



Have pet, will travel

Well, it might not be as simple as packing your pooch along with your passport! *Rachel Read* examines the complications and challenges of pet relocation.

You've got the house packed up, the school place sorted and the plane tickets booked, but have you started researching what to do with your four-legged friends? We all know how furry critters become irreplaceable members of the family (we might even prefer their company to some of the great-aunts out there!) and parting with them just because you're leaving the country is often unthinkable. But the pet relocation process can be far from easy.

The steps you need to take vary widely depending on what country you're moving to and what pets you need to transport, but the key element to ensuring the process goes smoothly is having time on your side. Some countries require a minimum six-month gap between blood tests and the move; similarly, there are also maximum limits between when health certificates are obtained and when your pet flies, so timing is essential.

Suited to move?

But first, a warning for owners of exotic species and "small furrries", like rabbits. Dr Jamie Gallagher,

assistant senior veterinary surgeon at SPCA Hong Kong, advises that in some cases, finding them a new home in Hong Kong may be preferable to relocating them abroad: "The export of reptiles is a very [specialised] area requiring special licenses from the government, as many species are either protected or illegal to both import and export. The husbandry requirements are so specific that transport can be very dangerous to their health, even resulting in death." Meanwhile, some countries have banned the import of "small furrries" (Australia considers rabbits to be pests, rather than pets). Further, these animals are highly susceptible to stress, meaning transportation can prove fatal.

Dogs and cats are the most commonly exported animals from Hong Kong – but again, owning certain breeds can be problematic. Many airlines impose restrictions on flying "snub-nosed" breeds, like shih-tzus, chow chows, pugs, bulldogs, Persians and Burmeses, due to their genetic breathing difficulties; Cathay Pacific refuses to carry them, whilst other airlines may insist they fly only

during cooler temperatures. Once again, having time on your side pays off.

What's involved?

In general terms, the requirements for dog or cat relocation are straightforward. First, ensure your pet has a microchip (many pets sold here already have them); these are used as international identification for your animal, meaning your pet can be matched with the correct paperwork wherever you are in the world.

Secondly, ensure that your pet has all the vaccinations needed for international travel; contrary to popular belief, cats need rabies injections, too. Rabies vaccinations are typically valid in Hong Kong for three years, but some countries (such as New Zealand, Taiwan and the Philippines) require your pet to have an annual booster jab prior to their import. You must also visit your veterinarian seven to ten days before flying to gain a general health certificate – which, in some unfortunate cases, may rule out older pets or those with existing health conditions.





For countries like the UK, USA, Canada and those within the EU, that's pretty much it, give or take a few differing timescales. Australia, however, is notoriously more difficult; one of the few major countries to still enforce a quarantine period for imported pets (during which you cannot visit your animal), they also insist on a secondary series of blood tests for your pet. Be sure to check with the agricultural and fisheries department websites for your specific country to research exactly what your pet needs and when.

Who can help?

