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The 4 best airline-approved cat carriers of 2024, tested and reviewed

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Medically Reviewed 



You'll need one of the best airline-friendly pet carriers to keep your cat safe and comfortable while flying.

Amazon; Sleepypod; Chewy; Diggs/Business Insider

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Air travel with a cat is stressful, but one of the best airline-approved cat carriers can make it easier. When a cat is flying at your feet in the plane cabin, a durable soft-sided carrier with some key features will

ensure your pet's comfort and safety, and your peace of mind.

To select the best carriers for flying with a cat, we spoke with a veterinarian and pet travel experts and tested 24 different airline-friendly pet carriers. Our top pick, the [Sleepypod Air](#), is as durable as it is comfortable for pets and humans alike. If you're looking for a more affordable airline cat carrier, the simple [Frisco Premium Airline Compliant Quilted Carrier Bag](#) will keep your kitty comfortable from the beginning to the end of your journey.

Keep in mind that carrier size requirements vary by airline. [Delta](#), [American Airlines](#), and [United](#) allow pet carriers up to 18 inches (L) by 11 inches (W) by 11 inches (H). Some airlines have smaller maximum sizes, so make sure to check the airline's website before embarking with your pet.

[Read more about how Insider Reviews tests and researches pet products.](#)

Our top picks for the best airline-approved cat carriers

Best overall: Sleepypod Air - [See at Chewy](#)

Best expandable: Mr. Peanut's Gold Series Expandable Carrier - [See at Amazon](#)

Best stylish: Diggs Passenger Travel Carrier - [See at Amazon](#)

Best budget: Frisco Premium Airline Compliant Quilted Carrier

Bag - [See at Chewy](#)

Best overall



Sleepypod Air

The crash-test-certified Sleepypod Air has plush bedding, optimal ventilation, and a roomy interior to keep cats calm and comfortable in the air and on the ground.

[Shop at Chewy](#) ↗ | [Shop at Amazon](#) ↗

[Shop at Sleepypod](#) ↗

What we like

- ✓ Optional privacy screen
- ✓ Double-layered mesh
- ✓ Crash-test certified
- ✓ Ample storage
- ✓ Padded carry handle
- ✓ Washable interior mat
- ✓ Unzips into bed or car seat

What we don't like

- ✗ Carry handle may cause discomfort for those with larger hands due to its small size
- ✗ Expensive

Specifics

Dimensions: 22" L X 10.5" W X 10.5" H

Total ventilation: 40.1%

Weight limit: 18 lbs.

Folds flat for storage: Yes

Available colors:	Nine colors
Warranty:	One-year limited warranty plus lifetime replacement if it's damaged in an auto accident

Our cat testers weren't shy about expressing their clear preference for the Sleepypod Air. During a recent trip to the vet, they both piled into the carrier, opting for its cozy sanctuary over their other carrier. The Sleepypod Air's plush bedding, just-right ventilation, and spacious interior proved calming and comfortable. For skittish fliers, the carrier includes a privacy screen you can slide through the mesh top, though this significantly reduces your cat's access to fresh air.

The carrier stands out for its innovative design and commitment to pet safety — it's certified by the Center for Pet Safety (CPS), a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that researches and crash-tests pet carriers to ensure their safety. Rather than doors, it features one continuous zipper that runs end to end. With one pull of the zipper, the carrier transforms into an open bed, converts into a car seat, or rolls up for convenient storage. It's also designed to fold in approximately 2.5 inches at each end, meeting the size requirements of most major airlines. We recommend practicing compressing the bag before your trip.

The padded cross-body shoulder strap felt supportive, and the carrier rested comfortably against the body without collapsing inward. With the luggage strap, the carrier easily stayed balanced on a suitcase when rolling over curbs and rough sidewalks.

