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Cara's Corner

By Cara Yanussi, RVT

At numerous times over the past almost 8 years I have answered questions from clients about traveling long distances with their pets. I think those calls were always handed over to me because I had driven across the country with 5 cats and a dog in 2012 and had some experience in getting myself and my animals prepared. As I prepare to embark on another long move with a new crop of furry best friends, I will share with you some last tidbits on Cara's Corner.

How to Have Safe & Happy Road Trips with Your Pets

- 1) Microchips save lives. But this is only REALLY true if the chip is registered. So, make sure your pet has a chip. And then make sure the information is up-to-date with whatever company you choose. I use [HomeAgain](#), but there are numerous others like [24PetWatch](#), [PetLink](#), and [AKC Reunite](#). Just do a search online and pick one whether it is free or not AND MAKE SURE YOUR CONTACT AND EMERGENCY INFORMATION IS UP-TO-DATE.
- 2) Safe traveling involves restraint. We all wear seatbelts, and so should your pet. I know plenty of animals, both feline and canine (and I imagine avian) who would love to roam around in a vehicle and be able to admire the passing view. Remember though, that could give animals motion sickness. And untethered animals can become projectiles in any sudden stops or accidents. This puts them at risk of greater injury and all human passengers too. They may also be ejected from the vehicle and in a moment of fear or panic or pain, flee the scene in an unfamiliar area. Not to mention that the opening of windows would need to be restricted.
 - a. For dogs, there are a variety of crash-tested harnesses. They vary in the range of sizes that are available. The 2 manufacturers with the most accolades according to the [Go Pet Friendly](#) website are Ruffwear Load Up Harness (which I use for my dog on all car trips, both long and short) and SleepyPod.
 - b. Carriers for all cats. They should always be in a carrier, but just as important is restraining the carrier so it does not slide around. Many plastic carriers have either a handle on top, and may have an actual spot for the shoulder and lap straps of a seatbelt to slide into. Whether your cats are riding shotgun in the front seat next to you, or on the back seat, or in the folded-down cargo area, buckle the carriers in so that they do not slide around in any accidents or quick stops. The added benefit of belting a carrier into the front passenger seat is that it will keep the airbag from deploying and injuring your pet.
 - c. All of section "b" applies to small dogs in carriers as well.
 - d. For large dogs you may opt to utilize a crate. It should also be strapped in to the vehicle.
- 3) Getting your pet used to being confined/crated is something that takes time. While I recommend crate training for all dogs regardless of travel plans or how well house-broken they may be, not all are. But if traveling with your pets is in your future, or a possibility in your mind for the future, start training early and make it a positive experience.
 - a. Leaving a cat carrier open and inviting in your home at all times has a high likelihood of *not* meaning that your cat runs away every time you go near the carrier or pull it out of the garage. This means not having to find the hiding cat under the bed or in the closet when it's time to go. This applies to all vet visits, too. Cats are curious by nature and love going into little dark places.

By keeping a carrier out with some comfy bedding and toys, it is less likely to be a shock to the cat when an appearance is made. I also occasionally throw some crunchy treats or food into my available carriers so that cats go in and do random checks on their own. ALWAYS MAKE SURE THERE IS SOME TYPE OF ABSORBANT/SOFT MATERIAL IN THE CARRIER. Under stress, many cats can vomit, urinate, and/or defecate. Having some absorbent material means it will be more on the bedding and less on the cat. Cats do not like to be dirty.

- b. For dogs, feeding them in their crate can be very helpful. You can leave the door open and also occasionally throw some tasty treats in.
- c. If you plan on using a seatbelt harness but your dog has only ever worn a collar, it can take time for animals to become accustomed to the feel of a harness. Also, it is very important that the harness fits and is adjusted properly to ensure no injuries occur should there be an accident on the road.

As I recommended above, properly restraining a pet for every trip, even just down the block, is the best plan. Once they are used to that, long trips will be a snap.

- 4) Has your pet ever traveled before? Do they get stressed? Do they get car-sick or motion-sick? Now is the time to talk to your veterinarian about what medications may be helpful. The law in California states that a veterinarian cannot prescribe medication without an exam within the last year. While in the past getting an appointment in the next day or week was never an issue, the pandemic has created an incredible demand for veterinary appointments. Many pet hospitals, not just APH, are booking weeks in advance. The best way to avoid having to be asked to be squeezed in or pay for an emergency visit anywhere, is to keep up with yearly exams. They are not only for vaccines, but also to check the all-around health of your pet. Not only that, but a veterinarian that has an established relationship with your pet is more likely to understand what medications may be the most helpful.
- 5) The what-ifs and what-you-should-haves.
 - a. Pictures. These prove the pets are yours and also what your pet looks like. If the pets have unique markings or colors, make sure you have a picture that shows it. And not just on your phone. Have a printed copy of a photo of each pet. Should a pet become separated from you, having pictures readily available for posters is important.
 - b. Proof of vaccination. Traveling is scary. There are new sounds and new people. Sometimes animals can act out. If your pet accidentally bites or scratches someone, proof of vaccination can save a lot of trouble and heartbreak. Keep a paper copy with your pictures.
 - c. Have their microchip number readily available.
- 6) Oops, someone went potty on the road.
 - a. Have some (extra) garbage bags, paper towels, cleaning cloths or spray, and bedding/pee pads packed together.
 - b. Make sure all doors and windows are closed before opening any carrier/crate doors.
 - c. Remove soiled bedding, but don't worry too much about a dirty pet until you reach a place you can safely let them out (i.e. your next hotel stop).
- 7) I have spent a lot of time driving. Seriously, A LOT. Many of you may not know that I have been commuting to Alameda from San Jose for almost 8 years. Some of you have heard about my original road trip to CA, or my many adventures to Native American reservations for no-cost spay/neuter programs. On most of my drives I have had a canine companion. But what I ALWAYS have is music. It keeps me mentally happy. That said, what we humans find enjoyable, animals may find jarring.

Seriously, there have been studies. [Dogs prefer reggae or soft rock](#), while [cats prefer calmer music](#) with some of their own feline sounds mixed in. I am not saying you have to listen to singing cats or Bob Marley, but definitely keep the volume down, and try to avoid music/songs with lots of hard beats.

- 8) Keep the cabin of your vehicle cozy. Depending on your direction of travel and where in your car your pet is located, pay attention to how much sun is directly on your pet, especially since we are confining them for their own safety. They will not be able to move away. Consider a shade for the window nearest them or a light cover for the carrier/crate.
- 9) When it comes time for human breaks, make sure all carriers/crates are securely closed and pets are not running around your car BEFORE you open your door. And check again when you get back to the car. Park partially in the shade if you can, though I know so many rest stops do not have enough trees for that. If you can, bring a human companion to trade off, especially in the summer months, when it becomes especially important not to leave an animal in a car that can become an oven very quickly.
- 10) Stop for doggy potty breaks. Try and keep your dogs on their normal schedule if they have one. Do not worry about cats (as much), but make sure you have a good-size litter box for your nightly stops.

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