

Choosing a place to leave your dog is more than ticking boxes. It is a trust decision that affects their comfort, health, and the peace of mind you carry while traveling. Over the years I have toured dozens of kennels, stayed overnight while observing shifts, and spoken with veterinarians and trainers about what goes wrong and why. The difference between a good boarding experience and a stressful one often shows up in subtle ways during the first walkthrough. This checklist will help you see those signals, ask the right questions, and make a defensible decision for holiday boarding, long term boarding, or short stays.

Why this matters Dogs are masters of routine, scent, and social negotiation. A facility that gets the basics right reduces stress behaviors, lowers illness transmission, and improves return-to-home recovery. Poor hygiene, ambiguous staffing, and unclear protocols can translate into emergency vet trips, separation anxiety, or worse. You'll be able to spot most of these risks during a single tour if you know what to look for and how to interpret what you find.

What to bring on the tour Bring your dog's vaccination records, a list of medications, and a clear idea of the dates you need. Take notes and photos where allowed. If your dog is reactive or anxious, visit without them first. Bring a tape measure if you want to confirm run and sleeping area sizes against the facility's claims. Ask in advance whether the facility requires appointments for tours; many busy kennels have structured windows for safety and to avoid upsetting other dogs.

First impressions count, but inspect the details A tidy lobby and friendly receptionist are important, but they are only the start. Walk the entire facility if you can. Smell matters; a faint, clean disinfectant is acceptable, but a strong urine or ammonia odor is a warning sign. Listen for the cadence of barking. Some barking is normal, especially with holiday boarding when capacity is high, but constant, high-intensity barking that does not abate suggests understaffing or poor separation protocols. Observe staff interacting with dogs. Do handlers move confidently, using calm voices and clear directions? Or do they appear rushed and reactive?

Facility layout and ventilation Good ventilation and natural light reduce airborne pathogens and stress. Ask about HVAC maintenance and whether intake and exhaust filters are changed on a schedule. Outdoor yards should allow drainage; muddy, standing water is a source of parasites and infection. Indoor kennels should have non-porous, easily sanitized surfaces. Check for layered separation between play areas and sleep areas. Facilities that mix unvaccinated or unknown dogs into general [hiphound](https://hiphound.com) play are risking contagious disease spread.

Health and vaccination policies A facility should require core vaccines and proof of current titers or vaccinations, and it should post its policy where clients can see it. Typical requirements include rabies, distemper/parvovirus combination, and a current bordetella vaccination or proof of immunity. Ask whether they accept titer results in place of boosters and whether they require a recent fecal check for parasites, particularly for long term boarding. Clarify what happens if a dog becomes ill while boarded. Is there a written illness protocol? Which veterinarian do they use, and are emergency vet trips approved by phone only, or can staff transport a pet if you are unreachable?

Staffing levels and training Find out the staff to dog ratio during peak and off-peak hours. Ratios of one handler per 8 to 12 dogs during supervised play are common in many good facilities, but the number can vary widely with size and layout of the play areas. Ask whether staff are trained in canine first aid, behavior observation, and enrichment techniques. A facility with written, ongoing staff training and certifications is more likely to detect early signs of distress or illness. Watch the staff handle dogs of different sizes and temperaments to see their comfort level.

Supervision and group play Group play can burn energy and provide socialization, but it must be managed. Ask how dogs are grouped and rotated. Good facilities use temperament assessments and trial play sessions before assigning dogs to mixed groups. If staff describe grouping by size only, probe further. Size does not predict play style. Ask for a description of the intake temperament test and whether they do supervised trial sessions, and if so, how long those are. Observe a play session if possible; look for clear rules, safe entry and exit points, and handlers who intervene before escalation.

Sleeping quarters and day areas Measure the indoor and outdoor sleeping spaces. For a medium-size dog, expect at least 4 to 6 square feet of resting space plus room to stand and turn. Larger dogs need more. Are kennels stacked in tiers that limit airflow, or is the space single-level and open? Bedding should be washable and replaced between dogs. Check for personal space options — crates should not be the only place dogs spend all day. If a facility markets a "suite" or "luxury" room, compare them directly rather than assuming parity. Ask whether dogs with separation anxiety are offered extra staff time or in-suite soothing options.

Cleaning schedule and disinfectants Ask when kennels and play areas are cleaned and what products they use. Effective disinfectants for parvovirus and other hardy pathogens are available but require proper contact time to work. Staff should be able to tell you both the product and the dwell time. Floors and crates should be power-washed or scrubbed regularly. If you see staff cleaning with a simple spray and wipe between dogs, press for clarification. Also ask about laundry procedures for bedding and how often toys are rotated and sanitized.

Red flags checklist Use this short checklist during or immediately after the tour to prioritize follow-up questions.

1. Strong urine or ammonia smell that penetrates the lobby or indoor areas.
2. No visible cleaning schedule, or staff cannot name disinfectants and contact times.
3. Lack of clear vaccination policy or acceptance of unverified claims.
4. Staff-to-dog ratios that vary wildly depending on who is answering, or no formal training for staff.
5. No temperament testing before group play, or staff claim all dogs are safe together.

Vaccination and health exceptions Some facilities accept exceptions for medical reasons, like allowing a titer instead of a vaccine for an adult dog. That can be reasonable when backed by a veterinary note. What is not reasonable is a blanket policy that allows unvaccinated dogs without oversight. If the facility accepts exemptions, ask how they mitigate risk: separate play areas, solo runs, or mandatory quarantine periods. For holiday boarding when many dogs are present, stricter policies should be in force; ask about additional health screening during peak seasons.