The Sleepypod Air isn't cheap. However, given its versatility, comfort, and impressive safety features, we believe it's well worth the investment. You can return it, used or unused, within a year, and Sleepypod guarantees a replacement if it's damaged in an auto accident.

Best expandable



Mr. Peanut's Gold Series Expandable Carrier

Mr. Peanut's Gold Series Expandable Carrier unzips to almost double in size, providing a cat with extra room on long travel days.

[Shop at Amazon](#) ↗

What we like

- ✓ Front and top-loading carrier
- ✓ Expandable compartment for more space
- ✓ Secure luggage strap
- ✓ Padded detachable shoulder strap
- ✓ Washable interior bed
- ✓ Easy to store

What we don't like

- ✗ Limited pocket space
- ✗ Expandable section can't be used in flight
- ✗ No warranty

Specifics

Dimensions: 18" L X 10.5" W X 11" H

Total ventilation: 24.8%

Weight limit: 15 lbs.

Folds flat for storage: Yes
Available colors: Five
Warranty: No

On long travel days with time spent in airports, Mr. Peanut's Gold Series Expandable Carrier offers jet-setting cats extra space to stretch out. It includes a zippered panel on its right side that unfolds into a mesh atrium that nearly doubles the carrier's interior space. While the expandable section can't be used in flight, this feature makes it the best airline-approved cat carrier for cross-country flights with layovers and extended stays away from home.

The spacious carrier is front- and top-loading with a roll-up privacy flap over the top door, and it offers plenty of ventilation to keep a cat from overheating. Inside, there is a soft plush bolster bed and safety tether. Outside, it has an adjustable padded shoulder strap and a faux leather carry handle. There is one 10-inch by 4-inch mesh pocket on the backside.

With sturdy mesh screens and smooth zippers, Mr. Peanut's carrier excelled in our testing. It was easy to spot clean, and although the bed is labeled hand-wash only, it came out of the washing machine looking nearly new after air-drying.

When we tested the luggage strap, the carrier remained mostly balanced on our suitcase, slipping only about an inch to one side. Carrying it on the shoulder was comfortable, and the strap was easy

to adjust to the correct length.

Best stylish



Diggs Passenger Travel Carrier

The Diggs Passenger Travel Carrier stands out for its eye-catching design that prioritizes safety in the air and at your destination, all without compromising on convenience or comfort.

[Shop at Amazon](#) ↗ | [Shop at Diggs](#) ↗

What we like

- ✓ Padded detachable shoulder strap
- ✓ Padded carry handle
- ✓ Secure luggage strap
- ✓ Multiple pockets
- ✓ Side panel opening for easy access
- ✓ Crash-test certified

What we don't like

- ✗ Offers the least ventilation of the carriers tested
- ✗ Interior mat is spot-clean only
- ✗ Expensive

Specifics

Dimensions: 20" L X 11.5" W X 10.8" H

Total ventilation: 18%

Weight limit: 18 lbs.

Folds flat for storage: No

Available colors: Four

Warranty: One-year limited warranty

The Diggs Passenger Travel Carrier not only looks great but also prioritizes safety. Like the Sleepypod Air, it is crash-test certified by the CPS. It also has an interior safety tether and a zipper-locking mechanism to prevent unintentional openings during transit.

The cushy interior mat provides maximum comfort for your kitty copilot while the padded cross-body and secure luggage straps ensure that your precious cargo has a smooth journey from point A to point B. We also appreciate the thoughtful conveniences for human travelers, including three pockets for storing your or your cat's belongings, including a large 16-inch by 6-inch front zipper pocket. There's a D-ring to clip your keys too.

In case of accidents, the carrier comes with one custom-fitted pee pad (more sold separately) that you can access via a side panel to minimize disturbing your pet. The nylon fabric carrier has a moisture-resistant quality that causes liquids to bead up on contact, so bigger messes won't readily adhere. However, the mat has a bolstered edge where gunk can get stuck, so you'll want to thoroughly spot-clean the interior cushion once you reach your destination.

