
AIRLINE NEWS

When the fur needs to fly, airlines are making it tricky, costly to bring your pets. Blame COVID-19

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A Brazilian diplomat had to move from New York City to Sao Paulo last April, but when airlines imposed flight cuts and restrictions as the coronavirus hit, he had to leave a beloved pair of parrots behind.

After giving the African grey and Senegal parrots to a friend for temporary care, he called in a pet transportation service. Following months of permits and red tape, the birds finally winged their way home to South America, via Germany – after their happy owner parted with about \$10,000 for the airlift.

Such is the complicated new world of trying to reunite pets with their relocating owners in a global pandemic, said Sally Smith of Airborne Animals in Boonville, New York, who handled the globetrotting parrots and related their story.

"I have never worked so hard with so few jobs," Smith said. "Everything takes longer, everything is more emails with airlines."

Fewer airlines are accepting pets as cargo. Those that do have imposed restrictions on the size of crates or the number of animals allowed aboard each flight. And, of course, there are now far fewer flights due to the virus, causing further delays.

The good news is that pet moving services say the backlog of pets left behind when their owners had to fly home as countries tried to seal themselves off from the virus is largely gone. But it's still a daily struggle to move dogs, cats, birds and other pets to their owners' destinations.

The puppies stay: Veterinarians refuse CDC order to deport bulldog puppies rescued from O'Hare airport

The job requires coordination and a dash of creativity.

When an owner was unable to get his big pooch shipped from Shanghai to New York as the pandemic took hold, Air Animal Pet Movers in Tampa, Florida, swung into action. It was able to find a flight that could take the hulking canine via Moscow on Russia's flagship carrier.

"We don't use Aeroflot every day of the week, but they were able to accommodate a very large dog," said Walter Woolf, a veterinarian who founded the service 43 years ago.

Three of the four largest U.S. airlines – Delta, United and Southwest – say they aren't currently accepting crated animals as cargo, but do allow pets in passenger cabins if they are in approved carriers that will fit under a seat.

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But there are restrictions. Southwest limits the number of animals in one of its 737s – the only plane it flies – to six, and no pets are allowed on international flights. And it can be costly: Delta charges \$125 per pet each way for domestic travel.

American Airlines says it will still accept pets through its cargo service, albeit with restrictions. They must be at least 8 weeks old, healthy, meet weight restrictions (less than 100 pounds for domestic travel) and travel can occur only if the outside temperature is between 45°F and 85°F at both the origin and destination airports. Also, certain breeds aren't allowed, such as boxers and pitbulls.

American also accepts animals for travel in the cabin, including those deemed to be for emotional support.

Stimulus package 2.0: Southwest Airlines CEO looks to concessions, not layoffs, if Congress balks on more aid

Owners should always check with airlines in advance to make sure a pet will be allowed aboard.

International carriers have a hodgepodge of restrictions. Australian airline Qantas' freight division, for instance, warns that its ability to carry pets is extremely limited and it requires owners to go through a pet transport service rather than trying to make arrangements themselves.

Within the U.S., owners always have another alternative: driving.

"Shipping a pet by (air) cargo can be tricky in the best of times, especially if there are multiple connections or layovers," said Sheila Goffe, a vice president for the American Kennel Club, in a statement relayed by a spokesperson. "With increased flight changes or cancellations, it's less than optimal for shipping a pet."

Instead, she said owners bringing their dogs to shows usually hit the road.

"If they are going to a dog event, they're driving," Goffe said. "We've heard about many people taking long road trips and bringing their dogs along for the adventure."

If a dog is along on a long trip, after all, it's definitely going to be an adventure.

Ask the Captain: Will airlines ever adopt common-sense rules on emotional support animals?