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It's a dog's life!

Just like boats, man's best friend comes in all shapes and sizes so when choosing a four-legged boating companion, taking the same considerations as you did when selecting your craft should apply. What and why you want one, the overall cost not just the initial outlay and the commitment to the project, says ALISON ALDERTON

One of the most important factors to consider is size, both of your craft and your dog. As much as you may love the thought of a Saint Bernard, you, the wife, all the fishing gear and the dog just aren't going to fit comfortably into a day boat! Think about the room available, both inside and out, the deck space, width of gunnels, access in and out of cabins, all should be considered.

Some dogs have a life expectancy of over fifteen years and will depend on you for everything. It is therefore important to consider costs of keeping your dog; these will include veterinary fees, food, regular flea, tick and worm prevention, grooming etc.

Is the breed suitable for your lifestyle?

There are many different breeds to consider, the Spaniel is often referred to as the water dog but do you really want a pooch that is in and out of the water all day? Other breeds associated with water include the Newfoundland, the Otterhound and the Labrador Retriever, in fact some of these so called water dogs love swimming so much that they have developed webbed feet. Collies are probably the easiest of all dogs to train; they are smart, obedient and quick learners whilst Beagles and Bassett Hounds are at the other end of the scale and will prefer to follow their noses in the hope of discovering a tasty morsel rather than follow instruction.

Certain breeds have coats that don't moult such as Poodles, Burlington Terriers and Labradoodles. This is an important consideration for some especially if an allergy or asthma sufferer. Other breeds require more regular or professional grooming so bear this in mind when making your selection.

Responsibility

Whichever breed you choose you should strive to be a responsible owner. Remember some people are frightened of dogs and your playful pup bounding towards them at full speed may freeze them to the spot. A friendly smile and an apologetic nature go a long way. Taking part in some professional training is worthwhile not only will you and your dog learn some tricks of the trade but your pooch will also get to socialize with other like-minded mutts. Of course no matter how much time you spend on training there will be times when your dog gets the better of you. Even the best trained dogs will occasionally decide to show their owner up or develop a severe case of selective hearing at a crucial moment but generally these little hiccups will enrich life with your four legged friend!

Being a responsible dog owner also means cleaning up after them. More and more councils are providing pooh bins, some waterways and councils even provide you with free pooh bags so there really is no excuse for not scooping the poop and you can face prosecution or a fine for not doing so. When visiting other countries make sure you know the rules and if boating or mooring on or near coastal waters remember it is essential to pick up on beaches where children may be playing. You should also be aware that at certain times of the year some beaches are completely out of bounds to dogs or have "on lead" restrictions. You will be able to get details from the local Tourist Information Centre.

In good health

It is extremely important to have your dog vaccinated as there are some dangerous diseases which can affect dogs in the UK. Your vet will be able to discuss these with you in detail and advise you on what is best for your pet. Remember to tell your vet that your dog will be in regular contact with water

as there are diseases which due to this type of lifestyle you are more likely to encounter notably Weil's disease.

Weil's disease or Leptospirosis is transmitted by the urine of infected animals with rats, mice and voles being the main host. Dogs can easily pick up the disease by drinking or licking from the waterside areas these rodents inhabit and in doing so can develop severe liver and kidney damage. Fortunately your dog can be inoculated against Weil's disease but one waterbourne disease which cannot be prevented in this way is caused by Blue-green algae. This is a natural inhabitant of many waters and an important contributor to aquatic biology. However, when numbers become excessive, mainly due to a result of prolonged sunshine which is why it is usually at its worst in late summer, toxins are produced. As the algae dies and decays they use up the oxygen in the water causing problems for fish and other aquatic life. The scum or bloom which is then produced is the major cause for concern to wild animals, livestock and pets. This can prove fatal so don't allow your dog to drink or swim in water which looks scummy or stagnant. It can also be harmful to human's in particular young children and those who may be in regular contact with infected waters. More information can be obtained from the Environment Agency who produce an informative leaflet on the subject.

Getting used to a life afloat

When my husband and I decided our lives were not complete without a dog we thought about it long and hard. At the time we did not own a boat but it was a dream we planned to fulfil so once our puppy was home and settled into family life we started introducing him to the world of waterways. Walks along canals and rivers to get used to the sights, sounds and smells were the first exercise, followed by visits to the sea and marinas. Whilst on holiday we tried to

Clockwise from top left: ***Buster the barge Beagle; Buster wearing his life jacket whilst cruising on tidal waters; Taking it all in! ; Tender love!***

incorporate short boat trips or ferry crossings. The Lake District is an ideal venue for this as you can combine short water crossings with good walks for your pooch.

Most boat hire companies allow dogs onboard by prior arrangement, some will require an extra fee and full details will be listed in the brochure. On booking our first dog accompanied narrow boat holiday we decided on the Ashby Canal as it offered lock-free cruising and countryside criss-crossed with nice walks. By going early in the season we missed the crowds and had plenty of mooring spaces to choose from which helped immensely with our new to boating puppy onboard! Before we ventured onto the locking process we visited several on foot and our dog soon became used to being around them. However, when boating we do keep him away from lock edges or onboard especially during busy periods.

We soon purchased our own boat and began a life afloat. Our now grown up dog has settled into life onboard well and enjoys himself immensely. He has recently started to accompany us on regular trips across the Irish Sea by ferry or fast cat service all of which this salty sea dog takes in his stride!