Despite the carrier's 20-inch length, each side compresses by an inch, ensuring it meets most in-cabin airline regulations. Despite the carrier's 20-inch length, each side compresses by an inch, ensuring it meets most in-cabin airline regulations. The width of the carrier also exceeds airline regulations by a half inch but as long as

you don't overstuff the side pocket, it can compress.

Best budget

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REVIEWS



Best overall

Best expandable

Best stylish

Best budget

What to look for

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Quilted Carrier Bag

This Frisco cat carrier is a cozy and budget-friendly option that holds up well to wear and tear.

[Shop at Chewy](#) ↗

What we like

- ✓ Two loading doors
- ✓ Velcro-secured pocket
- ✓ Washable interior mat
- ✓ Holds large cats
- ✓ Comes with ID tags and collapsible travel dish

What we don't like

- ✗ Shoulder strap lacks padding
- ✗ Luggage strap not as secure as other carriers
- ✗ Only one color option

Specifics

Dimensions: 18" L X 11" W X 11" H

Total ventilation: 24%

Weight limit: 22 lbs.

Folds flat for storage: No

Available colors: Gray

Warranty: One year

Although this carrier is a fraction of the price of our other picks, it still performed well in durability testing. At home, it was also the carrier our tester cats consistently chose to lounge in time and time again. Simply put, the cozy Frisco Premium Airline Compliant Quilted Carrier Bag is an excellent budget airline cat carrier.

Susan Nilson, a cat and dog trainer and behavior specialist, recommends leaving a carrier with the doors open at home so your cat can get accustomed to it before travel. We did just that, and the carrier quickly became one of our cats' favorite spots to nap. Even after machine washing the interior fleece mat, it didn't lose its softness or cat appeal.

The carrier has two doors, top and side, and two storage pockets: a secure Velcro pocket to stash your keys and phone and a mesh pocket to keep your cat's treats and travel documents easily accessible. The included collapsible silicone bowl and ID tag ticks two essentials off your packing list.

The adjustable shoulder strap and carry handle lack padding and may become uncomfortable on longer journeys. Similar to pricier options, the Frisco carrier includes a luggage strap designed to attach the carrier to the telescopic handle of your suitcase. However, the strap doesn't keep the carrier well-balanced on curbs and sidewalks, so you'll want to have a free hand for added support.

What to look for in an airline cat carrier

Cat carriers come in many different styles at varying price points. To ensure you get the best value for safety and comfort, our experts recommend considering the following factors when shopping.

Safety: Unlike child car seats, there are no universal safety standards or inspections for cat carriers. However, some brands go the extra mile by subjecting their carriers to rigorous testing by reputable third-party or nonprofit safety organizations. Among our recommended picks, the Sleepypod Air and Diggs Passenger Travel Carrier have been crash-test certified by the Center for Pet Safety (CPS), a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that studies the safety of pet products.

Currently, CPS studies do not extend to air travel and flight safety. Despite the absence of standardized air travel safety tests, crash-test certification remains the gold standard. As Lindsey Wolko, founder and CEO of CPS, points out, you'll want to consider your entire journey, including driving from your home to the airport and transportation at your destination.

Wolko says carriers are most susceptible to failure at seams where the mesh connects to the carrier body. She recommends inspecting carriers for any signs of loose threads, weak spots, or faulty zippers to ensure their overall safety and reliability throughout transit.

Size: A carrier should be roomy enough for your cat to comfortably turn around and lie down while still being compact enough to fit under the seat in front of you. Carrier size requirements vary by airline, so double-check your airline's specific requirements.

Fortunately, size isn't usually a limiting factor for cats. More often

than not, they prefer to curl up in a small ball and hide during the trip, says [Dr. Jo Myers](#), a veterinarian with Vetster. She says extra room for playing, eating, drinking, or using the litter box during the flight is typically unnecessary. However, if you anticipate a long layover and want extra legroom for your cat, an expandable carrier like Mr. Peanut's Gold Series Expandable Carrier is a good choice.

