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Leave room in your carry-on for pet guilt

By Christopher Muther | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 30, 2014



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

Admiral Jules Vern von Picklebottoms III

When I scooped up the orange bundle of fur, the purring intensified and I felt relieved that my cat seemed to forgive me for deserting him for nearly two weeks. But as the purring continued and he looked at me sweetly, a little too sweetly, I began to wonder if this was his passive-aggressive way of making me feel guilty for going on vacation.

“Was it really necessary for you to be gone that long?” I imagined him asking as I stroked his big belly. “Were you too busy packing your skimpy swim trunks to remember to add fresh catnip to my scratching pad? You couldn’t be bothered to Skype with me?”

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The truth is, I did think about the cat when I was on vacation. At times the guilt was terrible. While my cat, Admiral Jules Vern von Picklebottoms III, may seem like a tough 20-pound bruiser, he’s really just a big snuggle muffin. A sitter visited him daily, but I was worried that the Admiral would miss his morning cuddle time.

Many people consider their animals to be part of their family, and it can be difficult to have a good time frolicking at the beach when you think that a member of the family — sometimes your favorite member — is stuck at home moping around.

“I’m experiencing plenty of guilt,” veterinarian Llana Reisner told me as she vacationed on the Cape earlier this summer. She left behind three dogs, four birds, and a cat. “But I don’t think guilt is going to help either ourselves or our pets. What can help is planning well in advance so that the best arrangements can be made.”

It's one thing for a human to feel guilty, but I've always wondered what my animals were thinking when I jetted off. It's bad enough that my cat has to put up with me singing along to Dusty Springfield. Was I inflicting further emotional trauma by going on vacation?

“It depends on how we approach going away,” said Jackson Galaxy, a cat behaviorist on Animal Planet's “My Cat From Hell.” “I know a lot of people who leave a big bowl of food for the weekend and say ‘See you later.’ So yeah, that's traumatic. There comes a moment when we really have to start considering that animals have the same emotional reality that we do. They feel things the way that we do.” Galaxy explained that if your animal wakes up one morning, its owner gone, and sees nothing but a bowl of food, there are going to be problems. That's shorthand for watch where you step when you get home because there may be an unwanted gift waiting for you on your favorite carpet.

And, as I learned from Kai Hsieh, owner of Happy Paws Pet Care in Boston, my absence most likely agitated the cat.

“Pets do notice and get upset when the owners are gone for long periods of time,” she said. “I'm talking more than two weeks. They'll act out to express their emotions. They mope around, they won't eat. I can go on and on.”

Chicago-based dog behaviorist and trainer Ami Moore said she regularly encounters vacation guilt among her clients.

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‘Pets do notice and get upset when the owners are gone for long periods of time. . . . They'll act out to express their emotions. They mope around, they won't eat.’

“Dogs don’t recognize us as humans, or dogs, or alpacas, or anything else,” she said. “They see us as an energy field. The trick is how you leave them when you go on vacation. If you leave with happy energy, then you’re giving them happy energy. If you leave them with negative energy like ‘I’m worried,’ ‘I’m afraid,’ ‘I’m guilty,’ then the dog will act the same way.”

Her recommendation is that you clear your mind and say, ‘I’m happy that I’m going.’ Keep the tone upbeat and the dog will respond in kind. She said most dogs suffer from separation anxiety as a result of their owner’s anxious behavior.

“I can take care of most cases in one two-hour visit. That’s why I make \$500,000 a year solving dog problems,” she said. “The dog is very easy to change because dogs are natural followers. Nature likes balance and strength. Humans like drama trauma cases. They like Lindsey Lohan and Kim and Kanye. Nature doesn’t. Nature runs away from that or kills it.”

Our experts say that the best way to eliminate the guilt — or at least some of the guilt — is to start planning long before you go on vacation. In the past, I planned by trying to con friends into taking care of the cat while I was away. But eventually they got wise and realized that the effort involved in feeding an obese feline twice a day was not worth the T-shirts that I brought them in return. I was fortunate enough to find Happy Paws. Hsieh kindly e-mailed me pictures of the Admiral while I was away so I knew he was doing well. As a bonus, I’m not annoying my friends.

If you hire a pet-sitter, Galaxy said you should have that sitter visit a few times before your departure so the cat feels more at ease with the stranger. He said he often hears from pet-sitters who say they don't see the cat for the first three days.

“There's tons of homework, because you're not going to relax on vacation unless you can predict what's happening at home is 100 percent perfect,” said Terri Bright, director of behavioral services at MSPCA/Angell Animal Medical Center. “It's like leaving your child somewhere. You should know what time they eat, what time they go to bed, and what time they exercise. That's the metaphor.”

Ideally cats should stay at home with a sitter that stops by at least twice a day, said cat behaviorist Marilyn Krieger. She said cats are not the arrogant, apathetic loners that many make them out to be. They bond with people and miss them when they're gone. They miss them so much that Krieger suggests an elaborate system to keep them happy while owners are sunning themselves on a far-flung beach.

“You take eight things that have your scent on it,” she explained. “Maybe it's eight T-shirts that are heavily scented. And you get eight plastic bags that can be sealed, In each one you put a separate item. Every day, your cat-sitter should take one of these items out of plastic. That way your cat won't feel abandoned. Cats are very scent-oriented.”

To be honest I was biting my lip to keep from laughing as Krieger explained this to me. But Bright also recommended leaving scents around the house for both dogs and cats.

While most cats don't mind a little alone time, dog trainer Jonathan Klein said many dogs have a difficult time with separation anxiety caused by owners who over-bond. He suggests teaching the dog to be alone. After that, research your canine boarding options and check credentials. Then bring the dog a few times before you go on vacation to make sure the dog is comfortable in its new surroundings. Also, don't be shy about making an unannounced visit to ensure that the facility is well run. Short of that, make sure you have good references.

Animals like rituals and patterns, so when Westwood-based luxury travel expert Tiffany Dowd leaves for work, she makes sure her rescued Maine coon cat, Onyx, has everything he likes, including a fresh pair of Crocs to chew on (his favorite hobby). She also reassures him by rubbing his belly.

"I always feel guilty leaving Onyx," said Dowd, president of Luxe Social Media. "He likes to sprawl himself out next to my suitcase when I pack as if to say he knows I'm leaving."

Hotels have gotten wise to the trend by offering more pet-friendly options for dog owners. But when the pets have to stay at home, it's an adjustment for all involved.

"I'm pretty sure some people would rather leave their kids behind than their pets," Klein said. "Being away from our pets is usually tougher for us than it is for them."

Christopher Muther can be reached at christopher.muther@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@Chris_Muther](https://twitter.com/Chris_Muther).

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