

5 Tips for the Ultimate Dog Road Trip

Is a road trip with your dog in your future? It's never too early to start planning and prepping to ensure your trip is enjoyable for all - and without too many unexpected surprises. Consider these five tips now for a successful road trip filled with memories for a lifetime.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dec 9, 2022 • 5 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you're like a lot of pet parents these days, you'd really prefer to bring your dog along on road-trip vacations and getaways
- There's a lot to think about before hitting the road with a canine family member; arguably the most important is your pet's temperament and ability to relax in unfamiliar settings
- Planning ahead is essential — everything from getting your dog comfy with riding in your vehicle, to finding pet-friendly hotels, to embracing the importance of "expecting the unexpected"

For a variety of reasons, a growing number of pet parents these days choose to limit their getaways to "dogs welcome" visits and vacations they can travel to and from by car. In a pinch, they may call in a reliable pet sitter or worst case, take their dog to a boarding kennel, but their first choice is always to bring their furry companion along.

Current estimates are that at least 18% of Americans traveling for pleasure have hit the road with their pets. A study published in the Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism noted, "As an increasing number of people consider pets as members of their families, pet owners are refusing to travel without their pets."¹

Planning Ahead

If you're considering bringing your dog on a first-time road trip, or he's new to the family and hasn't traveled with you before, the first thing to consider is his temperament. Temperament is actually more important than breed when it comes to determining whether your canine companion will enjoy being your traveling companion (and vice versa).

Every dog is an individual with his or her own level of tolerance for the unfamiliar sights, sounds, and smells that a car trip brings. Veterinarian Dr. Tom Watson of Carolinas Veterinary Medical Hospital sums up the situation well:

"You're going on a vacation to relax and unwind. If the dog is anxious and making you anxious because they're not traveling well, you need to figure out how you can make it a good trip for everybody."²

It's also important to ensure ahead of time that the hotels you're planning to stay at are not only pet friendly, but also allow your dog's breed, as some hotels have breed restrictions in place. Certain hotels may also have size limits, as well as limits on the number of pets in a room, so it's important to check those things out ahead of time as well.

5 Important Tips for Successful Road Trips With Your Dog

Generally speaking, I don't recommend traveling with your pet by air unless there are no other available options, so the tips that follow pertain to travel by car.

1. Help your dog learn to enjoy the ride — Some dogs seem to be hard-wired to love car rides. Others, not so much. If your dog has extreme anxiety about car travel that you've tried and failed to help her overcome, you may want to rethink a road trip. For dogs who just need some convincing, there are ways to make car rides fun in baby steps.

*"If you want to run a marathon, you start by jogging around the block one time. The same thing goes for dogs," says Watson. "First, put the dog in the car and stay in the driveway. Then, move up and down the driveway or go around the block once."*³

From there, you can take brief trips to close locations your dog loves, such as a forest preserve, pet food store or grandma's house, to help her view car travel as a good thing. Be aware that, just like people, dogs can get motion sickness.

Experiment by taking trips when your dog has an empty stomach, and after she's had a few treats. Some dogs do better traveling on an empty stomach, while others do best with a small amount of food in their tummy.

2. Put safety first, always— Just as you would never consider driving without a seatbelt or allowing human passengers to ride without one, you shouldn't allow your dog to travel unrestrained either. I recommend most dogs ride in a crate that fits snugly, with enough room to be comfortable, but not excess room (which can pose a risk in an accident).

Depending on your vehicle, you can place the crate in the rear (such as in an SUV) or on the backseat. Look for crates and carriers that have strength-rated anchor straps or work in conjunction with your vehicle's existing LATCH connection systems (used for children's car seats) so the crate won't become an unguided missile in the event of an accident.

Alternatively, you can use a safety harness to restrain your pet in the car, but be sure it has been crash-test certified for safety.

3. Plan extra time for pit stops — Traveling with a dog is not unlike traveling with a small child, in that you'll need to plan extra time for plenty of stops along the way. Your dog will need opportunities to relieve himself, stretch his legs, and do a bit of sniffing for mental stimulation every few hours. Be sure to have clean-up supplies on hand, along with his leash and collar or harness, water bowl, and a supply of fresh water.

Also plan for mealtimes — for both of you. Most dogs do best when fed first thing in the morning (an hour or two before departure), and again at night at the hotel. If you'll be stopping to eat along the way, try to find pet-friendly restaurants, or consider eating in your car, since it's never a good idea to leave a pet unattended in a vehicle.

4. Pack for your pooch — When traveling with your dog, you'll need to bring all necessities, including her food, of course, plus treats, poop bags, and food and water bowls, along with a few of her favorite toys, blankets and, if practical, her own bed from home.

You should also make sure she's wearing a collar with a current ID tag at all times, and pack a pet first aid kit in the event of an emergency. A recent photo on your phone is also recommended, in the event you become separated from her.

5. Expect the unexpected — It's highly unlikely a road trip with your dog will be entirely free of hiccups, so it's important to "get your mind right" before setting out!

Bringing your dog along on vacation will provide you with wonderful memories and extra time to bond with him, providing you accept that there will be extra stress on both of you, especially when things don't go exactly as planned. Be prepared to be flexible in your plans and keep your dog's best interests in mind, even if it means skipping an activity or two.

Needless to say, if your dog is often anxious or fearful, he'll need lots of extra TLC along the way. But be aware that even outgoing, confident dogs may have some anxiety when thrust into a new environment and routine. In either case, spraying your car or hotel room with Rescue Remedy or other anxiety-reducing flower essences may help take the edge off your dog's stress.

Sources and References

¹ [Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism January 26, 2015](#)

^{2,3} [Southern Living, 5 Veterinarian-Approved Tips for Traveling With Your Dog](#)
