

[Couple is taking wheels and wags on the road](#)

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Staff Writer

Amy and Rod Burkert hopped in their tricked-out Winnebago this weekend and set out with their two best friends in search of the country's best vacation spots – for people with pets.



Clark Van Orden/The Times Leader

Amy and Rod Burkert of Weatherly with their pets, Ty and Buster, have started a new business for people who want to travel with their pets. They are traveling in an RV as they research.

The couple's traveling companions are Ty, a 5-year-old Shar-Pei, and Buster, a 2-year-old German shepherd. And trying to find hotels to accommodate them and their dogs on a fishing trip to Canada two years ago led to a new career path and way of life for the Foster Township couple.

"We sat down that July and started to make travel plans and determined we needed to stay in seven different hotels on our circular road trip. It took me two full days to find the seven hotels we would stay in because of the way the Web sites were," Amy said.

Web sites that advertised hotels as "pet friendly" didn't necessarily indicate if they charged extra for pets, if there were weight or breed restrictions or if they allowed two dogs in one room.

"I kept saying to Rod, 'This is crazy. People aren't going to take the time to do this. They'll just take their pet to a kennel because it's just not easy enough to plan a trip with their pets.' So, we got home, looked at other Web sites, did more research on what was out there for pet friendliness and we just decided we were going to make it easier for people to travel with their pets," Amy said.

And that's how "gopetfriendly.com" was born.

The Burkerts, who describe themselves as "recovering accountants," said goodbye to their careers as business appraisers and devoted their work-day attention to their searchable Web site – think Expedia or Travelocity for dogs ... and cats ... and birds, ferrets and pot-bellied pigs – even lions, tigers and bears. Oh, my!

Statistics show that dogs are by far the most popular travel companion, followed by cats and birds, Amy said. But their research covers the gamut of feathered and furry critters. "When you see these animals on 'The Tonight Show' and 'David Letterman,' they have to be housed somewhere," she said.

The Web site will generate revenue in two ways, Rod said – through advertisements and through commissions generated when people book their stays through the site. And given the economy, a lot of people are interested in taking shorter, driving vacations that are amenable to pets.

As the couple started the Web site, the economy was starting to tank, Rod said. Rather than misfortune, they saw opportunity.

“You had people that wanted to travel but couldn’t afford to. And if they did, they came back and had a several hundred dollar bill from a kennel. So now, there are a lot more accommodations opening themselves up to pets because the economy is so bad and all these places of hospitality are trying to attract travelers. And the traveler with a pet has money to spend and there are a lot of them,” he said.

The Burkerts expanded their Web site from solely hotel booking and information to include campgrounds. Then they expanded it some more.

“We didn’t want people to get to their hotel or campground and then be stuck there, so we did a bunch more research and found all kinds of pet-friendly things to do and places to go – wineries, shopping centers, beaches, restaurants with outdoor seating, off-leash dog parks — all kinds of attractions, anything we could find where you could take your pet – and we put it on our Web site,” Amy said.

Rod said he and Amy want to “spread the word about how easy it can be to travel with your pet. But I said to Amy, ‘You can’t really tell people how to travel with your pet if you’re sitting in an office behind a computer. You actually have to do it.’ We decided the best way to do that would be to buy an RV, travel around and blog about the things we see and do with our pets in different cities.”

In case you haven’t figured it out yet, the Burkerts are big proponents of vacationing with your pets.

“Amy’s big saying is that many people work really, really hard throughout the year, and their pets don’t get the attention. And when they finally have two or three weeks of vacation time, they leave the dog at home, either in a kennel or with a friend. ... And pets pick up on body language. So at the time of year when they can see you the most relaxed, the most happy, the most easygoing, you’ve left them behind,” Rod said.

The career change for the Burkerts wasn’t just about the Web site or their pet philosophy.

“I’ll be turning 54 in July. And there were things that sound so silly to say, like I’ve not seen Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon or Mount Rushmore and, at the rate we were going, I was never going to get the time off to see those places,” Rod said.

“This business is as much about helping people travel with their pets as it is for us to completely redesign our lifestyle and do something different,” he said.

The Burkerts plan to spend 70 to 80 percent of their time – about three weeks per month – on the road with Ty and Buster in their Winnebago, updating their Web site, posting blogs as they go, and meeting other pet-friendly travelers along the way, Amy, 36, said.

Generally, they’ll head north in the summer and south in the winter, stopping here and there to visit family and friends. Other than that, they don’t really have an itinerary.

“That’s the whole point of this trip,” Amy said, “to not have a plan.”

JOIN THE RIDE

You can follow the Burkerts’ progress at

www.gopetfriendlyblog.com.

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