



The hidden airport facility that helps your pets travel the world safely

Zach Wichter

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Let's say you and your dog, Doug, want to take a trip abroad. Doug is a big boy, so he doesn't fit under the seat in front of you and has to travel as cargo. It may sound stressful, but there are experts who can help make your trip as smooth and worry-free as possible.

If you and Doug are flying into or out of John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, pet (and other animal) customs will likely be handled by [The ARK at JFK](#), a specialized facility for processing animals coming into and out of the country

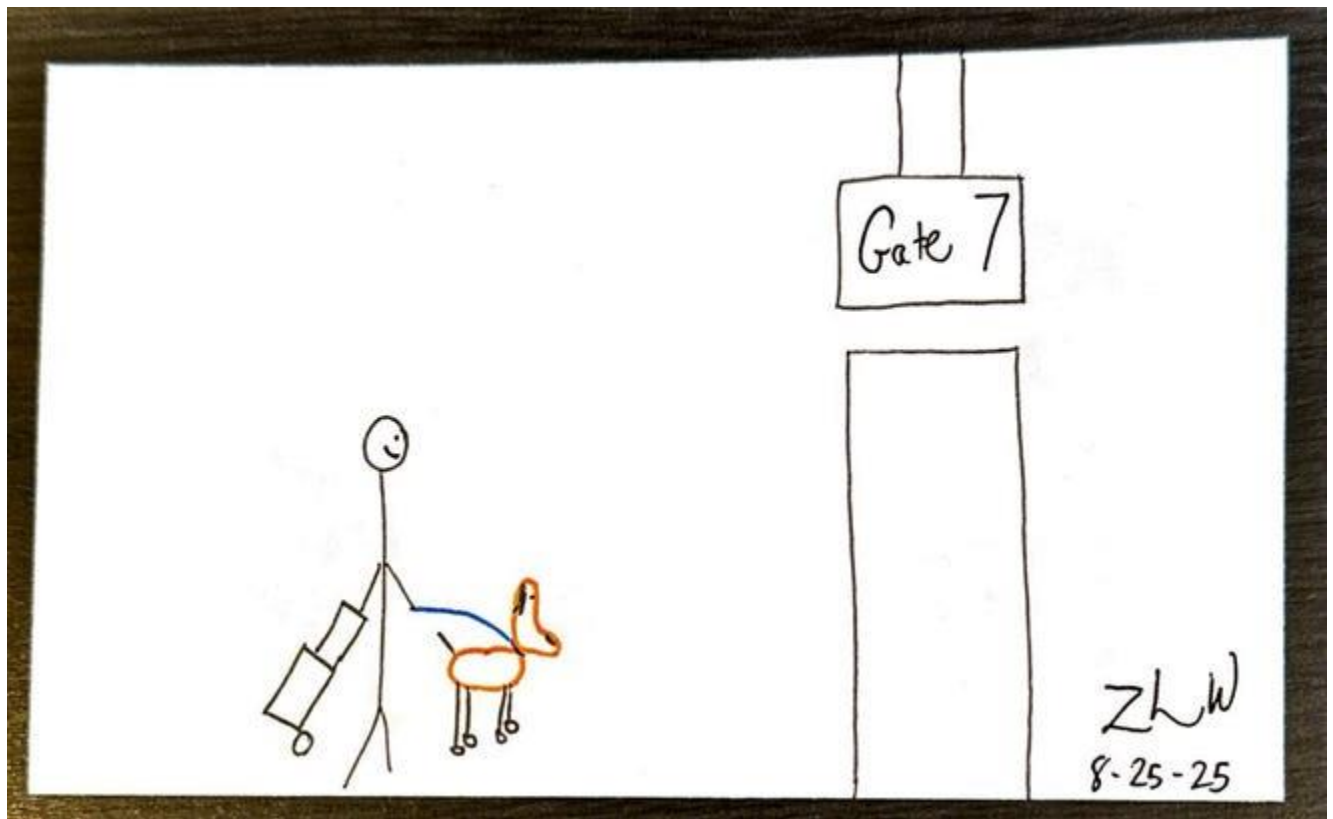
Before you and Doug ever make it to their doorstep, however, you'll want to make sure that his paperwork is in order, that his vaccines are up to date, and that they meet the requirements of wherever you're going.

I recently had a chance to visit The ARK myself and saw a number of dogs and cats arriving or preparing for their journeys, along with horses that were getting ready to get on flights.

