

The Thrifty Traveler: Money-saving strategies for senior pet travel

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Hitting the road with our nearly-15-year-old Labrador has proved to be as challenging as it is rewarding. While we are thrilled to be able to provide her with this adventure during her golden years, there are certain things we need to do differently now than we did when she was younger. Following are a few of our favorite strategies for wrangling a spunky senior canine who suffers from senility and separation anxiety.

Equipment: While her heart is still in the game, her joints just aren't what they used to be. This translates into difficulty jumping out of our Jeep and the frequent inability to jump into it. Our search for new vehicle options to offer her easier access revealed we'd be looking at a \$25,000 minimum throwdown. Not out of reach if we'd had time to coordinate a private sale of our vehicle before departure in order to get the best price, but we wanted to start our journey as quickly as possible. This meant finding another solution to help with automobile entry and exit.

We settled upon a device called the Help 'Em Up Harness, which is comprised of connecting chest and hip harnesses with sturdy lifting handles. It provides support in comfortable places on the underside of her body so lifting doesn't hurt her, and she's able to relieve herself while wearing the entire ensemble, which streamlines the canine potty break process on travel days. One and two person lifts are a breeze, and she can enjoy a day of adventure without feeling constricted. While the \$110 price tag is certainly more than her regular leash accessories, it is tens of thousands of dollars less than the vehicle alternative we were considering and has enabled her to participate in an adventure we might not have been able to include her in otherwise.

Medication: Part of attending to our dog's changing requirements means incorporating pain and inflammation management meds into her daily routine. In addition to fish oil capsules, our vet prescribed Rimadyl when stairs and jumping started to cause discomfort. While her need was occasional, we stuck with the original pills.

Once the monthly cost became a regular and significant line item in our monthly budget however, asking about a generic equivalent saved us a whopping 66 percent. While we haven't incorporated glucosamine yet, we have used it with another pet under veterinary guidance with great success. Bottom line? Every canine is different. Take the time to work closely with your dog's doctor to determine the best course of treatment.

Communication: While we keep a close eye on her at all times, the truth is animals in general are unpredictable. With her lapses in lucidity occurring with greater frequency, we decided we couldn't put off the microchip approach any longer. Just the thought of her

getting away from us in the wilderness or an unfamiliar town and not being able to remember the location of her current home base is incredibly disconcerting. While a microchip doesn't eliminate that risk, it does provide a way for anyone who might find her to reach us immediately.

Communication also relates to how we are able to interact with our furry child herself. Her joints aren't the only thing functioning at less than 100 percent. The fact is, her hearing is nearly gone. We originally thought we could deal with this by downloading one of the free dog whistle apps to our phone and hitting the play button to get her attention from across the tent or hotel room. I downloaded every single one I could get my hands on, and they were all a total bust. I didn't get so much as a raised eyebrow.

Consequently, the days of conveniently calling her name when it was time for food, water, meds or a walk are long gone. She doesn't even hear the doorbell when the delivery man comes to the house. Getting her attention now involves walking across the room and either waving a hand in front of her eyes, tapping her on the hip or getting down on her level and interacting face to face. Positive reinforcement requires a similar approach. Verbal praise no longer gets the job done. We opt instead for extra cuddles, or speaking with our lips pressed to her ear so she can at least feel the vibrations as we pair those vibrations with a treat or hug.

Traveling with a senior pet can be just as rewarding as vacationing with a younger one, provided you are prepared to offer the additional support an aging canine requires. Adjusting to the extra needs is a process for both you and your dog. Be sure to build the necessary time into your travel itinerary in order to avoid unnecessary frustration on both sides.

(Myscha Theriault is a best-selling author and avid traveler She is currently traveling through North America with her husband and Labrador retriever. Readers can follow their adventures on trekhound.com and on Twitter at @MyschaTheriault.)