

TRAVEL

DISPATCHES



SEOULARTIST/ISTOCKPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Travelers to San Diego and other spots may see unexpected fees.

New online fee riles renters

Renting a vacation house or condo this year? You'll pay a new service fee if you're booking online through VRBO, HomeAway or VacationRentals.

The sister companies, acquired last year by online travel giant Expedia, began charging a service fee in February. The fee, which goes to the company and not the homeowners, is 4% to 9% of the rental amount, excluding taxes.

It is in addition to cleaning fees and any other fees owners charge. It's calculated on a sliding scale, so the pricier the rental, the lower the percentage of the entire price.

The maximum fee per rental is \$499.

Vacationers and homeowners who list their places on HomeAway and VRBO are complaining loudly about the fee to the company and on social media and online forums. They say the company sneaked in the fee and is being greedy because it already charges booking fees or a subscription fee to list rentals.

HomeAway Chief Executive Brian Sharples acknowledged the backlash — and defended the fee — in a letter posted on the company's website. Sharples said the fee is needed to improve the online booking experience and better market the company's services to travelers.

Ellen Creager



GETTY IMAGES FOR AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION
Danielle DeVito demonstrates the hands-only CPR training kiosk.

Learn CPR on a layover

Passengers waiting for flights can now use their down time to learn how to save a life at several big U.S. airports.

That's thanks to new interactive kiosks designed to give airport patrons a lesson in the Hands-Only CPR method. Fliers can then practice by performing their technique on a specially designed rubber torso.

The simplified CPR method doesn't require rescue breaths. Instead, the kiosks encourage bystanders to assist someone who collapses by pushing hard and fast in the center of the chest — all while the beat of the 1970s disco hit *Stayin' Alive* plays in the background. The kiosks' how-to lessons give practicing fliers feedback on how to improve their technique.

The kiosks come courtesy of the American Heart Association and the Anthem Foundation. According to the AHA, every year, more than 359,000 cardiac arrests occur outside the hospital, with more than 20% occurring in public places such as airports.

The CPR kiosk initiative launched with a pilot kiosk at Dallas/Fort Worth in July 2013 before expanding this year to Chicago's O'Hare and, last week, to Indianapolis. Kiosks at three more airports — Atlanta, Baltimore-Washington and Las Vegas — are scheduled to open this spring.

Harriet Baskas



CHUCK GOMEZ, AMTRAK

Amtrak is expanding its pets-on-trains program to more routes in 2016. But your special passenger has to be under 20 pounds.

Sit. Stay. Ride the rails with your furry friends

Amtrak is now allowing small cats and dogs in effort to boost ridership, revenue

Melanie D.G. Kaplan

Special for USA TODAY

Last month, Ted Moche, an anesthesiologist, traveled for business from his home in Groton, Mass., to New York City and brought along his family. Moche, his wife and kids, and their 2-year-old Maltese, Tucker, packed into a limousine and headed south. But they weren't crazy about the ride — they felt cramped, and traffic delayed their journey. In New York, between work obligations, Moche joined his family in Central Park. They ate at Carnegie Deli and saw *Wicked*, returning at night to the dog-friendly Trump International.

TIPS

1 Advance reservations are required for pet travel. To reserve a spot, call 800-USA-RAIL. The surcharge is \$25, and pets are permitted to travel for stretches up to seven hours.

2 Your cat or dog must be 20 pounds or less and needs to travel in a soft carrier that will fit under the seat.

3 If your pet is not used to travel, introduce the carrier at home with treats and toys. Practice carrier travel for short drives in the car so the pet is more relaxed when it's time to hit the rails.

4 When you check in at Amtrak, you will be asked to sign a waiver agreeing that your pet is healthy and non-aggressive.

5 Though you may not be asked for it, have your pet's vaccination records on hand.

At the last minute, thanks to pleas from his children, Moche called Amtrak to see if they could take the Acela back to Boston.

"I was pretty worried," Moche says. "If they didn't take pets, I'm not sure what I would have done."