The ARK handles all kinds of other animals, from exotic creatures to lab mice.

I spoke to Elizabeth Schuette, president and CEO of The ARK, and learned more about what travelers need to know for the most animal-friendly international trips.

Other services like [BARK Air](#) allow travelers to fly with their pets, but for many destinations, more traditional shipping is the best or only option.



Flying abroad with your pet can be complicated, but it doesn't have to be stressful. *Zach Wichter/USA TODAY*

What paperwork do you need to fly with your pet?

Just like humans need passports, animals usually need some level of documentation to enter the United States or another country.

“On arrival somewhere, depending on the country and depending on where the animals have come from, there’s typically some form of investigation or confirmation that the animal is the same animal that they say it is and that the animal has received all necessary treatments and vaccines,” Schuette said. “For dogs that are arriving from low-risk countries like most of Europe, then the process is pretty smooth. The customs paper gets presented to customs. That can get cleared and the dog is released and picked up by the owner or delivered by a pet shipper.”

She added that it’s important for travelers who plan to fly internationally with their pets to familiarize themselves with their destination country’s requirements well in advance and make sure they have time to get their paperwork, and any required vaccines, in order.

Does your pet need to quarantine if you're flying internationally?

Usually, Schuette said, animals shouldn’t have to quarantine if their documents are up to date and endorsed by the appropriate authorities.



A cat preparing for its flight at The ARK at JFK. Zach Wichter/USA TODAY

Still, she said, animals entering the United States from some countries could face tighter restrictions if they're coming from a country considered at high risk for certain diseases, especially rabies.

“If the dog has been vaccinated in a country that's considered high-risk, or a puppy in a high-risk country, people have the option of bringing in the dog to the United States and going through the full 28-day quarantine if it hasn't received a U.S. vaccination,” she said.

How long does it take for a pet to clear customs?

Schuetz said most animals with the appropriate paperwork can be cleared through The ARK in about eight hours if they arrive early in the day on a weekday. She said the processing time can be longer overnight or on the weekends, when the facility isn't fully staffed.

For the animal to clear customs, a veterinary medical officer has to examine the pet and review its documents to make sure everything is in order. Animals coming in from some countries also have to be revaccinated for rabies before being cleared to enter the United States.

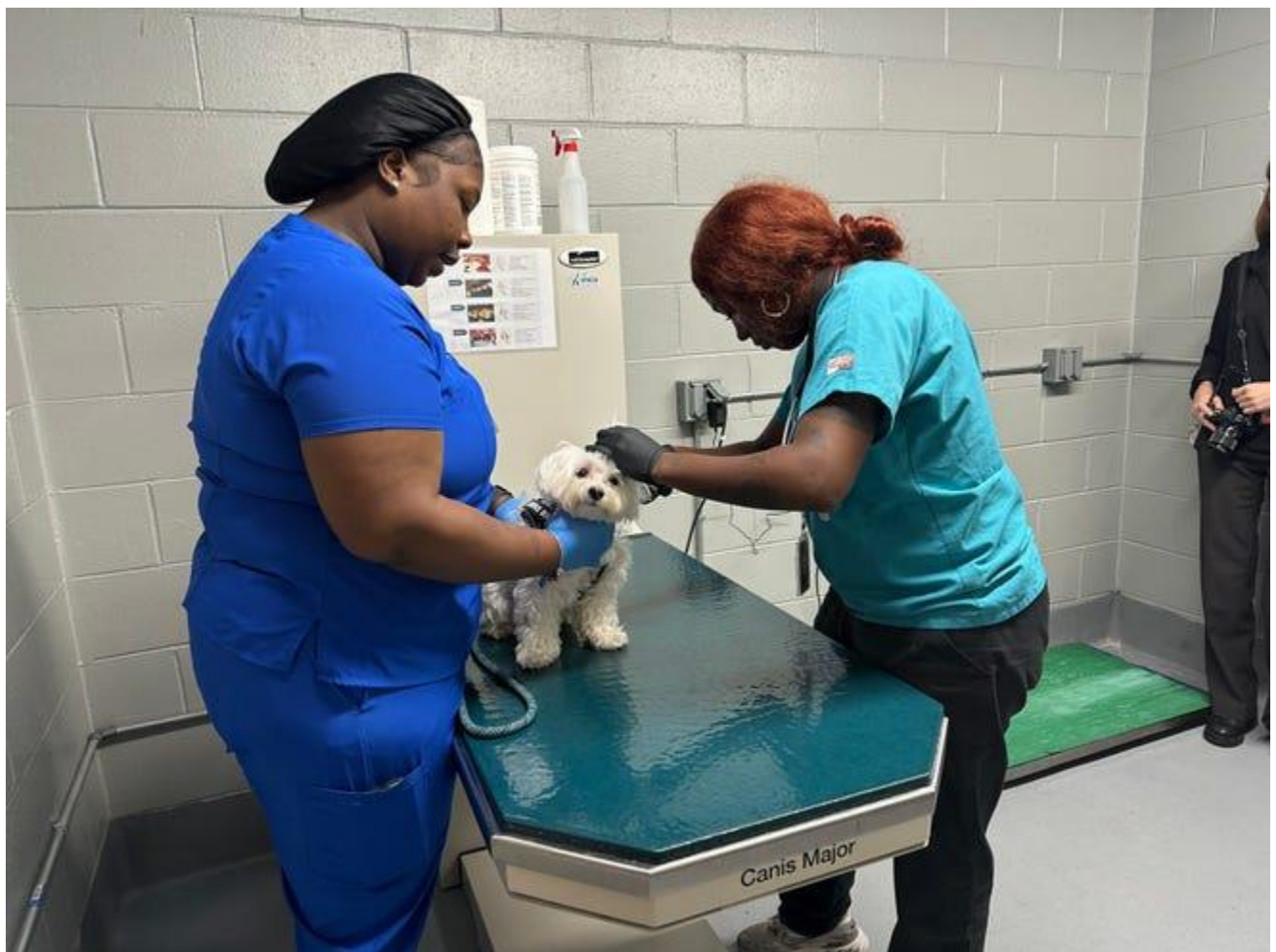
Schuetz said The ARK tries to keep animals calm and comfortable during their processing and noted that as a specially designed facility, it's often smoother for pets than at other ports of entry.