Weight restrictions: Many in-cabin cat carriers are suitable for cats weighing up to 15 or 18 pounds. If your cat is on the heavier side, double-check the weight limit for the carrier you're considering purchasing and make sure your cat has room to comfortably move around in the carrier.

Ventilation: Most carriers are designed with enough ventilation (at least 16%) to meet the [International Air Transport Association \(IATA\) minimum requirement](#). Some carriers may have less or more, so the amount of ventilation you choose depends on you and your cat's preferences.

Since Myers says most cats prefer to hide in stressful environments, carriers with privacy walls and flaps may be beneficial.

Alternatively, she recommends bringing a towel or blanket that you can place over the carrier if your cat becomes stressed. "Even if you cover the carrier with a towel, it's far from airtight," she says.

"Simply check on your cat occasionally, without disturbing them any more than necessary."

How we tested airline-approved pet carriers





Our cats had plenty of time to explore the cat carriers we tested. Janelle Leeson/Business Insider

We developed our selection and testing criteria for this guide to the best airline-approved cat carriers with advice from our experts. The 24 carriers we evaluated underwent the tests described here.

Feature comparison: After conducting interviews with our experts, we created a point rubric for scoring each carrier based on the following features:

- Shape and design
- Interior mat
- Loading doors
- Carrying straps and handles
- Pockets

- Ventilation
- Privacy flaps
- Interior safety tether
- ID tag
- Luggage strap
- Dimensions and in-cabin airline capability
- Safety certifications
- Ease of storage

Scrape test: We scraped a mesh section of each carrier 50 times with a fork to test its durability, noting any damage or discoloration.

Zip test: To test the durability of each carrier's zippers, we completely zipped and unzipped one of its loading entrances 50 times. In the process, we observed changes in the zipper's ability to smoothly run its course.

Luggage test: If a carrier included a luggage strap, we evaluated how well it remained balanced on top of a suitcase. We placed a 10-pound weight inside and attached the carrier to a suitcase handle so it rested on top of our luggage. Then we rolled it over a curb, up a ramp, and along the sidewalk and street of a city block.

Ventilation test: According to Wolko, ventilation is important to

prevent a cat from overheating during travel. We measured the dimensions of each carrier's mesh panels and calculated the percentage of the total surface area they comprised. We favored bags with more ventilation. According to IATA live animal regulations, pet carrier bags must have a minimum of 16% ventilation.

Walk test: We took each soft-sided carrier containing a 10-pound weight on a 15-minute walk around a neighborhood. Each was carried using the shoulder strap and held at the front of the body the way a person would if they had a real cat inside. For the last block of the walk, we switched to using the hand-carry straps. The backpack carriers were taken on the same walk but were not carried by hand. With each one, we paid attention to how comfortable it was to carry, how much it bounced, and whether it collapsed inwards.

Goop test: We devised this test to determine how easy it would be to clean the carriers if a cat vomited or defecated in transit. We mashed together cat kibble, canned food, and water with a mortar and pestle to make the goop, then spread a tablespoon on an exterior wall and interior mat of each carrier. After 48 hours, we wiped the goop from the exterior using dish soap and water and cleaned the mats in the washing machine.

Drop and stomp tests: We brought the carriers to a local park, loaded each one with a 10-pound weight, and threw them off of a 10-foot play structure, looking for any damage that occurred upon landing. We then rolled the bags several times on the ground with the weight still inside, looking for damage to the stitching, mesh, or zippers. Later, at home, we placed each carrier on a rug and stomped on it a dozen times with bare feet, noting whether its frame changed shape or the bag suffered any other damage.

Airline cat carrier FAQs

What is considered an airline-approved pet carrier?

