



Putting Out the Welcome Mat for Pet Lovers

Millions of travelers who want to take Fido or Tabby along are finding pet-friendly accommodations at a growing number of properties. These savvy hoteliers know that by providing facilities and services for pets, they may win the lifetime loyalty of grateful owners.

BY CATHLEEN McCARTHY

Most Americans grew up in a world where pets were left with friends, relatives or a kennel when they took a vacation. Few people thought of taking Fido along on an overnight trip, unless it involved camping or the family beach house. But the role pets play—and the money Americans spend on them—has risen considerably in recent years, causing many hotels to rethink their pet policies.

Americans spent an estimated \$29 billion on their pets last year, up from \$17 billion in 1994, according to surveys by the American Animal Hospital Association. In 2001, nearly 65 percent of Americans reported traveling with their pets, a 7 percent increase since 1995. In the past three years, 29.1 million Americans traveled with a pet on a trip of 50 miles or more, according to the Travel Industry Association (TIA) and a whopping 29 percent of them stayed in a hotel or motel.

It's now possible to take pets along to almost any city or resort in North America and find a range of pet-friendly accommodations. The posh downtown Manhattan Soho Grand and Tribeca Grand, for example, both welcome dogs and impose neither fee nor weight restriction. A dog room service menu and doggie day care are available, and bell-boys carry dog treats in their pockets. It's no coincidence that these hotels are owned by the Hartz Mountain Company, manufacturers of 2-in-1 pet products. Pleasing pet owners makes good business sense for them.

Pre-planning is still necessary for travelers with pets. Many chains continue to maintain strict no-pets policies, including Suisse Chalet Motor Lodges, Travelodge, Flagship Hotels and Resorts, Coachman Inns, and Helmsley Hotels. Other hotels charge pet fees and impose weight limits. Exel Inns of America, for example, accepts pets under 25

pounds in smoking rooms, no more than two at a time, never to be left unattended. Such rules often vary from hotel to hotel in a given chain—making things more complicated for the traveler. Pets are forbidden at Marriott's Fairfield Inns, for example, but accepted at their Residence Inns, which charge a non-refundable deposit averaging \$100 to \$200. Large chains of individually owned hotels, such as Clarion, often allow individual owners to make their own pet policies.

But an increasing number of hotels have begun not only waiving the fees and restrictions but welcoming Fido with open arms—and gourmet dog biscuits.

We love pets

Until three years ago, Loews Hotels' pet policy varied by location, like many national chains. Overall, Loews was on the lenient side regarding pets but a few properties, like Loews Ventana Resort in Tucson, did not accommodate pets, according to the resort's public relations director Kimberly Sundt. Other Loews properties, such as the Regency in New York City, did. In fact, the Regency was known as pet-friendly as early as 1961 when Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton showed up with their famously spoiled pooches.

Then, in June 2000, the chain launched its "Loews Loves Pets" program. Each of its 18 properties now actively solicits pet owners with special events and packages catering to pets. Guests who arrive with an animal are presented with a "VIP (Very Important Pet)" bag containing a "personal note" from the hotel's manager, a list of pet services available, area maps with dog-walking routes, information on veterinarians, groomers and pet-friendly restaurants. Guestrooms are stocked with pet toys, placemats with food and water bowls, and a special "Do Not Disturb" sign that reads "Heads you're in/tails you're out" (actually a warning to hotel staff that an animal is present).

"For the most part, we always allowed pets, we just didn't make a big fuss over them," says Emily Kanders, director of public relations for Loews Hotels. "Then we started noticing the important role pets were playing in American families." By the

late '90s, Kanders explains, couples were postponing childbearing and focusing a lot of attention on their pets instead. That, combined with an increase in single household pet ownership and disposable income in general, led to a booming luxury market for pets. Doggy spas began to appear and luxury brands like Coach and Burberry introduced expensive pet accessories. "Since we were already allowing pets anyway," Kanders says, "we figured why not make it more of a special experience for pets and pet owners?"

