

My husband and I live on a sailboat that we keep at a marina at least 6 months a year, and sail up and down the coast the rest of the year. I'd like to have a pet cat aboard. What do you think?

History tells us that cats have long accompanied sailors and fishermen on boats either as invited guests or as stowaways. While some pet cats can't even tolerate car travel, howling in distress and getting sick along the way, others will do just fine on a boat. It would be wise to first let your new cat live with you onboard the boat while you are docked for a while. Keep her in a crate or confined area in the cabin at first and as she becomes more comfortable in her new home. Let her explore while you supervise. Make sure there are no places she can squeeze into that would be dangerous. If she seems comfortable, an overnight voyage nearby would be the next step. Gradually increase the length of the trips if she seems to be handling them well. If seasickness is a problem, there are medications that can be prescribed.

The first all important precaution you need to take is to prevent her from falling overboard. Put up protective nylon netting attached to the lifelines. Keep a large fish net on an expandable pole in case of emergency. Try to acclimate her to water in a friend's bath tub or swimming pool. In case of emergency, at least she has tried swimming a few strokes before, as most cats will not wear a flotation device. Having a scrap of carpet that you hang over the side that can reach the water level could be an emergency entrance for her to climb back aboard. Make sure she has a microchip in case she ever accidentally gets off the boat at shore. Be careful about her exposure to sun and heat. Keep ventilation ports open below deck and have shaded areas for her on deck.

Of course you'll have to stock the food she normally eats and any medications, but what to do about the litter box? Using standard kitty litter may not be the most practical option as you'll need room to store it, and won't have an easy way to dispose of the soiled litter. Try getting her used to using a litter box with artificial turf cut to fit. That way you can flush the solid waste and hose off the urine from the mat. If she won't use the artificial turf, try a non-clay type of litter that won't be as messy if she tracks it on the wet deck of the boat.

Talk to other cat owning sailors to get their thoughts and ideas. It can work and be very enjoyable for all of you.

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