Do regulations differ for service animals or in-cabin pets?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently enacted stricter regulations for in-cabin pets, which mean they now have to go through a similar process as larger animals that travel in cargo.

Schuetz said that at JFK, employees from The ARK will meet passengers at their planes to take the animal for processing.

Service animals from abroad also have to undergo the same customs process, but Schuetz said those exams usually get priority.



A dog undergoing an intake exam at The ARK at JFK. Zach Wichter/USA TODAY

“In the reservation process we identify if it’s a service dog or not,” she said. “We also pre-notify CDC that it’s a service dog and they will prioritize the review of the exam and release.”

She added that in cases when a person cannot be separated from their service animal for even a brief time, the traveler should work with the airline to make sure they can accompany the animal to the customs facility.

How much does it cost to get your pet to an international destination?

According to The ARK, the cost varies by the kind of animal and its specific requirements, the length of the trip, the destination and a variety of other factors. For example, Doug, a midsize dog traveling from New York to London as cargo, would cost about \$2,000.

The ARK does not arrange shipping for horses directly but does handle their quarantines. A three-day quarantine in ARK facilities costs \$1,925.

When pets travel in cargo, a representative from The ARK helps load or unload them from the aircraft in New York but does not travel with the animals to or from the international port.

Horses usually have trainers who travel with them, but those services are arranged separately.

How can you keep your pet safe and comfortable when it flies internationally?

Schuette said animals are usually pretty comfortable once they get on the plane, but loading and unloading can be more stressful, especially if the pet is traveling in cargo.

“The most important thing is if your dog is going to be traveling in any sort of container, that they’re comfortable in that. Anytime they get agitated, that increased their respiration, increased their heart rate,” which can lead to greater danger of health complications while traveling, she said. “The most solace people should take is it is actually very safe.”



A horse preparing to be loaded onto a flight at The ARK at JFK. Zach Wichter/USA TODAY

U.S. airlines mostly no longer take pets as checked luggage, but there are exceptions for some circumstances. Alaska Airlines and Hawaiian Airlines appear to be the only U.S. carriers that now accept pets as checked baggage.

Most travelers with pets that don't fit under the seat, however, will have to ship them as cargo, which means they may not be able to fly on your same flight. So if you need to travel with your pet, make sure to speak to your carrier or research pet shippers well in advance.