In many ways, the gimmick is a perfect fit for Loews high-end individualized properties. After all, places like The Regency can afford to indulge the eccentric whims of their guests. Many boutique hotels and pricey B&Bs long ago learned the benefits of allowing pets. Boutique properties like Hotel Monaco and Hotel Burnham in Chicago can afford to waive special fees; they make it up on extras like "special pet menus" and dog-walking services. Besides, individual service and special amenities—such as Burnham's "turn-down service for dogs"—are what make boutique hotels popular in the first place.

Kanders is quick to point out that pet idolatry is not exclusive to the wealthy. "Our customers tend to be among the upper-middle class but animal lovers cover the economic spectrum. It's pretty universal." Pet travel does seem to vary by region. Basically, hotels that receive the most driving vacationers get the most pets. Loews' Orlando, Miami, Nashville and Washington D.C. properties all saw a marked increase in animal guests, Kanders says. But the biggest increase by far came at the Loews San Diego property. "I guess it's the weather," she says.

In general, cosmopolitan cities like New York and Los Angeles have always catered to pets. "People come to New York with their small dogs," Kanders says. But in general, it's the more casual western states that have embraced pet travel most passionately. On dogfriendly.com, one of many sites catering to traveling pet owners, cities like Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia average five pet-friendly hotel listings each; Manhattan has ten. Los Angeles/Hollywood, on the other hand,

has 26; San Diego 29 and Denver 13.

Only the best for puppy—and cow?

When Loews decided to cater to pets, they pulled out all the stops, demonstrating a savvy understanding of animal lovers' sense of humor and the incredible lengths they will go to cater to their furry objects of affection.

Room service menu items for pets include grilled lamb or chicken with rice for dogs and grilled liver or salmon with rice for cats, along with the more casual "tuna delight" for cats and "bow-wow burgers" for dogs. For "health conscious dog or cats," the chain also offers a vegetarian entrée. Milk and Evian water are the recommended pet beverages. All recipes are developed in collaboration with a licensed veterinarian, Loews claims, and designed "to help pets deal with travel stress, including jet lag and altitude adjustments." In case dinner is not enough to handle such stresses, "puppy Prozac" and catnip are also available.

If guests find themselves in need of emergency doggy treats after room service has closed, there is now an item in the mini-bar called "Benefit Bones," gourmet biscuits prepared by the hotels' chefs and filled with "healthy ingredients" like mint, which "improves dog moods," according to the chain's publicists. A 10-ounce bag will put guests back \$10 but all proceeds go to the American Kennel Club's DOGNY Canine Support and Relief Fund for Police Search and Rescue Dog Teams across the country—a promotion spawned by the popularity of rescue dogs after September 11.

Loews' "Did You Forget Closets" now contain dog and cat beds in different sizes, leashes and collars, even pet videos. Last year, the "puppy pager" was introduced, presented to pet owners so that hotel staff can contact them in case of emergency.

Not surprisingly, dogs are by far the most popular pets to take hotel-hopping. According to a poll by TIA, about 78 percent travel with their dogs; cats come in at 15 percent. "Not many people travel with cats," Kanders says. Sharon Stone was one exception, showing up at Loews Ventana in Tucson with two felines. "Cats are really easy, for the hotels and the owners. Give them a little pan and some food and

they're happy. It's also easier to fly with a cat because you can shove them under the seat in a carrier."

But the Loews Loves Pets program doesn't stop at dogs and cats, she adds. "We had a cow at the Regency when they were doing the press junket for the movie 'Me, Myself and Irene,'" she says. The cow weighed 2,000 pounds and was kept in the ballroom where the marble floors were specially covered. "We didn't want the cow to fall over," Kanders explains. "Siegfried and Roy stayed up at the Regency with little cub tigers and some folks from Busch Gardens stayed at the Loews Santa Monica with Bengal tigers. We had a serval (an African wildcat) in Washington D.C. at Lafant Plaza. Those kinds of animals come with their trainers."

