

HOSPITALITY ON A LEASH: A STUDY OF THE ONLINE VISIBILITY, AVAILABILITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF PET-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATIONS IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. – Hospitality on a Leash: a Study of the Online Visibility, Availability and Distribution of Pet-Friendly Accommodations in Romania.

The present paper explores the growing phenomenon of pet travel within contemporary tourism, focusing on the preferences of dog owners and the operational implications for hospitality and destination management. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature and empirical data from Romania, the paper examines the emotional, logistical, and structural factors shaping pet-inclusive travel, emphasizing both opportunities and challenges. A central theme is the disconnect between increasing demand and the pet-friendly infrastructure in destinations. The study provides an analysis of the spatial distribution of pet-friendly accommodations across Romanian counties using publicly available data from major travel platforms. Uneven patterns are revealed: while urban centers and major tourist destinations dominate in absolute numbers, true inclusivity remains rather localized and fragmented. Four county typologies emerge based on the intersection of total accommodation numbers and promoted pet-friendliness, pointing to both strategic opportunities and infrastructural gaps. Despite Romania's rising domestic pet travel demand, it still lags behind many EU countries in terms of online-listed pet-friendly options. The paper concludes by advocating for a systemic, ethical approach that balances economic potential with environmental sustainability and animal welfare, framing pet travel as part of broader cultural geographies of mobility, inclusion, and human-animal relations.

Keywords: *tourism, pet, dog owner, pet-friendly, accommodation unit, mobility.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, societal perceptions of companion animals have undergone a significant transformation. Once mostly confined to the private space and receiving limited recognition, pets are now widely regarded as integral members of the family (Carr and Cohen, 2009; Ying et al., 2021; Hidalgo-Fernandez et al., 2023; Ramos-Ruiz et al., 2024) and, in many cases, even compared to children, as several scholars have previously noted (Mlakar and Korže, 2022; Buhalis and Chan, 2023).

This cultural shift is reflected in both the rising global rates of pet ownership and the rapid expansion of pet-related consumer markets, a trend that has accelerated further since the COVID-19 pandemic, and is still anticipated to grow further. For example, projections made in 2020 for the United States estimate that the dog population will increase from 85 million to over 100 million by 2030, with the share of households owning at least one dog expected to rise from 38% to 45% over the same period (AVMA, 2020). This growth parallels the expansion in the pet industry. According to the American Pet Products Association (2025), total pet-related expenditures in the U.S. (including food, supplements, veterinary care, grooming, boarding, training, walking services, insurance, and other services) reached \$151.9 billion in 2024.

This trend is not confined to the United States; according to a report by the European Pet Food Industry Federation (FEDIAF), 166 million households in Europe have at least one pet, with 25% of all households owning at least one dog; thus, the dog population across Europe stands at approximately 106.4 million, with a population of 68.6 million located within the EU member states. The pet food sector alone represents a market of €29.2 billion, with an annual growth rate of 9% (FEDIAF, 2024).

According to the same report, Romania ranks eighth among EU countries in terms of total dog population, with 4.24 million dogs. It follows Germany (10.6 million), Spain (9.31 million), Italy (8.76 million), Poland (8.11 million), and France (7.6 million). However, when considering the proportion of households owning dogs, the situation is a bit different, Romania being in third place, with 45% of households owning at least one dog. It is surpassed only by Hungary (50%) and Poland (49%), and it is followed by Czechia (42%), and Portugal and Slovenia (both at 39%).

The rise in dog ownership in Romania can be observed through official veterinary and registration data. According to the national Registry of Dogs with Owners (RECS), the number of dogs receiving the (mandatory) rabies vaccine increased from 2,549,558 in January 2018 to 3,656,725 in 2024. This trend is further supported by data on newly registered dogs within RECS, which

show a steady annual increase beginning in 2019. Notably, the number of dogs registered in 2023 nearly doubled compared to the previous year, 631,445 dogs being registered in 2023, compared to 332,185 in 2022. Early figures from March 2024, with 212,855 dogs already registered, suggest this upward trend has most probably continued. It is important to contextualize these figures as a historical peak in dog registrations had occurred in 2015, when 1,105,908 dogs were recorded. However, this surge was largely driven by the enforcement of regulations issued in 2014 by Romania's National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (ANSVSA), which made the identification and registration of owned dogs via microchipping mandatory. The 2015 figures most probably reflect a one-time adjustment, as many pre-existing dogs were microchipped and brought into compliance. Despite the legal requirement, underreporting and non-compliance remain relevant challenges, particularly in rural areas, where many dogs still go without being chipped. Since a dog cannot legally receive a rabies vaccine unless microchipped, these figures offer a strong, though still approximate, indicator of the dynamics of the dog population in Romanian households.

