

Flying the fur-friendly skies

More airlines offer perks to four-legged travelers



F.Birchman / MSNBC.com

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The holiday season is traditionally a time for people to get together with family and friends across the country and around the world. Now that pets are becoming even more a part of the American family, many are tagging along, too. If you're thinking about bringing your pet along to take part in the festivities, keep in mind that planning a plane trip is a whole different ball game if Fido or Fluffy is flying with you.

With the relaxation of quarantine laws between the United States, Britain and many European Union countries, more dogs, cats and even ferrets are taking to the skies with their pet parents.

“The percentage of people traveling with their pets is going up between 10 and 15 percent monthly,” says Barbara DeBry, owner of **Puppy Travel**, which claims to be the only full-service pet travel agency in the United States.

DeBry specializes in both customized and special package vacations for people and their pets — everything from skiing trips in Colorado to beach destination itineraries as well as hiking trips. And, if you want to gamble with Rover, she can book you a stay at the Virgin

River Casino and Hotel in Mesquite, Nev., the only pet-friendly casino in the country. DeBry also handles international pet re-locations and vacation travel to the [United Kingdom](#) and Europe.

"People call me all the time, outraged because they cannot purchase a seat for Fido. I wish I could oblige," says DeBry.

Frequent flyer plans

While pet owners may not be able to reserve a separate seat for their animal, they can now do the next best thing and shop around for a frequent flyer program for their pet.

With the launch of its Points for Pets Program in 2001, Israel's El Al Airlines was the first international airline to introduce a frequent flyer plan for animals. A round-trip pet ticket from New York to Tel Aviv costs \$260, and after three trips in a three-year period, the pet earns a free ticket. Meanwhile, [Japan Airlines](#) offers a domestic program, which gives furry fliers a chance to earn gifts and free carrier rental on future flights inside the country.

Without a doubt, the leading player in the field of pet travel is Virgin Atlantic Airlines, which currently flies from eight U.S. destinations to London.

"When we launched our Pet Travel Scheme in May this year, we underestimated how many people would want to travel with their animal companions internationally" says Karen Kerlake, Marketing and Public Relations Manager for Virgin Cargo.

Beginning in January 2005, all pets traveling aboard Virgin Atlantic will receive a "Welcome On-Board" pack detailing their travel arrangements, says Kerlake. The dog pack contains a T-shirt with the Virgin logo and a special collar tag. Cats will receive their own Virgin catnip mouse and collar tag, while ferrets will get a Virgin baseball cap and scarf. All pets will receive seasonal goodies depending on the time of year.

In addition, every animal traveling on Virgin will be issued a pet passport, which contains a paw print or photograph of the animal and will be stamped on arrival at each destination. When the pet has achieved five paw prints, it becomes eligible for a gift, such as a drinking bowl or collar.

Alternatively, the points can be donated to a recognized animal charity anywhere in the world up to \$92. Ten paw prints entitle the pet to a gift of higher value or a charitable donation of \$184. Fifteen paw prints earns a grooming treatment or a \$276 donation and

20 prints may be exchanged for a full day at a pet spa or a \$369 charitable donation, says Kerslake.

Unfortunately, although many major American airlines are pet friendly and allow them to travel "cabin class" or "cargo class," as yet, none offer incentives to pet travelers either within the United States or abroad.

Make your pet official

New travel regulations that came into effect last October require U.S. pets traveling to Britain or to countries within the European Union to have a government-issued document detailing compliance with certain vaccination requirements and confirmation that the pet has been fitted with a microchip. Information on countries participating in the Pet Travel Scheme, known as PETS, and the relevant regulations relating to these pet passports can be found on the Web site of the British Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at www.defra.gov.uk.

Before heading to the airport, it's essential to check the specific requirements of the airline involved. Airlines usually only allow one pet per cabin so advise them well in advance. Many allow pets to travel in the cabin for domestic flights, while long-haul traveling often restricts them to a special cargo section, where costs vary according to weight and generally start around \$169 for a pet (plus carrier) weighing between 10 pounds and 50 pounds. Pet carriers also have to comply with strict specifications.

Weather, too, can dictate if the pet will be allowed to travel. Many carriers will not accept animals checked as bags (for cargo travel) if the outside temperatures are extremely hot or cold, says DeBry.

"If it is over 85 degrees in the cargo hold, airlines will not fly animals and if it's under 45 degrees, they require a letter of acclimation from a veterinarian stating the pet can withstand the colder temperatures."

To tranquilize or not?

Many owners wonder whether it makes sense to get a prescription for a tranquilizer for their pet. In some cases, it may be the best option for everyone — including your fellow passengers if your pet is flying in the main cabin.

"Most owners can make a reasonable prediction of whether or not to tranquilize their pet before traveling simply by their reaction to a visit to the veterinarian," says Dr. Gary Norsworthy of the Alamo Feline Health Center in San Antonio, Texas. If a pet has a hard

time handling even a short trip to the vet, they're unlikely to make it through a plane ride gracefully without the help of medication.

"The most common tranquilizer used for airline travel is Acepromazine," says Norsworthy. "Others, including Valium are acceptable. Significant tranquilization usually lasts about 2 to 3 hours. Then a gradual recovery occurs over the next 2 to 3 hours."

When it comes to cats, Dr. Drew Weigner, a board-certified specialist and a diplomate of the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners, based in Atlanta, says, "It's kind to give a mild tranquilizer to most felines that fly. Cats like to be on firm footing, so it's disorientating for them to be on a plane in motion."

And, if cats are traveling domestically, it's "imperative that they travel in the cabin," he adds.

In general, planning a trip with your pet is a lot like traveling with small children, says DeBry. Don't forget to pack for your pet and make sure you have all its necessary "gear."

"Details, details, details. Favorite toys, treats, medication and even the pet's security blanket are luggage essentials," she says.

And, if you find that you and your pet actually like traveling together, you can take some tips from Jerry Hatfield of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., who oversees a Web site called PetTravel.com, which offers **international travel** advice for pet owners. Hatfield and his 15-year-old Shih Tzu Ruggles, have vacationed in England, France, Germany, Switzerland, the Bahamas, Belize, Canada and Mexico each "at least half a dozen times."

"We explore new places together," says Hatfield. "He's shopped with me on Fifth Avenue, New York, seen the skaters at Rockefeller Center, dined in dozens of interesting restaurants and visited the Eiffel tower in Paris."

Hatfield insists that while upmarket hotel chains like Loews, [W Hotels](http://WHotels.com) and the St. Regis may welcome guests with four paws and a tail, his definition of a truly "pet-friendly hotel" is one where the desk clerk wants to pet Ruggles on arrival and the bellman comes up in the morning to take him for a walk.

If you are about to jet off into the fur-friendly skies and are still wondering about the adventure ahead, then a copy of "The Cat Who Went to Paris" by Peter Gethers is required reading. The hilarious tales of his cat Norton, a Scottish Fold who traveled the

world, wined and dined in Europe's most fashionable restaurants, almost started a war in Italy over an uneaten sardine and mingled with celebrities like Roman Polanski and Harrison Ford, will have you rolling in the aisle.

Bone voyage!

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