Unbeknownst to Moche, the timing was perfect. Amtrak had recently started a pilot allowing small cats and dogs on Acela for weekend rides. The cost of bringing a pet is \$25, in addition to the human's ticket. Tucker, all 3 pounds of him, was among the first canine passengers, and Moche was delighted.

"It's like travel hadn't caught up to all the dog-friendly hotels and resorts," says Moche, who bristles at the thought of checking Tucker into a kennel. "This is bringing travel up to speed."

After the success of a 2014 pilot program in Illinois and a much larger pilot along the Northeast Corridor this past fall and winter, Amtrak announced in February that its pet program on the Northeast Regional and Downeaster routes (from Norfolk, Va., to Brunswick, Me.) would become permanent. It also added the service for longer trips, for which all of the legs (pun intended) do not exceed seven hours. The longer Auto Train from Virginia to Florida, for instance, is not included. At the same time, it announced the Acela Express pilot, which runs into June.

"The (Northeast Corridor) pilot exceeded our expectations," says Amtrak President and CEO Joe Boardman, who as a young man had trained to become a veterinarian. "It makes our pet-owner customer happier, and it increases our revenue."

For sure, Amtrak must be



TED MOCHE

pleased with nearly \$500,000 from the 4,600 passengers who traveled with their pets between October and March. But perhaps even more encouraging, Amtrak says it didn't receive any negative feedback during the pilot from customers who shared cars with a furry passenger. (Amtrak limits the number of animals to one per passenger and five per car; the quiet and cafe cars remain pet-free.)

Furthermore, it wasn't a case of dachshunds dashing up the aisles. Pets and their humans followed protocol, according to Amtrak, which means the animals traveled in their carriers and were healthy and non-aggressive, as required in the fine print. Much of the feedback came from customers requesting expanded services — such as the inclusion of other pets and those that exceed the current 20-pound limit.

Before these pet programs began, only service dogs were permitted on Amtrak trains, while pets have been allowed on many commercial flights for decades, and regional trains historically have been more welcoming. Amtrak did allow cats and dogs in the 1970s, but the service ran into problems with poor climate control in the baggage cars where the animals rode, which led to some deaths. Today, the pets ride with their owners in a soft carrier under the seat.

Rep. Jeff Denham (R-Calif.), who in 2013 introduced a bill that would require Amtrak to implement a pet policy, says he and Amtrak's Boardman talked about the idea nearly five years ago.

"I told him I was surprised to find out my small dog Lily could fly back and forth with me to California, but she wasn't allowed to ride on the train," says Denham, chair of the Subcommittee

on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials. His office heard from several constituents interested in train travel with their pets. In 2014, Denham created a working group to explore a pilot program. The group included representatives from Amtrak, the Humane Society of the United States and the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council. The pet legislation was part of a highway bill that passed in December.

"When we brought it up with Amtrak, and they surveyed it, they saw how much new ridership they could get not just in the Northeast Corridor, but across the country," he says. "Not only is the support bipartisan, but this is about love for your pet that you want to be able to travel with."

Boardman says he expects the program to expand, but it will be done cautiously.

"We need to be careful how many animals we have on the train," he says. "It won't just be a Wild West situation where you have a python and a gerbil." Challenges remain: In some regions, passengers may be bused between stations, and the buses aren't pet-friendly; if Amtrak arranges lodging for passengers because of a delay, the hotel may not allow animals. Naturally, some conductors are keener than others about canines and felines in their cars, but the overall reception, Boardman says, has been positive.

Moche was concerned about Tucker bothering other passengers, but the dog slept throughout the trip. Amtrak staff shared pictures of their own pets, and no one, Moche "gave us weird looks."

Knowing about the pet program, Moche says, his family will be taking more leisure trips to New York. "If we can take the dog for \$25 and do a weekend, heck, that's a no-brainer."

Last month, Jackson Connelly, 8, and his sister Samantha, 10, traveled to New York with their parents and their dog, Tucker. On the way down from their home in Groton, Mass., they all packed into a limousine. On the way home, they were able to spread out on an Amtrak train.