The shift in the perception of companion animals to the point that they "are playing a central role" in their owners' lives (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008), has also been accompanied by a growing interest in including pets (especially dogs, and to a lesser extent cats) in a wide range of human activities, including leisure and travel. As a result, traveling with pets has become more mainstream, more increasingly visible, and is in the process of being socially normalized. Pets are now often regarded as "important travel partners" (Ying et al., 2021).

Until the late 2000s, the role of pets in their owners' travel plans was rarely acknowledged in tourism research or industry practice (Ying et al., 2021). Kirillova et al. (2015) were among the early scholars to highlight a growing number of individuals who wished to travel with their pets, particularly dogs. Despite this emerging demand, the authors noted that pet-friendly tourism offerings remained relatively limited at the time.

Drawing on previous studies, Kirillova et al. (2015) also observed that hoteliers (particularly in the luxury and economy segments) had begun to experiment with pet-friendly services, though such efforts were less common in midscale and upscale establishments. Their findings also revealed a rather wide range of pet-friendly practices, from simply allowing pets in rooms to more comprehensive services such as offering treats, providing additional amenities, or employing trained staff capable of walking pets on request.

Later, Mlakar and Korže (2022) emphasized that "pet owners who travel with their pets have become one of the fastest growing tourism segments". The evolution of pet-friendly tourism from a niche, or underserved segment, to a more structured and marketable offering has been further documented by

Müller et al. (2024). The authors note that as pets became increasingly recognized as part of their owners' lifestyles, the tourism sector began adapting to this demand by developing more specialized services and experiences. Müller et al. (2024) also cite earlier surveys conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom, which found that over 40% of pet owners expressed a desire to bring their pets along on holiday. Higher figures appear in their own case study involving 553 Hungarian dog owners that showed that 79% of respondents reported usually traveling with their dogs (Müller et al., 2024). Moreover, Carr and Cohen's (2009) study of Australian dog owners found that only 4.2% of its respondents would rather not bring their dog on holiday with them.

The present paper explores the phenomenon of pet-accompanied travel in Romania, a topic that has received little to no academic attention to date, with a particular focus on accommodations as a key for understanding how this trend is developing. This study focuses exclusively on pet dogs and does not include service dogs, which, at least in theory, are governed by different regulations and are typically granted broader access rights in different public settings and facilities.

While Romania mirrors the broader European rise in pet ownership and increasing integration of pets into everyday life, there is a notable absence of studies examining how this shift translates into tourism behaviours, specifically, the motivations and preferences of travellers who wish to include pets in their journeys.

Grounded in a geographical approach to tourism studies, this research investigates how accommodations in Romania respond to and shape pet-friendly travel, treating companion animals not as passive accessories but as active co-travellers. Their inclusion can reconfigure related spatial practices and the very notion of hospitality. By shedding some light on this underexplored segment, the study aims to contribute to a growing body of literature that examines human-animal relations in tourism, while also laying groundwork for future research on the experiences and needs of tourists traveling with pets in Romania, as well as in the field of spatial planning, addressing the need of *shared spaces* at tourist destinations.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the geographic and touristic dimensions of pet-accompanied travel in Romania, focusing on pet dogs. The research integrates targeted literature review and data acquiring to explore how Romanian tourism infrastructures, particularly accommodation units, shape the feasibility of traveling with companion dogs.

Tourism accommodation data were collected from major online booking platforms, including booking.com, tripadvisor.com, and travelminit.ro. The use of such platforms in this study not only reflects current market realities but also allows for the collection of geographically disaggregated data, supplementing official tourism statistics and offering some nuanced insights. These platforms were selected due to their growing role as primary mediators between tourists and service providers, particularly in the post-pandemic era, which has seen a notable shift toward digital planning of travels. As noted by Hoy et al. (2023a), 66% of global travel and tourism revenue in 2021 was generated through online sales sites, with online hotel bookings growing at an annual rate of 10.3%.

Data were retrieved manually at the national and subnational level, focusing on Romania's counties and their major municipalities. Accommodations were selected based on the availability of pet-friendly services as advertised on these platforms, allowing for a comparative assessment across counties.