Safety issues

Apparently all dogs can swim if they have to but this doesn't mean that they want to or enjoy it. If you wish to encourage your dog to swim then try visiting safe bathing areas or an animal aqua centre before venturing afloat. Life jackets and buoyancy aids are available for dogs and will give you peace of mind. Even after several years afloat we still use our dog's life jacket especially if on new waters, in rough weather or when rivers are in flood. Not all dogs like wearing a jacket as they can make them feel restricted. It is best to start by getting your dog to wear his jacket on dry land for short periods of time before setting sail. For their first boating trip you may wish to secure them to a safe area of the boat, a car safety harness is ideal for this and will also prevent them for getting under your feet!

It is important that your craft is dog friendly. This can be easily achieved by providing non-slip matting in certain areas; your pet will soon learn that this is a safe place to be. If out and about in the height of summer make sure there is a shady area and drinking water available. If you are planning a long trip remember your dog will need to relieve himself and if you are unable to access shore this can prove a problem. We have overcome this in the past by carefully planning long trips and providing a turf at the front of the boat underlined with thick polythene sheeting. Our dog soon realised what this is for and when the turf is not in place he simply knows not to relive himself there. You can also do the same thing with a piece of Astroturf, newspaper or puppy training pads. It is also important that your dog has his own private area for sleeping or just getting away from it all and although room is limited on a boat your pooch will appreciate having his own space where he can chill out alone.

First-Aid kits for pets are available from leading pet suppliers. You can add to these with certain favoured products for instance we always ensure we carry a small tub of wound powder onboard for minor cuts and grazes. Make sure your dog wears a collar with a good identity tag attached. You can easily have several made up with different contact numbers if need be for when you are based at a marina or travelling around. It is also a good idea to have your dog microchipped. This involves a quick and painless injection to insert a microchip beneath the skin. Each microchip has its own unique number which is assigned to your dog and can be read by a scanner allowing authorities to contact you directly should your pet get lost.

If you are a constant cruiser or away for long spells and need a vet, finding one is relatively easy either by word of mouth or by checking out the internet. Whilst away cruising for three months we had to put this into practice when our dog ripped a claw on a metal footbridge. In just a matter of minutes we had located our nearest vet and arranged an emergency out-of-hours appointment! It is important to consider having your dog insured as an unforeseen accident

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Clockwise from top left: *Do not disturb!; manning the ropes; First Aid kts are available for pets; play time!; a riverside BBQ is always a favourite event for a dog!*

or illness can quickly leave you out of pocket. If you spend some time shopping around you may discover insurance to be more reasonable than you first thought.

When travelling to more rural canal networks make sure you have a supply of dog food with you especially if you use one of the less well-known brands as small village shops may not cater for your dogs needs and a sudden change in food may cause tummy upsets.

Worldwide travel

The world is now a very small place and with the introduction of the pet passport you can take your best friend for boating holidays further afield. Your vet will be able to talk through the procedure in detail with you which is fairly straightforward but needs to be planned approximately 8 months ahead of your travelling date. The European Pet Passport was introduced in July 2004, known as PETS or Pet Travel Scheme; this currently covers Dogs, Cats and Ferrets. There are still certain rules and conditions which you need to comply with in order to use the scheme and full details can be obtained from your veterinary surgery or the DEFRA website.

Our pets are very special to us and at the end of the day their life's are relatively short so should be filled with as much enjoyment as possible. It is therefore worth bearing in mind that some dogs will just not take to boating no matter how hard you try and being aware of this is important, you should never force your dog to do anything he doesn't feel happy with. If a dog is not for you don't despair there are plenty of other pets that take well to living afloat including cats, which you may be surprised to learn are extremely good swimmers, caged birds, particularly parrots and budgies who like nothing better than having their cages out in the fresh air on a summers day and small caged animals such as chinchillas and hamsters.

There is no denying that owning a dog is a big commitment, it is hard work but be patient and remember that the more time and effort you put into training the more rewarding it will later become. If you make it fun and enjoyable then in no time at all you will discover just why the dog is referred to as "Man's best friend". One thing is for sure you will never be lonely or lack for stories to tell when you have a dog onboard!

RESOURCES

Listed below are just a small selection of companies and agencies that can help you find a dog and/or help you and your dog prepare for a boating adventure:

HOLIDAYS

Blakes Holiday Boating Ltd., Wroxham, Norfolk, NR12 8DH. Tel: 01603 739 456. E-mail: Boats@Blakes.co.uk www.blakes.co.uk

Hoseasons Holidays Ltd., Lowestoft, Suffolk NR32 2LW. Tel: 01502 500 505. E-mail: mail@hoseasons.co.uk www.hoseasons.co.uk

LIFE JACKETS FOR PETS

Crewsaver, Mumby Road, Gosport, Hants PO12 1AQ. Tel: 01243 9252 8621. Fax: 01243 9251 0905. www.crewsaver.co.uk (Producers of "Petfloat" suitable for cats and dogs, available in 5 sizes & 2 colours)

LOOKING FOR A NEW DOG OR HELP & ADVICE ON CHOOSING A BREED? TRY:

The Kennel Club, 1-5 Clarges Street, Piccadilly, London W1J 8AB. Tel: 0870 606 6750. Fax: 020 7518 1058. www.thekennelclub.org.uk

Crufts
Website: www.crufts.org.uk

Discover Dogs
www.discoverdogs.org.uk

HOW ABOUT A RESCUE DOG?

RSPCA
www.rspca.org.uk

PET INSURANCE

Petplan, Great West House (GW2), Great West Road, Brentford, Middlesex TW8 9DX. Tel: 0845 071 8000. www.petplan.co.uk

PET PASSPORT

DEFRA
Tel: 0870 241 1710
www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/quarantine/index.htm

NEED TO FIND A VET? TRY:

www.rcvs.org.uk