may learn to fetch a ball or chase a small Frisbee, but he won't be able to handle any rough stuff. If you want a tough dog that plays hard, get a larger pet.
- ✓ **Pepe probably is a good traveler.** Most Chihuahuas adapt well to the open road and love to watch the world go by from the passenger's seat (especially when a passenger is in the seat). Of course, a crate (see Chapter 5) is safer.
- ✓ **Pepe must be taught manners, the same as any other dog.** Little and cute loses its charm real fast when your Chi develops bad habits.
- ✓ **Pepe is a natural born showoff with a good memory.** After he learns a trick or two, he'll be proud to perform for your friends (if he's familiar with them).
- ✓ **Pepe is sensitive.** He tries to comfort you when you're sad and dances for joy when you're happy. He won't feel secure in a house full of friction.
- ✓ **Pepe is delicate.** He needs your protection from bigger dogs, even if he doesn't think so. And not just when he's on the ground. Big dogs have been known to snatch tiny ones right out of their owners' arms (yes, that's rare, but I thought I should warn you).



Do you tend to get physical when you're angry? If so, it's best not to have any pet, especially not a Chihuahua. The first hot-tempered blow a Chihuahua receives will probably be his last.

- ✓ **Pepe is intelligent and highly trainable.** In fact, he's capable of becoming competitive in active events like agility and obedience (see Chapter 12). But don't expect miracles. He'll prefer indoor activities to performing on damp grass.

Loyal, intelligent, trainable, portable, and incredibly cute to boot! If all those endearing Chihuahua charms have you captivated, you have plenty of company. In 2006, 22,562 new Chihuahuas were registered with the American Kennel Club. That ranked the breed 11th among the 155 AKC breeds. And in 14 major cities, Chihuahuas placed in the top 10. The little guys are big on popularity!