Pet promotions and pet packages

Every June, all Loews hotels host the "Bark Breakfast" on Take Your Dog to Work Day (an invention of Pet Sitters International). Proceeds benefit local animal charities; so far, \$30,000 for animal charities across the United States and Canada. Guests pay \$30 and show up early, at around 7:00 a.m. "The idea is that you're taking your dog to work with you," explains Loew's Ventana's Sundt, whose version of the event benefits the Southern Arizona Humane Society.

Bark Breakfast, Tucson-style, featured a people buffet and a dog buffet served al fresco at umbrella-covered tables. Last summer's event attracted more than 50 guests. Dog clothes, donated by Pet Smart, were modeled (on dogs) and auctioned off. A vet offered tips on traveling with pets; and pets and owners left with a "bark briefcase" filled with pet goodies and items like bandanas donated by Old Navy.

Loews Ventana also hosted their own "VIP Kids and Pets" reception last year. General Manager Matthew Kryjak's came up with the idea after noticing the reaction children had to his dog Blondie, the Spuds MacKenzie-like English bull terrier who accompanies him to work everyday. The event featured a booth where children could have their pictures taken with Blondie beneath the "Loews Loves Pets" doghouse.

The chain comes up with new pet-related events and packages each year. The "Houndly Holidays" package featured a special rate for pet owners and a holiday meal featuring turkey with "schnauzer stuffing," "Christmas dog nog," and "Lassie latkas" for Chanukah celebrators. A "Puppy Love" package, offered in February in honor of Valentine's Day, included free in-room movie and dinner for two in the hotel restaurant with a special "doggie bag" of leftovers. Heart-shaped "Poodlicious Peanut Butter cookies" were created by the Miami Beach Hotel's executive chef for the occasion.

Placating the petless

Concerns about cleanliness, health, and noise levels are among the reasons many hotels continue to ban animal guests. Just how successful have pet-friendly hotels been at banishing smells, stains and dog hair from guestrooms—and how much trouble has it been?

"It's really gone very smoothly," Sundt says of the transition to a pet-friendly resort. "It hasn't been high maintenance really." Loews uses vacuums with allergen removing HEPA-filters and other special cleaning equipment for rooms with animals. As to noise, she says, "it's not very obtrusive. Most people who travel with their dogs are very considerate and have well-behaved pets. Once in a while I hear a dog barking in the lobby. That's about it."

"It really hasn't alienated other customers," insists Emily Kanders, speaking for all 18 Loews hotels. "In a 500-room hotel on any given day, we might have one or two pets in-house and at times, none—a couple pets per week. It's not like you walk into the lobby and feel like you just stepped into Central Park's dog run. It's still a very small percentage of our overall business."

Nevertheless, she adds, the number of guests showing up with pets has doubled each year since the program began. "We saw a big spike in that business after September 11 with less people flying and more driving. There was more pet travel because it was just a lot easier to travel with a dog by car. Frankly, it's also a cost savings, avoiding kennels." ■



PET FACTS

■ In the past three years, 29.1 million Americans (14 percent of the population) traveled with a pet on a trip of 50 miles or more. While travelers with pets most often stay with friends/relatives, an almost equal number (29 percent) stay in a hotel or motel. (Travel Industry Association)

■ Americans spent an estimated \$29 billion on their pets, up from \$17 billion in 1994. (American Animal Hospital Association)

■ A 2001 survey revealed that nearly 65 percent of Americans travel with their pet, up from 58 percent in 1995. (AAHA)

■ Dogs are by far the most common pet to take along on travel (78 percent). Cats came in a distant second at 15 percent of travelers. A few people report traveling with birds (2 percent) and either a ferret, rabbit or fish (3 percent). (TIA)

■ The percentage of households traveling with their pets most likely increases during the summer when more families travel on vacation. Auto or truck is the primary mode of transportation (76 percent), followed by RV (10 percent) and airline (6 percent). (TIA)

■ According to an October 2002 survey conducted by dogfriendly.com, 43 percent of respondents take more than five overnight trips a year with their pets. Sixty-seven percent say they travel with their dog(s) for more than a week at a time. Twenty-one percent stay only with friends or relatives; 40 percent stay at hotels, motels or B&Bs; and 39 percent stay at a combination of both. (www.dogfriendly.com)