

RVing With Dogs

Enjoy the comfort of home with your dog on an RV vacation.

By Sally Deneen

Before Steve Robinson hits the open road in his 40-foot Holiday Rambler Endeavor motor home, he walks to the spacious rig's dining table and secures his travel companions — six Chow Chows.

One dog rests beneath the table in a hard plastic crate. Another lies in a strapped-down tabletop crate. Two crates on either side of the table serve as temporary homes for the remaining dogs until break time, which comes every four hours.

All set, they're off!

"It's just a big toy," says Robinson, a Chow Chow breeder and retired American Kennel Club inspections and investigations director from Siler City, N.C. "For me, I enjoy my motor home more than any toy I've ever had in my life." He mainly travels to dog shows, but also takes his canine crew on trips to the mountains. "The advantage is having your 'house' available to you all the time," he says. "If I get tired, I pull over. If I need a restroom, I have one. If I need refreshment, I have cooking facilities."

His dogs treat the place like home. "They're just as comfortable," Robinson says. "They're in their own habitat." He also enjoys the independence the RV affords. "I can take my dogs, take care of them, and not impose on other people."

More and more people travel with their dogs, and campers like Robinson find RVing a relatively easy way to travel with a pet. The latest Recreational Vehicle Industry Association survey found that more than half of RVers travel with pets. "Anything people can have as a pet, they will take in their RV," says RVIA spokesman Kevin Broom. Five percent have hit the highways and byways with ferrets, horses, snakes, birds, hamsters, or gerbils. But the vast majority chooses dogs as companions — 88 percent. Here's what you need to know if you're considering joining that number.

What to take A sturdy pet carrier and bungee cords to secure the crate so it stays put in the RV. Natural or prescription motion-sickness treatments. Ask your veterinarian for recommendations. An easy-to-store pet exercise fence, so you can create a secure outdoor area for your dog. No-spill pet bowls, sold at pet-supply stores and on the Internet. Plastic bags or a pooper-scooper, and towels for cleanup. Important documents like vaccine records, up-to-date veterinary health certificates, and dog licenses. Make your dog comfortable with crates

Robinson found this easy, as he started teaching his Chow Chows to be familiar with crates during puppyhood. "They're used to sleeping in crates, and they're used to riding in the crates, and they can eat and drink in the crates," he says. "That's their self-contained shelter."

To train your dog, start at home: Place favorite treats or toys in the crate and leave the door open so your dog can walk in and explore. Over time, he'll associate the crate with good things. Once he's comfortable in it, transfer the crate to your vehicle.

Robinson sometimes lets one dog sit on the floor next to him as he drives. But if your dog craves being petted, a crate is safer. "It's very distracting when you're trying to drive," he says.

Evaluate your dog

Size up your dog and your intended road trip. Not all make good matches. Rough roads can cause a rocking motion and loud noises that can spook a dog, making him scared of RVs.

So found the owner of one Jack Russell Terrier during a 1,000-plus-mile Ohio to Florida road trip, as reported on an RV.net forum, where a handful of pet owners share similar experiences. The terrier ended up riding home in an accompanying car, where she no longer seemed scared.

Prepare, prepare, prepare

Create an itinerary with your dog — and possible mishaps — in mind. Robinson favors interstate highways, as they're designed for long-distance travel with rest stops and highway patrol officers available for help.

GPS devices and online tools such as Mapquest.com and Google Maps make it easy to get directions, driving distances, and times. A common strategy — especially in this era of \$4-a-gallon fuel — is to pick a destination within a few hours' drive and go straight there, maybe taking one rest stop along the way.

Broom has enjoyed a few long trips with his hound mix Angel, but they've also RVed close to home. "She went to a county park that's all of about 15 minutes from our house," Broom says. "We were there three nights. We got to go to the campground, we got to have the great outdoor experience, and we didn't have to go far to get it."

Research dog-friendly destinations

Pick destinations with your dog in mind, and identify possible limitations. For example, national parks generally permit dogs in organized campgrounds and on asphalt roads, but forbid them on hiking trails or anywhere else. That essentially banishes pets to campsites, and you can't leave them unattended.

Avoid dog discrimination by camping in U.S. Forest Service campgrounds, whose rules typically allow dogs to have a great time. Depending on the location, dogs may follow most, if not all, hiking trails, sometimes swim in lakes, and ditch the leash in general forest areas, although a leash makes sense, lest your dog vanish in pursuit of wildlife. For more information about federal campgrounds, call 877-444-6777 or visit www.recreation.gov

Where to turnHow to RV: www.newrver.com Saving money on camping fees: <http://tinyurl.com/5cw393> Choosing where to camp: Get descriptive, nitty-gritty details about thousands of campsites from Moon Outdoors' camping guidebooks such as West Coast RV Camping (Avalon Travel Publishing, 2007). AAA CampBooks, free to AAA AutoClub members, offer basic information and ratings for nearly 11,000 campgrounds. On www.AAA.com, access these listings through the campground search feature. Trailer Life Directory offers a free online directory of more than 12,000 RV parks at www.tldirectory.comBook in advance

Popular camping areas book up quickly, so reserve early — even six to 11 months ahead for places such as Anastasia State Park in St. Augustine, Fla., popular for its beach sites with panoramic ocean views. It's aggravating driving from campground to campground during a holiday weekend or busy tourist season only to find every RV site taken or rules that forbid pets.

"People should always check with the RV park to learn what their restrictions are," says Marilyn Moore, author of Florida RV Camping (Avalon Travel Publishing, 2006). "Many of them will limit the pet to, say, dogs under 25 pounds or specifically prohibit Rottweilers or pit bulls or so-called 'aggressive breeds.'" She remembers her cousin arriving in a motor home at a Florida state park only to be turned away because the park did not allow pets. "She had to camp at another RV park," Moore says, "several miles away from us."

Take a break

While on the road, stop for periodic leg stretches, as Robinson does. He pulls into highway rest stops, truck stops, or the RV-friendly parking lots of businesses such as Wal-Mart and Cracker Barrel restaurants. He walks two dogs at a time. The other dogs remain in the RV, where the generator keeps the interior cool. "It might take me 45 minutes," Robinson says. "But that gives them a break, and me, too."

Think about "alone time"

Logistically speaking, think about what you'll do with your dog if you stop to eat at a restaurant when it's 90 degrees or want to pursue an activity that prohibits pets. Robinson turns on the generator to keep the RV cool for his Chow Chows when he has to leave. That works in parking lots, but not in RV parks — managers often forbid leaving pets unattended. Ideally, you'd spend the whole day with your dog, but a possible alternative is to consider a short-term kennel stay. Theme parks such as Disney World and Universal Studios offer on-site kennels.

In the end, RVing with a dog isn't for everyone, but Broom loves to spend time with Angel, and enjoys her company in the motor home. "She'll poke her head out and try to look out the windshield," Broom says. "It's just fun to have her along."

Sally Deneen is a DOG FANCY contributing editor who lives in Seattle. She is co-author of "The Dog Lover's Companion to Florida" (Avalon Travel Publishing, 2005) with her husband, Robert McClure.