Boarding Ferrets

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If your ferret stays behind while you travel, the best place to leave it is in its own home. Neighbors or friends who own ferrets will usually take better care of the ferret than the average boarding kennel devoted primarily to caring for dogs and cats. In most cities, professional pet sitters will stop by your home and look after your animals as often as necessary. Check with local ferret organizations to see if there is someone in your area who specializes in ferret sitting.

Some kennels will board ferrets and/or other exotic pets, and there may be a few ferret boarding facilities in large cities. These people are often very knowledgeable and will do their best to keep your ferret safe and healthy. Be sure to check the kennel before you decide to leave your ferret, to avoid the kinds of problems discussed below.

Problems with boarding facilities

Noise: Most ferrets are not upset by barking dogs but if yours is, choose a kennel that is devoted to ferrets, cats, or exotics that don't make much noise.

Food: Not all boarding kennels will be careful to feed your pet the diet it is used to, even if you leave a supply with them. Caretakers find it easier to feed all the animals the same food and like to assume that all cat food is created equal. Ferrets can be very choosy about what they eat, and some go on a starvation diet when a new food is suddenly introduced. The food offered by the kennel might be palatable but not nutritious enough for a ferret. Ferrets usually tip stainless steel dishes over, spilling and contaminating the food and water, and making it hard to tell how much has been eaten.

Feeding: Select a kennel that will reliably feed your pet the food you leave for it. They should allow you to leave the ferret's own dishes that cannot be overturned, and a water bottle if none are available in the kennel. Kennels that cooperate this way usually have feeding directions clearly marked on the cage cards. Leave enough of your ferret's own food to last the full time you are gone and about a third extra to allow for spillage.

Slippery floors: The floor of a stainless steel dog or cat cage is slippery. Some ferrets will lose control of their hind legs if forced to walk on a slippery floor day after day. If the kennel owner will allow you to do it, leave a piece of carpet (a sample is about the right size) to put on the floor of a cat cage to give the ferret good footing. Some kennels use a piece of corrugated cardboard for the same purpose: this is changed daily to keep the cage cleaner. However, many young ferrets immediately crawl under the cardboard, circumventing its purpose.

Escape: Veterinary hospitals sometimes board animals, but this is not their main function, and ferrets may not be well housed. The cages are designed for cats or dogs, not for ferrets, and the widely spaced bars allow small jills to escape, possibly falling several feet onto a hard floor.

Ventilation: The smallest cages are often up near the ceiling, the warmest place in the building. This is not ideal for ferrets, but it is usually where they are placed because the cage size is appropriate. If this is the type of area where your ferret will have to stay, it is better to make another arrangement. Warm dry air irritates the respiratory passages, inviting infections, and makes the ferret uncomfortable.

Litter box: The disposable cardboard cat litter boxes in most kennels are wonderful ferret toys and rarely used as intended. Allowing the ferret to have his own litter pan will encourage his usual clean habits.

Nest: Ferrets do not like to sleep in an exposed area, especially in unfamiliar surroundings. A sleeping tube or other familiar nest material from home will make them feel more secure.

Respiratory disease: *Bordetella bronchiseptica*, a type of bacteria that causes kennel cough in dogs, may cause respiratory disease in ferrets. Ferrets that will be boarded near dogs may be vaccinated with an injectable killed *Bordetella* bacterin. The first dose should be given 10 to 14 days before the ferret is to be boarded, and a booster dose the day it enters the kennel. This protects the ferret for about 6 months. If you board your pet again more than 6 months later, he will need a single booster within a few days of entering the kennel.

ECE: A veterinary hospital that treats ferrets is very likely at some time to have a patient with ECE. Despite efforts to isolate the animal with ECE, people who have touched it are free to move around the hospital, and it is possible for boarded ferrets to be infected. The admissions area, where your ferret will enter and be discharged from the hospital, is the riskiest place for inadvertent exposure to contagious disease, because the sick animals waiting with their owners have not yet been diagnosed. ECE is also a concern when ferret sitters service more than one ferret household a day – ferrets recovered from ECE carry the virus for months, and they may infect others who are contacted by the caregiver.

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