Booking.com was chosen as the primary data source due to its wide coverage and functionality (capacity to filter accommodations by specific amenities such as pet allowance). While official tourism statistics provided by the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship, and Tourism enumerate the total number of licensed accommodation units by county, they do not register amenity-level data such as pet accessibility (or such data is just not publicly available online). A comparison between the number of listings on Booking.com and the Ministry's registry reveals a relatively strong alignment in terms of regional distribution – suggesting that the platform provides a reasonable proxy for the overall accommodation supply. In contrast, other platforms such as Travelminit, while important in the local market, displayed notable regional discrepancies (e.g., Harghita listed more than twice the number of accommodations as Bucharest), likely due to platform-specific registration patterns. Booking.com offers a sufficiently representative base for assessing the availability of pet-friendly accommodations *as encountered by typical users planning a holiday in Romania*.

It is important to acknowledge though that the number of accommodation units listed as pet-friendly on such platforms is inherently dynamic (figures fluctuate depending on the date of search, seasonal closures, changes in property status etc.). Thus, the numbers cited in this study reflect specific snapshots of the platform, collected in two moments, April and May, 2025. The search was performed without being logged in, for one room, for a flexible date in July, August or September 2025.

In addition to platform-based data, a literature review was conducted. While not exhaustive, the review focused on international studies that examine the motivations and behaviors of pet-owning tourists, the evolution of pet-

friendly services, and the spatial implications of traveling with animals. These studies, some originating from contexts with similar socio-economic and cultural trajectories, and some performed in countries from which tourists travel to Romania, help address gaps in the Romanian tourism literature, particularly given the apparent absence, to the best of my knowledge, of domestic studies on this topic.

Together, these methods provide a framework for analyzing the pet travel phenomenon, situating accommodations not only as service nodes but as critical geographic markers that reflect broader trends in inclusion, hospitality, and mobility. After all, in the context of pet travel, mobility is *not just about movement* but about *who or what is allowed to move or stay*, how, and under what *constraints*. Accommodation infrastructure plays a key role in mediating the possibilities of pet travel as the ability to move with a companion dog is shaped not only by rules and regulations, or by cultural beliefs or mentality, but mostly by the mere availability of pet-friendly lodging services. Thus, the presence or absence of pet-friendly accommodation infrastructure is often the decisive factor in shaping the geography of where and how pet travel is possible.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. *Motivations and constraints in traveling with dogs*

Traveling with dogs is shaped by both practical constraints and owners' motivations. The motivations within this market segment are, to a large extent, emotionally driven and straightforward: pet owners are happier when in company of their pets, and often perceive the travel experience as more rewarding/more enjoyable in their presence, hence they prefer bringing the dogs along; conversely, when unable to bring their pets, owners report feelings of guilt and worry (Carr and Cohen, 2009; Kirillova et al., 2015).

The decision to travel with one's dog is closely tied to the strength of the human-animal bond, the emotional valuation of the pet, and the pet's role within the household; Yilmaz (2023) highlights that those individuals with a stronger emotional connection to their pets (especially single people, child-free couples, and those with higher incomes) are more inclined to travel with them. Similarly, Mlakar and Korže (2022), in a survey of Slovenian pet owners, found that this demographic often "completely adapt[s] their trips or vacation to the needs of their animal" even if most participants reported traveling with their pets for leisure purposes, rather than for dog exhibitions or family visits. The distinction the authors make is worth emphasizing: when travel is motivated

by dog sport events (search and rescue trials, monioring, agility competitions etc.) or dog shows, owners or handlers tend to invest additional effort in selecting accommodations that are convenient to the competition venue, provide a quiet environment, offer appropriate walking areas etc. In contrast, trips for family visits may be more easily managed when both the dog and owner are hosted by relatives, thus reducing the logistical burden.

Pet-friendliness becomes a key factor in choosing destinations, accommodations, and transportation modes (Yilmaz, 2023). In this context, the pet is no longer a passive travel companion, but a co-traveler that influences every layer of the travel experience. Moreover, pet well-being is very important to most pet owners, who may cancel or modify their travel plans if their pet cannot be properly accommodated or welcomed at the destination; on the other hand, when destinations prove to be welcoming and offer suitable facilities for pets, owners are likely to extend their stay (Kirillova et al., 2015).

