

Here is an article written by Harry Arnold for Towpath Talk in 2013.

Give your dog a break!

With this year's Crufts Dog Show having just finished and one of the main waterway hire boat companies (ABC Boat Hire) having produced a special leaflet for distribution at this major event entitled 'Take your Dog on a Boating Holiday this Year' it is perhaps a good time to look at this canine-friendly experience in more detail.



One or two provisos. Firstly, my suggestions are aimed at taking your dog for the first time on a hire boat. There are many thousands of what we call 'boating dogs' on privately owned boats, but these will be well adjusted to the waterway way of life, owners will have their own systems and the boat will be a regular second home to their dogs. No doubt any boating dog owners could also give you lots of pointers (no pun intended!).

Secondly, because of my job, all our dogs – a succession of Cairn Terriers the current one named 'Molly' – have spent many days boating on all sorts of craft. In fact the first one went on a hotel boat on the way back from collecting her from the kennels, and on a second different hotel boat that afternoon. They have probably been on more hire boats than the average human. We also live by a canal, in a village which is a very popular mooring, and our dogs have walked at least some section of a towpath most days of their lives.

So they have always loved boating and it has actually been a problem to stop them hopping aboard a conveniently moored visiting craft – especially if they smell bacon cooking. There have been a number of embarrassing conversations when we have had to apologise to some unsuspecting crew for this small hairy thing hurtling through their leisurely breakfast scene.

I should also say that I and all my family have been 'on the other end'. That is running hire boat fleets, and actually cleaning and supervising the cleaning during the weekly turn-round. This can create an anti-dog attitude when you see the state that some inconsiderate owners leave boats.

It has led to some fleets saying firmly no dogs or at least making a charge for extra cleaning. Although boats will be checked and cleaned, there is no reason – even with a dog – that you shouldn't vacate a boat in the condition you took it over. We take a pride in it.

A number of factors depend on your dogs breed. A narrowboat can be by definition a restricted space but as dog owners love being in close proximity with their animals come what may, size is not necessarily a consideration. We have seen dogs the size of small horses out boating.

Always bring your dog's own food and water bowls – do not use the boat's crockery. And its bed - depending on portability of course - and/or a favourite cushion and maybe toys. Anything to make the boat feel more like home.

Except in the worst of weathers our dogs like to be outside, ideally constantly looking ahead from a forward cockpit or – if the crew is all gathered around the stern – with them but still looking around the edge of the boat. We have a number of leads – expanding and constant length – that can be used for an arrangement where the end is firmly fixed to something on the boat and the dog can stand safely with its front paws on the gunwhales; prevented from falling over the side. It is also essential – and we always do this – that there is a water bowl within the length of the restraining lead.

The dog should wear a harness and there should be no restraint involving its collar. In either position – forward or stern – we never leave the dog out of sight of a crew member. Types of stern decks do make a difference however. If you have a full crew, plus dog, a 'cruiser' (or long open deck) is probably best. 'Semi-trad' (a short counter stern with a confined, often seated cockpit arrangement) is good, if the dog will stay within the cockpit part;

ours don't like it. 'Trad.' sterns (the short round counter like those on a working narrowboats) are fairly rare on hire boats but – as we are sometimes just two-handed our dogs like standing with the steerer. Not for the inexperienced though; the steerer needs to be fully aware of the dog's presence all the time.

There is the long space of the cabin top of course. You will see dogs on private boats on cabin tops – sometimes running up and down whilst the boat is going along. Again, not for the first-timer, unless you have a firm fixing for a very short lead with no chance that your dog might spot something it fancies and leap over the side.

You can get dog's buoyancy aids, in a variety of sizes to suit breeds. They are not cheap and as far as I know nobody hires them. Maybe there is a market here? They usually have a handy handle which – like a harness – you can lift the dog out if it falls in the water. If you want the extra assurance this device may give you will have to contact a good chandlers. But make a visit with your dog so you can try it on. The recommended sizes may not be appropriate for the shape of your hound. We have one in the roof somewhere as our dogs have never liked wearing it.

Walking is the one thing that dogs love and a waterway holiday can certainly provide miles of it. Apart from the morning and evening constitutional you can cover long distances on the adjacent towpath. However – especially if it is your first time – check in the waterway guide the distance between bridges and locks where you can conveniently get on and off. Because of the shallow edges – and possible the state of the bank – the boat cannot pick you up just anywhere. Apart from when they find an interesting smell, our dogs like to keep up with the boat. The 4 mph speed limit may seem very slow on the boat but it is quite a brisk walking speed. I have seen crew members get back on board absolutely all-in; the dog being game for more of course.

Much of the above applies to canals but rivers need a somewhat different consideration. Dog holidays on river only navigations are still good but you need to make what might be termed as more specific stopping arrangements for things like exercise and necessary functions. Speed limits may be higher and bank access more difficult. Lock keepers, such as those on the Thames, may not welcome your dog being around their pristine award-winning gardens. On the plus-side you may however hire a wide-beam boat with more dog space.

Which brings me to the delicate subject of dog poo. There is nothing that can fill an editor's post bag quicker than for and against correspondence on this subject so I won't dwell on it. As you should do at home, take lots of plastic bags and always clean up after your dog. There should be lots of places to dispose of these but you may consider taking a small sealed container for interim storage. Living in a canalside village of dog walkers I find that boaters are rarely at fault in this; although one of the most recent formal complaints has been about overstaying live-aboards letting their dogs roam (Oops! - another controversial can of worms, I will keep firmly shut).

Overnight or lunch-time mooring has its options. If you are eating aboard there isn't a problem in keeping an eye on the dog. Some canalside pubs and cafes have a garden and usually allow dogs in, some even inside certain rooms. Check ahead for a planned stop – the telephone numbers will be in the guide or manual on the boat.

Hire boats are by regulation well ventilated and can be more so, particularly those with top-opening hopper windows. So – except possibly in exceptionally hot weather conditions (yes – we do get these) – you may be happy to leave a well-trained dog in the boat for an hour or so. When in a very remote country mooring – free of cyclists hurtling by – we often let our dog sit on the towpath next to the boat. Securely tethered to a screw-in spike – which we actually call the 'dog mooring'. Or again, happily sitting in the cockpit or the stern; but always secure and within sight of a crew member.

Our family is somewhat biased of course, but if you are a dog owner and haven't thought about a waterway holiday, why not give it a go? I can guarantee your dog will enjoy it and there is much more than an even chance that you will too.