

Hurdling through Space and Time with Two Pet Rabbits

by Nan Gibson

I don't have a dog, cat or singing bird, the only pets cleared to travel in the cabin area of Austrian Airlines. I have two rabbits—Ned, a broken fawn English lop, and Sheba, a black mini-rex. We want to fly from Washington, DC, to the Republic of Georgia where my husband Gene is posted with the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Door to door, the trip will take about twenty-one hours, with short layovers in New York and Vienna. I have flown many international flights, but this will be my first time traveling with pets.

First hurdle: On January 8, the Georgian consulate tells me there are no restrictions on bringing pets into Georgia as long as they have international travel papers.

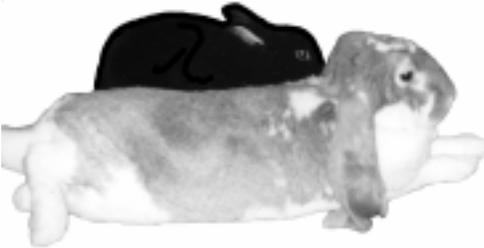
Second hurdle: Delta accepts the rabbits without a fuss, in cargo or cabin. But they explain that only one pet is allowed per passenger in the cabin. Should I split Ned and Sheba up? Or should I place them both in cargo, not knowing if I'll ever see them alive again? At first, I choose to separate the buns, with Sheba in cargo, and Ned in the cabin. But Austrian Airlines requires a special dispensation to allow such a wild animal as Ned among the passengers. To convince Austrian Airlines to accept Ned, I send a fax to their customer service department. I explain patiently that rabbits are clean, quiet animals who make excellent pets.

Third hurdle: Austrian Airlines approves the buns to fly in cargo/cabin to the tune of ninety dollars each. Per each airline's request, I give them the weight and dimensions of the carriers, and the weight of each of the buns.

Fourth hurdle: On March 4, I take the buns to our DC vet for the required check-up and travel certificate. I discuss the travel arrangements with the vet. I change my mind now about separating the buns on the plane. I decide to put them both in the same large carrier in cargo where they can comfort each other during the flight. I notify the airlines.

On the morning of March 11, I line their carrier with layers of towels, and tuck in a recently worn t-shirt. I add water, hay and carrots. At noon, my friend Kathryn arrives to take us to the airport. I am flying now on the

wings of prayer as I snap their carrier shut and load the buns into her car. Am I writing them a death sentence? Will there be dogs in cargo that will terrorize them? At the airport, we attract the attention of other travelers standing in the check-in line. "You are going where?" they ask. "With two what?" The time comes for me to hand Ned and Sheba over to the cargo attendant. Kathryn and I write a note and attach it to the carrier. We explain that Ned and Sheba are on a long trip, and ask that the attendants take good care of them. As the cargo attendant carries them away, Kathryn runs after him and slips him a ten-dollar bill.



Fifth hurdle: On the plane, I ask the flight attendant if my pets are on board. Finally, after we are preparing to taxi down the runway, she approaches me with a grin. "Two rabbits?" she asks, incredulously. "Yes," I say. "Thank you," I add, enormously relieved. On take-off, I reach inside my purse and find my talisman, a Beannie Baby bunny, a good-bye gift from Kathryn. I hold it tightly, my hand in my purse.

Sixth hurdle: After changing planes in New York, I ask again if my pets are on board. "Yes," they answer, "two rabbits?" By the time we are over the ocean, the Beannie Baby is out of my purse and onto my lap. I am a 45-year-old woman stroking a small stuffed animal and talking to myself.

Seventh hurdle: In the morning, I board a much smaller plane for Vienna to Tbilisi, the final leg of the trip. My fatigue is checked by my excitement of seeing my husband and arriving with the buns in Georgia. Before I have a chance to pop the question about whether my pets are on board, the flight attendant smiles and says, "Your rabbits may fly in the cabin with you." I am going to like Georgia, I think to myself. The buns and I settle into a happy re-

union, their carrier wedged into the floor space next to my seat. Soon, food and drinks are served. I drop my tray table with a contented sigh and read the printed menu. First course: marinated you-know-what. I cover the dish with a napkin, a white shroud, and apologize to the buns. We land in Tbilisi, three tired travelers. Gene meets us with flowers, as is the practice here. We zip through customs, then find the agricultural agent to process the buns into the country.

Eighth hurdle: We sit in a windowless office now. I am holding flowers, and Ned and Sheba are in their carrier at my feet. A USAID facilitator is with us. We pass the buns' papers across the desk. The agricultural agent shakes his head. He starts waving his arms and muttering in Georgian. Another agent steps in. They speak loudly now, both shaking their heads. The USAID facilitator explains to us that our travel papers are not in order. I point to the rabbits' names on the form, the date, and the vet's signature. "Ara, ara," they say Georgian for "no." They light cigarettes. A third agent steps in. They show us an example of European travel papers, indicating that this is the form ours should have taken. It finally dawns on me that the agents cannot read our papers, so I point to the words at the very top. Someone translates "International Certificate." The Georgians begin to nod. We begin to smile. We are given clearance to bring the rabbits into the country. But first we have to pay. Another round of discussion ensues, with arms waving and cigarettes dangling. A phone call is made. We have now been in the windowless office for forty-five minutes. It is settled. For sixty lari, or \$30 US dollars, Ned and Sheba may enter Georgia.

Released from the bonds of Georgian bureaucracy, we soon arrive to our new home. I open the carrier and out crawl my two travel weary buns. I am so proud of them. They have crossed the pond and are now official members of an elite club of overseas pets. To dogs, cats, and singing birds, they say, "Move over, guys. There are new kids on the international block." ♡

Thank you to the following people for showing their support for the rabbits by donating up to \$25. Your kind donations are much appreciated.

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