Handling emergencies and veterinary care Ask who signs veterinary release forms and under what dollar amount the facility may authorize treatment. A responsible facility will request that you set a limit and have an established emergency veterinary partner. Confirm whether staff are trained to administer common medications such as oral antibiotics, eyedrops, or insulin, and whether they chart medication administration per shift. Look for written incident logs. If staff refer to memory rather than records when describing past incidents, that is a risk factor.

Pricing transparency and extra fees Boarding pricing can include many line items beyond the per-night rate. Ask for a full written quote that lists holiday boarding surcharges, long term boarding discounts or fees, administration fees for medications, enrichment or training fees, and late pickup penalties. Low base prices that hide high add-ons are a red flag. Conversely, high prices do not guarantee quality; ask what is included and how staff time is allocated. For example, does daily playtime include supervised group exercise, or is it a half-hour individual walk billed separately? Clarity avoids disputes later.

Human factors you cannot see Sometimes the best signs are human rather than physical. How does the staff respond to difficult questions? Do they welcome a follow-up call from your vet? Are they defensive about past

incidents? Anecdotes matter. A manager who can give specific examples of past challenges and how they resolved them is more credible than someone offering only generic reassurance. Ask for references, ideally clients who have boarded dogs with similar needs to yours.

Packing and preparation when you decide to board Bring a clear, labeled bag with medication instructions, a feeding schedule, and an emergency contact. Include familiar-smelling items such as an unwashed T-shirt if your dog uses scent for comfort. Check the facility's boarding packing guide for permitted items; many facilities restrict toys with squeakers or certain bedding materials for safety. If your dog has separation anxiety, include a note describing triggers and calming strategies that work at home.

Short checklist for packing items

1. Up-to-date vaccination documentation and any vet notes for medical exceptions.
2. Medication in original prescriptions with clear dosing instructions and schedule.
3. A feeding schedule with brand, portion, and whether food is free-fed or portioned.
4. One clearly labeled, washable bedding item and a familiar-smelling cloth for comfort.
5. Emergency contacts and the name of your regular veterinarian.

Behavioral accommodations and enrichment Ask about enrichment programming, not just exercise. A well-run facility will offer varied enrichment such as puzzle feeders, scent work sessions, and one-on-one time for dogs that need it. The presence of enrichment can reduce stress behaviors and lower the chance of aggression. Check whether these services are included in the boarding pricing or available as add-ons. For long term boarding, ask about behavioral reporting intervals, such as daily notes or weekly progress updates. For holiday boarding, ask if they provide extra attention or quieter areas for dogs that are easily overstimulated.

Specific checks for long term boarding Longer stays magnify small issues. Ask how they rotate bedding, how often they do full-suite cleanings, and whether they offer periodic health checks or weight tracking. Find out whether staff will maintain a consistent routine for your dog, because frequent staff changes can trigger anxiety. Confirm policies for updating you about health and behavior — daily photos are nice, but written notes that mention appetite, bowel movements, and energy level are more informative.

What to do if you see a red flag during the tour If you notice a red flag, do not leave immediately without asking direct questions. Frame queries calmly: ask what caused the smell, how often the area is deep-cleaned, or why certain dogs were grouped that way. A good facility will explain the protocols and offer to show documentation. If the response is vague, inconsistent, or dismissive, treat that as a substantial warning sign. It is reasonable to request a supervised trial stay of one night before a longer holiday or long term booking. If a manager cannot accommodate a trial or refuses to provide written policies, consider another option.

Comparing facilities fairly When you tour multiple facilities, compare like for like. A small independent facility may offer more individualized attention but fewer amenities. A larger operation may have multiple play yards and 24-hour staffing but risk turning your dog into a number. Consider what matters most to your dog: socialization, quiet, medical oversight, or predictable routine. Ask about occupancy rates during holidays, and whether long term boarders are separated from short-stay dogs to reduce stress and exposure.

Red flags that warrant walking away Significant maintenance issues such as structural damage, persistent pest problems, or active disease outbreaks should end the conversation. So should a pattern of evasive answers about cleaning protocols, vaccination verification, or emergency vet procedures. If staff seem unfamiliar with individual dogs under their care, or if records are missing, decline to leave your dog. Your choice should balance convenience against the welfare of your dog and the potential cost of neglect.

Final decision strategy After tours, prioritize facilities that offer clear, written policies, transparent pricing, and staff training documentation. Give extra weight to those that invite you to observe a play session and show you their incident logs or health records. If your dog has special needs, verify that the facility has recent experience handling similar cases and can provide references. Trust your instincts: if your dog reacts badly during the tour to the environment or staff, that is information worth listening to.

A personal note from experience I once left a small terrier in a facility that looked immaculate on the tour but revealed chronic understaffing when I picked her up. The kennel smelled clean, but daily notes were sparse and her behavior had shifted. The manager apologized and offered a refund, but the disruption cost us a week of extra behavioral work at home. That experience changed how I evaluate boarding facilities. I now prioritize written protocols, easy access to records, and a willingness to do a short trial stay. The upfront time and scrutiny save time, money, and stress later.

If you need help interpreting a facility's policies or want a sample list of questions to bring on your tour, I can provide a tailored checklist for your dog's size, age, and medical needs.

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