

5 Steps to Finding the Perfect Kennel

How to find the right kennel for your dog.

Cathy M. Rosenthal

Whether traveling for business or pleasure, or called out of town on an emergency, all dog owners will at some point need alternative care for their dogs. But finding that home away from home can be stressful. How do you find the right boarding kennel for your dog? Will he be happy? How do you know if you made the right decision?

Here's how to find the right kennel for your dog ... in five easy steps.

Step 1: Whether it's a loving staff, convenient location, or cost consideration, make a list of things essential to you.

Nina Spadaccino of Texas says first impressions are critical to her. "It's not just how a place looks and what services they offer, but also how the staff interacts with your dog," she says. "If the staff can't greet your dog while you're standing there, how will they treat him when you're gone?"

Because Spadaccino does a lot of traveling, she boards her 6-year-old Boxer Titan frequently and wants him to have all the comforts of home. But most important, she wants people to respond to him from the moment he arrives. She searched several kennels before choosing one about 30 minutes from home that met her criteria.

"I feel like I am sending my dog to camp," Spadaccino says. "I know he doesn't want to go initially. But if I returned five minutes later, I know I would find a happy dog. The staff has a lot to do with that."

Step 2: Locate kennels and compare them to your needs list from Step 1. Visit their websites, and schedule a tour of each facility.

You can find most pet care facilities in the yellow pages or through an Internet search of your city or destination area, if traveling. There are four different categories of kennel providers: basic kennels, kennels with daycare options, veterinary boarding facilities, and upscale facilities with amenities. (See "Home away from home," from the February 2006 issue of DOG FANCY, for the pros and cons of each facility.) Pet-care services trade association ABKA also offers a pet service locator at www.abka.com which you can use to search for member kennels by city, state, or country.

Another method of finding a boarding kennel is through the recommendations of friends, family, or veterinarians. But don't rely solely on their advice. "Every dog owner is looking for something a little different or special for their dog," says Jim Krack, ABKA executive director. "Always visit a kennel to see if it meets your expectations."

Step 3: When visiting, look at the kennel's security, supervision, safety, and sanitation first.

"Everything else should be built around these four things," Krack says.

Security: Look for kennels with security systems and adequate fencing heights to prevent escape. Check for double gates that prevent dogs from slipping out when another dog is being taken into an area. Ask how dogs are moved from one place to another.

Supervision: Dogs should be supervised at least 12 hours a day. Staff should be trained to understand basic dog behavior, as well as recognize signs of illness and distress. Find out about staff training, and ask how they transport sick dogs to a veterinarian.

Safety: Dogs need a safe, temperature-controlled enclosure that's protected from outside elements. Kennels and exercise runs should be separated by walls, barriers, or additional space to ensure that dogs aren't challenged or stressed by other nearby dogs. Exercise areas should have good traction, and all areas should be well-lit and have appropriate ventilation. Ask staff about kennel evacuation plans in case of fire or disaster.

Sanitation: Staff should clean individual kennels daily and maintain them throughout the day. Dogs need clean beds and toys, and fresh food and water daily. Find out what the immunization and parasite prevention requirements are for boarding dogs.

Step 4: Once a kennel meets these criteria, ask about accommodations, daily schedules, services, and amenities that your dog might need or enjoy. Does the kennel provide bedding, or do you need to provide a bed from home? Some kennels offer plush doggie beds and couches; others may only add a blanket to the kennel. Does the kennel accommodate special diets? How often do they feed the dogs? Some kennels may not accommodate your dog's regular feeding routines. Will the staff medicate your dog? If so, how often, and what is the charge? Some kennels will not accept dogs who need insulin shots or other intensive medical treatments. Will your dog play outdoors or go for a daily walk? Exercise may be part of the overnight fee, or it may be extra. If you have multiple dogs, will the kennel board them together? Some facilities cannot accommodate two big dogs in the same kennel, and won't even allow two small dogs to share a kennel. What amenities does the facility offer? Some provide massages, in-room TV, and lap pools for water-based exercise. These extras cost more, but may give your dog a more active and enjoyable stay. How often can you call about your dog? Does the kennel provide reports at the end of the visit? Some kennels have video monitors and webcams that you can access from the Internet.

Step 5: Select a kennel and board your dog for a few days before deciding on an extended stay.

All that's left is to find out what your dog thinks about your decision. Board him for one or two days to assess the kennel's services and gauge your dog's reaction to the place. While he may be a little sad or nervous about being separated from you, his spirits should return to normal when you are reunited.

"I know my dog, and if he is acting strange or different when I pick him up, then I would reconsider my choice," Spadaccino says.

All dog owners need reassurance that their dogs will receive the best possible care while they are away. Start looking for a boarding kennel before you need one. You are more likely to find one that will meet your dog's needs and give you some peace of mind.

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Looking for a kennel? Use our printable Kennel Evaluation Checklist to help find the right one for your dog.