Despite these motivations, numerous challenges still hinder pet-inclusive travel, many of which are determined or amplified by cultural, legal, and spatial planning inconsistencies. According to Ying et al. (2021), traveling with pets involves logistical and financial issues that often surpass those of conventional tourism, mostly because of animals' dependence on human care and the limited tourist infrastructure accepting their presence.

Multiple studies (Chen et al., 2014; Ying et al., 2021; Yilmaz, 2023 etc.), point to three major categories of constraints:

Pet-specific constraints: these include health issues, behavioral issues or training deficits, including lack of socialization, and safety concerns: immediate dangers (for example, in Romania, a common concern among dog-owning hikers might be encountering sheep flocks guarded by aggressive dogs) or risks of contracting diseases.

Interpersonal constraints: these include concerns about potential negative social interactions, lack of time to properly care for the pet during the trip (in the absence of extra services, such as dog walking), the added pressure from balancing leisure and responsibility etc.

Owner-related constraints can be deeply social and shaped by the cultural context in which pet tourism occurs. Pet owners may face negative social interactions, such as complaints from other tourists or unfriendly behaviour from passersby, particularly in regions where animals in public places are not widely accepted. These interactions are often rooted in cultural attitudes toward animals, which vary significantly across and within countries. In places where pets are commonly viewed as family members, mostly in Western Europe, dogs may be welcomed in restaurants, public transport, or parks. However, in societies where animals are traditionally kept outdoors or associated with "work" (not in the sense of service or dog sports), such as in some rural Romanian

communities, bringing pets into public or enclosed spaces may be seen as inappropriate or even offensive. These tensions can cause stress or discomfort for pet owners, who may feel the need to justify or attenuate their pet's presence by altering their own behaviour to avoid conflict, thereby complicating their travel experience.

Structural constraints: these are the most frequently cited concerns in the literature, including the limited availability of pet-friendly accommodations, poor diversity in types of pet-friendly accommodation, poor diversity in service offerings, inconsistent legal regulations, a lack of accessible information, or no safe places to walk the dog. In rural Romania, for instance, there are usually no designated walking areas for dogs, and local free-roaming dogs can make walks unpleasant or even unsafe. Restrictions on bringing pets into public transportation or museums, lack of short-term pet care options (such as daycare facilities) in resorts and limited access to dog-friendly urban parks further complicate the issue. The lack of information regarding such aspects is also very discouraging to dog owners, as it also makes the process of planning a vacation with the dog much more complex and stressful (Hoy, Stangl, and Morgan, 2023b)

Ying et al. (2021) also introduced the concept of *learned helplessness* in the context of pet travel. When owners face repeated obstacles (ranging from initial planning to in place experiences) they may develop this sense of frustration and anxiety; this in turn can lead to trip cancellation or reduced duration of the overall stay. However, more recent research argues that accumulating experience in traveling with dogs builds more confidence in one's ability to obtain necessary information (Hoy, Stangl, and Morgan, 2023b). Many dog owners also tend to seek direct confirmation from hosts regarding pet-related matters, mainly due to distrust in the reliability of available online information (Koufodontis and Melissourgou, 2024).

Carr and Cohen (2009) note that not finding dog-friendly accommodation may discourage dog owners from taking holidays altogether, rather than simply choosing to travel without their pets. Notably, 82.9% of their respondents reported modifying their holiday plans to accommodate their dogs. These findings underscore a clear message for tourism industry stakeholders: the pet-travel market is significant and determined, but as, Hoy, Stangl, and Morgan (2023b) note, it is frequently underestimated or overlooked.

Despite the various logistical and structural challenges associated with traveling with pets, many owners (especially those with higher incomes) are willing to invest significant effort and financial resources to include their animals in holiday plans (Kirillova et al., 2015). In fact, the willingness to pay more in order to be able to travel with dogs and to ensure their comfortable accommodation is well documented (Hoy, Stangl, and Morgan, 2023a; Buhalis and Chan, 2023; Hidalgo-Fernandez et al., 2023 etc.).

Still, as Tomassini (2022) points out, despite some progress, oftentimes the hospitality industry continues to just accept pets only for the sake of customer satisfaction, while still limiting their presence to animals that are “small, silent, and tidy”. This approach prevents the sector from exploring the full potential of genuinely integrating animals into hospitality spaces which could lead to more innovative, inclusive, and enriched travel experiences for everyone involved.

