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With so many makes and models to choose from and so much to consider, car shopping is never easy. And since cars are designed for people, it becomes even tougher for dog owners looking for pet-friendly models.

Happily, rising fuel prices have had one positive effect: as automakers strive to pack as much usable space as possible into smaller vehicles, they've included features pet owners need, such as folding seats, spacious cargo areas and small-item storage.

But you still need to shop with your best friend in mind, and that means thoroughly examining every vehicle you're considering. The vehicles mentioned here are dog-friendly, but they're just recommendations and won't be right for everyone. The vehicle has to fit you and your dog – not the other way around. ➤

When you're car shopping, keep these important things in mind:

Take your time. The average test drive reportedly lasts 12 minutes, but should take at least an hour or two to assess everything. Can you enter and exit easily, sit comfortably and reach all the pedals? Is visibility good? Does the car have enough power to merge safely onto the highway?

You should be able to park nose-in and tail-in easily, and see traffic all around you with no blind spots. The seatbelt shouldn't cut into your neck, and the seats should still be comfortable after an hour. If you usually drink a coffee in your car, take your mug with you; in some vehicles, poorly placed cupholders block heater controls or the shifter. Make sure you can place your purse or briefcase in a convenient spot too.

Fido has to fit. Take your dog with you, or take the car home to your dog. (Be considerate and put a blanket on the seat.) Make sure your dog can easily get in and out of all doors and the hatch (if applicable). Keep in mind that as he gets older, it'll be tougher to climb up into a tall SUV.

Don't just eyeball the vehicle. If you use a crate, put it in and see how it fits – find out if one little grab handle prevents it from going in all the way. Check that storage compartments accommodate bowls or toys.

Test everything. Operate the folding seats to be sure you can do it easily (some require you to remove a centre head restraint, which can be tough to access). Can you reach the open liftgate, and is it easy to close? Check the sunroof; if it's too big, you may not be able to use a pet barrier.

Something that isn't right on a test drive is not going to get better with time, which is why it's essential to put the car through its paces. No matter how good it is, no vehicle will be perfect. The secret is to find a car whose positive points outweigh the negatives ones. Just like finding the right dog, selecting the right vehicle takes time and effort – but the end result is always worth the trouble.

A word about **safety**



Cars are safer than they've ever been, but only if all passengers are properly restrained – and that includes your pets. A dog sitting on your lap in the front seat will be killed if the airbag deploys in a collision.

Most pet stores sell car harnesses that attach to the seatbelt. Your dog is safest when secured in the back seat or in a crate. Never let him ride with his head out the window, or unrestrained in a top-down convertible or pickup truck.



5 DOG-FRIENDLY VEHICLES

1. SUV – Ford Escape

Many worthy competitors fill this segment, but I like the Ford Escape (also sold as the Mazda Tribute). It's nicely sized with good visibility, a square shape that makes the most of its cargo area, and a smooth and comfortable ride.

The cargo area is 84 centimetres (33 inches) high and 85 centimetres (33.4 inches) long with the seats up, or 150 centimetres (59 inches) long when they're folded flat. The hatchback glass opens separately; if you're standing outside the vehicle but your dog must stay inside, you can open it for ventilation.

The Escape is also available as a gasoline/electric hybrid, but do the math: its fuel savings are calculated for stop-and-go traffic, and depending on your driving conditions, you may not make back the extra purchase price.

Also consider: Saturn Vue, Suzuki Grand Vitara, Honda Pilot, Toyota FJ Cruiser.

2. Minivan – Dodge Grand Caravan

All minivans are great for dogs, but Dodge leads the pack with its "Stow 'n Go" seating system. Most minivans have disappearing third-row seats, but Dodge's second-row seats also fold into the floor (also available on the Chrysler Town & Country, but not on the short-wheelbase Dodge Caravan).

The seats are easy to use: lift the floor panel, fold the seat, and flip it down into the storage well. The major benefit, besides not having to lift out heavy seats, is configuration flexibility: should your dog/human ratio change on a trip, you won't be hampered by a seat left at home. When the seats are up, their storage wells provide an additional 340 litres (12 cubic feet) of covered leash-and-toy storage.

Minivans also boast access-friendly sliding doors, a lower step-in than most SUVs – great for older or smaller dogs – and a tall roof for large crates.

Also consider: Honda Odyssey, Kia Sedona, Hyundai Entourage, Toyota Sienna, Chevrolet Uplander.

3. Station wagon – Subaru Legacy

Technically they're hatchbacks, but station wagons offer a lower, more sedan-like profile many buyers prefer. I like the Subaru Legacy, which combines elegant styling, a well-finished interior and the company's trademark "symmetrical" all-wheel drive (all driveline components are positioned symmetrically for better balance).

The Legacy offers a cargo area 109 centimetres (42.9 inches) long with the seats up; fold the seats – which you can do without removing the head restraints – and it's 165 centimetres (64.9 inches) long, with a minimum width of 108 centimetres (42.5 inches) and height of 72 centimetres (28.3 inches).

There's a storage bin under the floor, and the cargo area includes

four tie-downs. Best of all, Subaru offers two dealer-installed dog guards, one of which will work with the car's optional sunroof.

Also consider: Volvo V50 or V70, Mazda6 Sport Wagon, Ford Focus ZXW, Dodge Magnum, Subaru Forester.

4. Compact hatchback – Honda Fit

The Honda Fit may be small, but it has a secret weapon: the "Magic Seat." This rear 60/40 bench seat not only folds flat without removing its head restraints, but it also flips up to reveal the unique low-slung floor. This gives it an area up to 126 centimetres (49.6 inches) tall, 57 centimetres (22.4 inches) long and 124 centimetres (48.8 inches) wide.

Your dog can enjoy three seating positions (on the folded seat, on the seat or on the floor), as well as a small, all-seats-up cargo area with four tie-downs.

The Fit's small size also means good fuel economy, and I find it handles better than many of its competitors. The cargo area is carpeted, unlike some of its plastic-floored competitors; your dog won't slide around as much, but it's tougher to clean.

Also consider: Chrysler PT Cruiser, Toyota Matrix, Pontiac Vibe, Chevrolet HHR, Dodge Caliber, Toyota Yaris.

5. Compact SUV – Honda Element

It's not going to win any beauty contests, but the Honda Element is one of the most dog-friendly vehicles on the planet, being almost ridiculously easy to clean.

While you shouldn't actually hose it out, Element's full-length vinyl floor can be wiped clean or damp-mopped, and the seats are covered in waterproof, stain-resistant fabric.

The Element's back doors are rear-hinged so the front and back doors release to reveal a completely open area. When you tilt the front seat forward, there's 75 centimetres (29.5 inches) of entry space.

The rear seats flip up and attach to the sides of the vehicle, leaving a completely flat floor; they're also removable, for a van-like cargo area measuring 110 centimetres (43.3 inches) tall and 97 centimetres (38.1 inches) wide. With the rear seats in place and upright, the cargo area is 67 centimetres (26.3 inches) long; fold or remove them, and it's 167 centimetres (65.7 inches) long.

Based on the Honda Civic, Element can be ordered with an all-wheel-drive system that transmits power to the rear wheels if the front ones start to slip. The removable rear sunroof available on all-wheel-drive models gives your dog extra light and ventilation in the back.

On the down side, the Element's strictly a four-seater: the driver must remove the seatbelt (on 2006 and earlier models) and open the front door for rear passengers to get out. Shorter users may find the open tailgate difficult to reach across.

Also consider: Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, Honda CR-V, Jeep Liberty, Toyota RAV4.