

# How to Prepare for Your Pet to NOT Join You on Your Trip

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

Not all pets are suited to travel, and not all vacation spots are made for pets. Learn how to decide when leaving your pet with a sitter or in a boarding facility is a better idea than traveling with your furry friend.

## WHEN SHOULD PETS STAY HOME?

Deciding to travel without your pet usually “depends on individual factors related to the pet as well as the type of trip,” according to Dr. Kelly C. Ballantyne, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist and clinical assistant professor at University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine and practitioner at Veterinary Behavior at Illinois.

If you have a pet who is very young or old or has special medical or behavioral needs—or your pet just lacks a sense of wanderlust (which is the case for most cats)—you should probably look for an alternative place for him to stay during your vacation. As Dr. Ballantyne explains, such pets “can struggle with trips with the family as there will inevitably be time when they need to be left alone, and being left alone in an unfamiliar place is often worse than being left alone in a familiar environment.”

Consider not only your individual pet but also where you’re going and how you’re getting there:

- Is the venue too noisy or stressful?



- How pet-friendly (and friendly for your specific pet) is the location?
- What activities will your pet be able to participate in, or will you often end up leaving him behind?
- Will your pet have to navigate stairs, hills, or other obstacles that aren't normally an issue at home?
- Will your pet have to spend a lot of time in the car, and does he find car rides stressful?
- Will your pet have to ride in cargo if you're flying? As Dr. Ballantyne says, “Traveling in cargo can be highly stressful even for the most stable pets.”

## WHAT'S THE BEST HOME AWAY FROM HOME FOR YOUR PET?

### Choosing the Right Environment

Let your pet's personality and needs guide you in determining where he should stay in your absence:

- Energetic dogs may do best in a boarding facility with a doggie daycare.
- Puppies and kittens, senior pets, and those with special needs may do best with a sitter, either in the sitter's home or in their own home (depending on their exact needs).
- A sitter who visits your home is

usually the purr-fect fit for cats (although some cats may do well in feline-friendly kennels).

- Aggressive dogs shouldn't board with (or near) other pets. Consult your veterinarian for advice specific to your pet's case.
- Pets who require specialized care for chronic medical or behavioral issues, take difficult-to-administer medication, or have limited mobility may need to board at a veterinary hospital or kennel with a trained veterinary professional on staff 24 hours a day.

### Selecting a Boarding Facility or Sitter

Once you determine which type of care is best for your pet, get recommendations from your veterinarian and other trusted pet parents. You can also check with the International Boarding & Pet Services Association (IBPSA), National Association of Professional Pet Sitters, or Pet Sitters International for reputable facilities and sitters. Consult the Better Business Bureau to ensure inspections are up-to-date, read any complaints, and look up online reviews. Then, check out the boarding facility or sitter yourself.

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### Boarding Facility

Many boarding facilities now have more in common with luxury resorts than with traditional kennels, but options include a range of amenities and price points. Tour the facility without your pet initially, and look for:

- Separation by size and species
- Socialization with other pets and staff
- Mental stimulation like food puzzles
- Adequate space to exercise—inside and out
- Protection from the elements and extreme temperatures
- Cleanliness
- Good ventilation
- Individual, spacious kennels
- Comfortable bedding (or the ability to bring your pet's own bedding)

During your tour, ask the following questions:

- Are you licensed and insured?
- Will you perform a temperament test?
- What vaccines do you require, and what are your infection-control procedures? (Check with your vet about the risk of canine influenza in your area.)
- How do you manage sick pets?
- How and when will you notify me if my pet becomes ill?
- In medical emergencies, will you contact my own veterinarian, an on-call vet, or another clinic?
- Is your staff trained on how to medicate pets?
- What other services are available?
- Do you offer a webcam so I can see how my pet's doing?
- Is the facility staffed overnight?
- Can I bring my pet's own food? If not, what do you feed?

Next, let your pet visit before the big stay. If possible, do a trial run such as a day in doggie daycare or short overnight stay. "A pet never lies," cautions Carmen Rustenbeck, CEO and founder of the IBPSA. "So watch how your pet interacts with the staff—body language will tell you."

### Pre-Vacation Prep

Whether you choose a sitter or boarding facility, make sure you leave contact information for you, your veterinarian and any veterinary specialists, and a trusted individual who can make difficult decisions if the caregiver can't reach you. Also, provide proof of your pet's vaccinations (generally required at boarding facilities), as well as a copy of your pet's recent medical history if he has a chronic illness.

### Pet Sitter

Decide whether a family member or friend will watch your pet or if you'll hire a professional sitter. Although your pet might be more comfortable with someone you know, consider that person's ability to make decisions or care for your pet in an emergency, administer medication, and follow through on the commitment.

Professional pet sitters offer a range of services and might drop in your home a few times a day, stay with pets overnight, or have pets stay in their home. These different levels of care vary in cost and may be appropriate for different pets' needs.



Although many of us can't ignore prices, it might be worth considering what your pet is used to and trying to accommodate as much of his normal schedule as you can. For example, a dog who is used to being walked 4 times a day might not do well with a schedule change that only allows 2 daily walks.

"Look for a pet sitter who has a business license and liability insurance," explains

Dr. Ballantyne. "This can show that the individual takes pet sitting seriously as a career and not something he or she just does on a whim."

In addition to making sure your potential pet sitter is bonded and insured, ask the following:

- Can you provide references?
- What is your experience with pets?
- When and for how long will you visit, and what will you do during each visit?
- What do you do to prevent a pet from escaping?
- How do you handle emergencies?
- What additional services do you provide?
- Do you send photos and updates at least once a day?

If your pet is staying in the sitter's home, many boarding questions (and a visit to the sitter's home) also apply.

Next, do a trial run with the sitter, including a walk to practice safety using your pet's walking equipment, and make sure your pet is comfortable with his temporary caregiver.

Regardless of where you decide your pet will stay when you're out of town, Dr. Ballantyne has some important advice: "Pay attention to how [the sitter or boarding facility staff] interact with the pet and speak about the other animals under their care. If anything is concerning, look elsewhere."

With plenty of preparation on your part, your pet can enjoy your vacation as much as you do—even if he doesn't come along.

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