3.2. Operational and market implications of pet-inclusive travel

Literature consistently reports that the growing desire to travel with pets has significantly outpaced the development of consistent and balanced regulations, accessible infrastructure, and culturally inclusive practices across tourism destinations.

Pet-friendly tourism needs more than just tolerant policies, it requires destinations to welcome the pets rather than just allow them to enter the premises (Hoy, Stangl and Morgan, 2023b), to support shared human-animal leisure through features like pet-accommodating transportation or accommodation, pet-oriented services, and “shared outdoor leisure spaces” (SOLS). As Hoy, Stangl, and Morgan (2024) note, these SOLS (e.g. dog beaches, forests or parks), are preferred by UK dog owners because of their accessibility, multisensory appeal for dogs, and opportunities for off-leash activity and socialization. These spaces foster a dual benefit: they enable dogs to “be dogs,” while simultaneously supporting human activities like walking, running, or meditating (Hoy, Stangl, and Morgan, 2024). Westgarth et al. (2021) provide further insight into leisure activities with dogs, distinguishing between functional walks (driven by the pet’s needs) and recreational walks (which benefit both pet and owner, typically in more scenic, natural settings). Within tourism contexts (where the environment is usually more scenic or engaging), routine walks can thus be elevated to meaningful leisure experiences, enhancing wellbeing for both parties. Accordingly, destinations that support safe, scenic, and accessible recreational walking environments are very likely to attract tourists with pets.

Despite this potential, pet-related infrastructure remains inconsistently distributed. In Romania, we can note that while cities like Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca have made efforts to integrate dog parks into urban planning, secondary cities and rural settings most often lack designated green spaces and basic pet-related amenities, such as waste stations. However, the absence of such infrastructure has not yet become a critical deterrent for most travelers, unlike the more pressing issue of accommodation, a decisive factor in enabling or discouraging travel with pets.

Turning to the perspective of accommodation providers, Kirillova et al. (2015) emphasize that implementing pet-friendly policies offers clear competitive advantages, with evidence showing increased guest loyalty (this segment tends to be more loyal to establishments that *treat their pets well*) and longer average stays (2.56 nights for pet owners versus 2.1 nights for guests without pets). This is further reinforced by the pet owners' documented willingness to spend more on pet-friendly hospitality and shared activities with their pet. Yet, as Carr and Cohen (2009) note, the tourism studies were still approaching pets as accessories to their owners and not as "potential consumers who are able to influence decision making processes".

In many cases, hospitality managers who are themselves pet owners can better anticipate and meet the nuanced needs of this market segment (Buhalis and Chan, 2023). These managers tend to implement more empathetic and balanced pet policies for both pet-owners and guests that are not traveling with pets. Pet-friendly policies that do not require any fundamental efforts from the accommodation units might include providing maps with the suitable and safe walking places, that include suggestions of activities to do with the dog, promoting a welcoming attitude among staff toward visiting dogs etc. (Hoy, Stangl, and Morgan, 2023b).

Managers of accommodation units tend to recognize the long-term potential of investing in pet-friendly services, as the request for pet friendly lodging will continue to rise (Buhalis and Chan, 2023), and in fact, the number of destinations promoting themselves as dog-friendly to attract this new market sector is steadily growing (Ramos-Ruiz et al., 2024).

Yet, accommodating pets also introduces potential challenges that must be acknowledged. Kirillova et al. (2015) point out that not all guests are comfortable with the presence of animals in hotels or restaurants; some might have concerns about hygiene (or even have allergies), or a general perception of *disrespect*. As many as 34% of respondents in a study group of tourists without pets indicated that they would prefer to avoid encountering animals at their accommodation (Koufodontis and Melissourgou, 2024).

While it is important for all guests - with or without dogs (and staff) to share the tourist space, it is the responsibility of the accommodation provider in the first place to consider all expectations of all guests and come up with feasible solutions (separate floors, pet-free elevators etc.) if deciding to function as a pet friendly unit (Koufodontis and Melissourgou, 2024). In fact, to strike a balance, some U.S. hotel chains have adopted practices such as designating specific floors for guests with pets or offering outdoor dining options to accommodate pet owners without alienating customers that are not as dog-friendly (Kirillova et al., 2015).

Another aspect that units must acknowledge is that operationally, pet-friendly status can also add expenses, as pet-friendly rooms require more intensive cleaning to eliminate allergens, and that housekeeping can become more complicated when animals are aggressive or untrained (Kirillova et al., 2015).