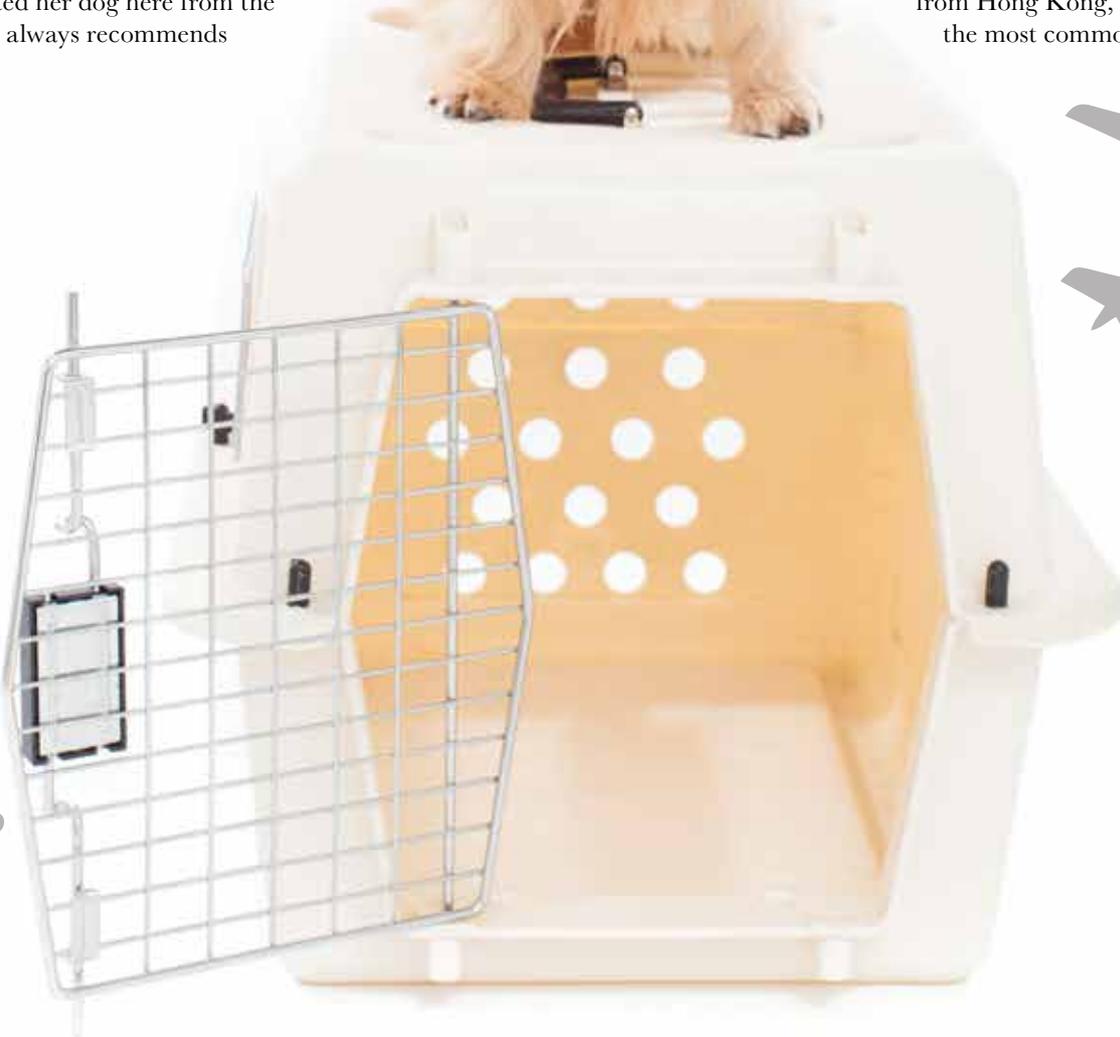
If all this is sounding a bit complicated, a reputable pet travel agency may be the way to go. Susan Mertens, who brought her dog from Europe to Hong Kong, describes these companies as “travel agents for pets – they book the flights, tell you how the flight works, help you with the paperwork and check if you have all the correct shots done in time”. Jamie from the SPCA, who imported her dog here from the States, always recommends

her clients use a pet travel agency: “They stay up to date with the always-changing requirements for each country and facilitate all the paperwork and veterinary requirements, making the process as

stress-free as possible. Nothing would be worse than exporting your pet to a country only for them to not be allowed in or sent back because of a missed bit of information!”

By far, the largest cost in exporting your pet will be the airfreight itself; this can cost as much, if not more, than your own tickets. A pet transport company's service charge will likely add up to just a few extra thousand dollars, which may well be worth it for achieving that peace of mind. Hedwig Henneman, who transported her dog from Hong Kong to the Netherlands, says, “Looking back, I am so glad I let the company help me... I was amazed at all the paperwork involved and moving to another country is stressful enough!”

Pet travel agencies are also well-versed in all the typical fears of pet owners – and know how best to relieve those worries. George Yung, founder of International Pet Travel, which has more than 15 years' experience in exporting pets from Hong Kong, says one of the most common concerns



among owners is that their pets will freeze on the flight. Luckily, this is one thing you *don't* need to worry about: pets are kept in a separate compartment from your baggage, in a pressurised area that remains between 18 and 22°C throughout the flight.

Additionally, Eric Lau, the manager of Pet Movers Hong Kong, which started in 1999 and now has offices throughout Asia Pacific and partners around the globe, says that many owners ask if their pet can be tranquilised for travel, fearing the psychological impact the long journey may have. However, this is actually incredibly dangerous: “The use of sedatives at high altitudes could increase the risk of heart and respiratory problems and is wholly not advised.”

More important is to make the journey as comfortable for your pet as possible. Since your pet will be travelling in a crate (size restrictions vary among airlines and animals), it is best to ensure they are familiar with this sooner rather than later. Susan Mertens introduced the crate to her pet a week before flying, allowing her dog to sleep inside and think of it as a “safe spot”. Jamie advises you line the crate with puppy pads to absorb any accidents your pet has on-board and stop it from soaking into your pet’s fur. Pheromone sprays, such as Feliway for cats and Adaptil or DAP collars and sprays for dogs, can help calm their stress levels for the flight. She also recommends purchasing a “good, strong, airline-approved crate. You get what you pay for and

this is not an area where you should be trying to spend less, as your pet’s safety and comfort should be most important!”

Furthermore, George Yung suggests putting a towel or t-shirt with your scent into the crate to make your pet feel more at ease, whilst Eric also recommends including your pet’s favourite blanket to ensure the environment isn’t totally unfamiliar. Be wary of including chew toys, however, which your pet could choke on while unsupervised.

While pet relocation requires some effort, with forward planning and the help of an experienced travel company, there’s no reason why your critter can’t enjoy a new life elsewhere with you. After all, as Susan says, “It was totally worth it.” 🐾

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