To fly with a cat in the cabin of a plane, you'll need a soft-sided carrier that fits within the allowable dimensions of the airline, which vary a little from airline to airline. Regardless of the carrier you use, Wolko says to make sure your cat has enough room to stand up, turn around, and lie down comfortably. Additionally, there should be at least 2 to 3 inches of clearance from the top of their ears to the interior roof of the carrier.

How much does it cost to fly with a cat?

Fees for flying with a pet in the cabin of a plane vary between carriers. At [United Airlines](#), a one-way flight for your cat adds \$125 to your ticket price. At [Delta](#), there is a \$95 fee for domestic flights. Flying a cat in the cargo hold on a domestic flight is typically about \$300 per trip. Sending a cat on an international flight can cost up to triple that amount.

How much ventilation should a carrier have?

For soft-sided carriers, Wolko says mesh ventilation should be on at least three sides of the bag. In cargo, airlines require that a kennel is ventilated on all four sides. According to the IATA live animal regulations, both soft- and hard-sided pet carriers must have a minimum of 16% ventilation.

Do cats need to go to the bathroom on a flight?

Unless a cat has a medical condition, they will be fine without access to a litter box for the duration of a flight. "Just based on the physiology of cats, they could probably go from Boston to Hawaii without needing to void," says [Dr. Bob Murtaugh](#), a veterinarian and chair of veterinary medicine for the National Academies of Practice.

In the cargo hold, kennels cannot be outfitted with a litter box or anything other than an absorbent liner and a soft bed or blanket. "If the travel day will be more than eight hours, during a layover pet owners can arrange a comfort stop for cats to be let out of their carrier," says Elaine Mathis, pet travel specialist and project manager at [Happy Tails Travel](#). When you let your cat out of their carrier, you'll want to make sure your cat is safely secured with one of the [best cat harnesses](#) attached to a leash.

Do cats need food and water on a flight?

On shorter in-cabin flights, it's unlikely your cat will require food or water. However, if you're flying your cat in cargo, Mathis says a food bowl and water bowl should be in the carrier regardless of the flight length. She recommends using dishes that fasten to the crate's door and can be refilled easily from the outside, such as [Lixit's Quick Lock Crock 10-ounce bowls](#).

What are the signs that my cat may be in distress in flight?

According to Murtaugh, a few obvious signs may indicate your cat is in distress during a flight, either due to fear or excessive heat. A cat that is panting, restless, and vocalizing could be experiencing significant anxiety or overheating. If the membranes in their gums

turn bright red, the latter is most likely, and it's important to cool them off quickly. If a flight attendant approves, placing the carrier on your lap so they can feel the air blowing from the vent above your seat or wiping them down with a wet cloth may help lower their body temperature. Before your travel, Nilson recommends lightly spraying the carrier with calming pheromones.

How to prepare a cat for flying

In the weeks before their trip, introduce your cat to their carrier or kennel in a positive way. "Make the carrier feel like a cave or a home or something that's comfortable, something that they're not just jammed into the first time they're on their way to the airport," says Murtaugh.

Place the carrier in an area of the home where your cat spends a lot of time and encourage them to explore it by placing catnip and treats inside or by playing with them in and around the space.

Murtaugh says that taking your cat on a car ride or other forms of transportation while in their carrier may also be helpful in the weeks before the flight. He recommends placing a bed or blanket that smells like home inside the carrier and using a pheromone spray or collar to help take the edge off.

If your cat has a history of experiencing debilitating stress during travel and will be flying in the cabin, you can speak to your vet about prescribing an anxiety-relieving medication. However, it's important to test medication out before your flight. "Make sure there won't be any untoward side effects," says Murtaugh. "Your vet can

help you tailor that to your cat's needs."

The IATA recommends against sedating a cat before flying in the cargo hold. It can be fatal for older, chronically sick, or highly stressed animals. Nilson says calming pheromones such as Feliway or Pet Remedy are safe alternatives.

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