



Doggy bag: Thanks to Amtrak's new policy, Mark Ferrante now takes Lucky along.

BEST IN COACH

Next time you ride Amtrak, you might spot some four-legged passengers in your car

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

When Mark Ferrante took the train from Union Station to Philadelphia in November, he brought along an extra bag, and every so often a scruffy, black-and-white head popped out of the top. Amtrak had recently begun an East Coast pilot program to let animals onboard, and Lucky—a Maltese-Yorkie mix—was out for his maiden voyage.

“Lucky had already traveled on New Jersey Transit, Long Island Rail Road, Southwest Airlines, JetBlue, and Delta,” says Ferrante, who moved to Bethesda from New York City last spring. “The more traveling we were doing, the more we looked into every transportation option. Amtrak was one of the missing pieces.”

Indeed, “America’s Railroad,” as Amtrak bills itself, hasn’t shown much love for the furry set, making the company one of the last holdouts in an increasingly pet-friendly culture. Even commercial airlines—not exactly renowned for customer service—have welcomed animals

for decades. So what took Amtrak so long?

Turns out this isn’t its first attempt to welcome pets aboard. In the 1970s, the company allowed them to travel in baggage cars, but problems with temperature control led to deaths. When it tried letting animals into sleeping cars, one passenger spread kitty litter on the floor.

“We had a bad taste in our mouths,” says Amtrak’s senior director of business services, Morrison Manner. (And, presumably, a bad smell in the carpets.)

Today’s pet owners have Illinois to thank for Amtrak’s evolving views. When the time came to renegotiate the railroad’s contract in 2013, the state dug in on the no-pets policy and required, among the terms, that it allow animals at least on a trial basis. The Illinois pilot program was a success—no fatalities, no soiled rugs—so Amtrak began to explore other places to test a similar program.

“Pets are part of families, and we see that,” says Manner.

More to the point, they’re moneymakers. Amtrak closely studied the demographics of the Northeast corridor, including Washington. Based on factors such as the region’s high number of millennials and retirees (both groups more likely to dote on pets instead of kids), relatively low rate of car ownership, and high boarding costs for pets (an incentive to take them along), Amtrak determined that launching the pilot here would be a winning strategy. Manner says that since launching the East Coast test run in early October—it ends in February—the rail service booked more than 1,000 dogs and cats.

There are some restrictions. For instance, animals aren’t allowed in the quiet car (insert Chris Christie joke here), and Amtrak limits the number of pets on each train to five so they don’t start “socializing” (i.e., barking).

Because no problems have arisen, the company expects the East Coast pilot to transition into a permanent program. Amtrak is now exploring ways to let pets ride overnight and to allow larger dogs on trains. Passengers currently need to call to reserve space for pets; it will be another year before they can book online.

Meanwhile, US congressman Jeff Denham, a Republican from California and chair of the House railroad subcommittee, reintroduced legislation last February that would require Amtrak to accommodate pets nationwide. It’s still awaiting a Senate vote but passed with bipartisan support in the House. Denham quite literally has a dog in this fight: his French bulldog, Lily, with whom he travels often. **W**

Melanie D.G. Kaplan wrote about the politics of DC alley cats in November. Her website is melaniedgkaplan.com.

Rail Rules

For \$25, pets can ride on most Northeast Regional and Downeaster routes plus some Carolinian and Palmetto trains between DC and New York.

Only dogs and cats are welcome, but Amtrak doesn’t rule out allowing other pets someday.

Animals must be 20 pounds or less and can’t travel more than seven hours at a time.

They need to fit into enclosed carriers stowable under seats.

Owners must sign a waiver certifying the pets are healthy, nonaggressive, and up to date on vaccines.