

When Animals Travel In An Aircraft Hold

By Steve Robinson

3rd August 2020

We all get stressed out at the thought of our pets travelling in an aircraft hold & the reason for that is because we owners simply have no idea of what happens to them so let's take a quick look at the laws, technicalities & processes in the hope it might put your mind at ease a little.

First the historical & technical bits;

At the end of WWII an all encompassing piece of legislation called the Air Navigation Order came into being & has now morphed into an internationally binding set of laws, criteria & penalties that covers all aspects of what, when & how any & all items can & cannot be carried on any commercial aircraft & as a very basic example, the 'Carriage O Dangerous Goods' part stipulates that frozen goods may not travel in the same compartment as an item designated as 'Flammable When Wet' for the obvious reason & live animal regulations are also included elsewhere in the Act.

A commercial passenger jet typically cruises at an altitude of between 31000 & 38000 feet above ground or sea level & without pressurisation, pilots are required to use oxygen at anything above 12500 feet AGL/ASL & passengers at 15000 feet AGL/ASL (unless in a pressurised environment) & the higher you climb, the colder the air temperature gets so typically when the surface temperature is 20C it is around -54C at 35000 feet AGL/ASL which means that all live animals can only travel in a heated & pressurised hold (just as the same rule exists for passengers in the cabin & crew on the flight deck) & without heating, pressurisation or oxygen at anything even close to those altitudes any oxygen breathing animal (including humans) would be dead either of cold or lack of oxygen long before the aircraft reached cruising altitude, which is why you occasionally read reports of frozen corpses of stowaways falling to the ground from a landing aircraft.

The short version is they hide in the undercarriage before take off & by the time the undercarriage is lowered for landing at the other end, they're not only dead as a dodo but also frozen as stiff as a board. I appreciate that's not pleasant but that's what happens. Now let's back on topic.

The designated cargo compartment or hold equipped to provide the necessary heated & pressurised environment suitable for animals is known on commercial aircraft as compartment or hold 5 & is located at the rear of the aircraft, near to the tail & the door to that hold is not large enough to accommodate a cargo pallet & is usually accessed by the loading team via a conveyor belt vehicle.

So in short, if you see what looks to be an animal box or boxes tied down onto a cargo pallet then they are either empty or at least, will not contain a live animal. If you see an animal box with an animal in it placed on or near a cargo pallet or container then it is there temporarily but strictly speaking should not be there at all as live animals are required to be kept in a covered vehicle until being loaded onto the aircraft.

Now let's move onto the travel procedure itself. The animal is put into a crate which by law has to be large enough for it to stand, sit lay etc & has a water tray & the animal(s) is/are usually brought out to aircraft side (in a covered vehicle) quite late in the aircraft loading procedure to ensure they experience as little noise, disturbance &

new experiences as possible & are usually the very last thing to be loaded into the aircraft before departure.

There are strict restrictions on what other materials/goods can be loaded in the same hold/compartments as your animals & this is to ensure their safety before, during & after the flight.

The crate is then placed on wooden planks that spread the load & act as a thermal break & the crate is then individually tied or strapped down securely. As previously mentioned, the aircraft hold is heated & pressurised (at all times) to exactly the same standards as the passenger cabin & the lights are turned off so the animal is in a warm, quiet, dark environment & will almost certainly sleep all the way.

Animals travelling on multi leg journeys in the hold have legally compulsory rest/feed/exercise/toilet breaks for stipulated periods & penalties for any kind of infringement that breaches any part of the Air Navigation Order are extremely harsh with fines for infringement often in the tens of thousands of US dollars for each infringement & as standards are so high, the animal will probably have a far more comfortable flight than the owner.

The alternative for ordinary pets (if small enough) is to go into a soft bag that has to fit under the seat in front of you where it will experience a totally alien & new environment & have no feed, rest, toilet or exercise breaks & probably be frightened out of its wits for a large part of the journey. If I was the animal, I'd choose the hold every time.

When calculating the required size of the crate you need to measure your animal and if it's nervous of tape measures etc one easy trick is just to stand the animal against a wall & mark the wall with length & height of animal with a piece of chalk & for width, just walk it through a restrictive gap such as a partially open sliding door & then measure the gap. These measurements should err on the large rather than the small side and remember you're measuring the animal for a crate not a bespoke suit. :)

The link below explains the criteria & process relating to the animal crate you need to supply.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_UGq9u4jnc&t=218s

In closing: It should be noted that some airports such as in the middle east often experience very high summer temperatures & on some aircraft, especially older aircraft the hold/compartments might take a while to cool down to a comfortable temperature so perhaps advisable to try to avoid sending your animals through such transit points especially in the hotter months of the year.

Also read: Pet Travel From A Non EU Member State in the files section.