Still, destinations and accommodations that invest thoughtfully in pet-friendly strategies stand to gain significantly, not just financially, but in cultivating loyalty and expanding access to a growing tourism demographic. The challenge lies in finding equilibrium: maximizing appeal to pet-owning tourists while maintaining comfort and inclusivity for all guests. However, well planned regulations do help with the predicament, in Slovenia, for example, the interaction between guests and pets being formally regulated by a hospitality-specific by-law, which offers a model for regulatory clarity (Mlakar and Korže, 2022).

3.3. Distribution of pet-friendly accommodations units in Romania

This section examines the distribution and accessibility of pet-friendly accommodations in Romania, drawing on data from major online travel platforms. The analysis focuses on how pet-related “amenities”, in this case, the *allowance* of companion animals in lodging facilities, are presented in the touristic offer across different counties, highlighting both opportunities and gaps in the current Romanian tourism supply accessible online.

Data were manually collected from major online travel platforms, primarily Booking.com, with comparative reference to Travelminit.ro and Tripadvisor.com. These sources were selected due to their accessibility to the general public and their ability to reflect the online offer most likely to influence travelers’ choices, especially among pet owners seeking convenience and clarity regarding animal-related policies.

While Booking.com was chosen as the primary source for its extensive coverage and relative alignment with official tourism registration data, the temporal and algorithmic variabilities require cautious interpretation. The analysis is therefore best understood as indicative of the visible and accessible online offer rather than a fixed structural inventory.

The absolute numbers of listings varied slightly between the two data collections (April and May, 2025), reflecting the dynamic nature of Booking.com's inventory, however, the proportional distributions remained broadly consistent. This analysis therefore emphasizes percentage values, which offer a more stable comparative basis across counties. Readers should interpret the data with caution, understanding that minor fluctuations are a feature of online booking platforms rather than real shifts in the accommodation landscape.

As of the data collection period (May, 2025), 24,854 Romanian accommodation units were listed on Booking.com, of which 6,360 explicitly

allowed pets, representing roughly 25.5% of the total. Comparable proportions were observed on Travelminit.ro (2,514 out of 10,806), and significantly fewer on Tripadvisor.com (498 out of 2,989), reinforcing the need to treat these figures as indicative rather than absolute. Nonetheless, these platforms collectively offer a valuable proxy for understanding how visible, accessible, and regionally distributed pet-friendly accommodation is for domestic and international travelers alike.

The spatial distribution of pet-friendly accommodations reveals an unsurprisingly pronounced clustering in established tourist regions and urban centers. Constanța County, encompassing the Black Sea coast major resorts, leads in absolute numbers (with 809 pet-friendly listings at the time of access), followed by Bucharest (703) and Brașov County (604). In addition to the leading counties, nine others (Cluj, Sibiu, Suceava, Maramureș, Prahova, Bihor, Harghita, Mureș and Iași) each host over 200 pet-friendly accommodations, while eight more exceed 100 units, and five more exceed 50 units. The remaining counties report fewer than 50 accommodation units, indicating a strong center-periphery divide and broader socio-economic and infrastructural gaps in Romania's tourism landscape.

When evaluated in terms of the proportion of pet friendly accommodations and the total accommodations per county, four distinct typologies emerge (fig 1). The thresholds used for the diagram (and the typology) were 500 units for the total number of accommodation units and 30% for the share of pet-friendly units.

- **High Availability, High Inclusivity.** Suceava, Maramureș, Tulcea, Harghita, Alba, and Neamț counties demonstrate both a strong overall accommodation supply and a high percentage of units accepting pets. These destinations appear particularly well-positioned to attract pet-traveling tourists without requiring substantial additional investment.

- **High Availability, Low Inclusivity.** Despite boasting large numbers of total accommodation units, counties like Constanța, Brașov, Cluj, Sibiu, Prahova, Bihor or Timiș, and the city of Bucharest, exhibit percentual low pet-friendliness. These areas, anchored by major cities, may reflect institutional conservatism, lack of managerial awareness, or perceived tensions between pet-related amenities and upscale or business-oriented tourism. This cluster suggests considerable room for growth in pet accommodation services, particularly given the developed already existing tourism infrastructure.

- **Low Availability, High Inclusivity.** A number of less central or smaller counties, such as Iași, Caraș-Severin, Bistrița-Năsăud, and Covasna, display high rates of pet-friendliness despite having fewer total accommodation units. These areas may appeal to niche markets in this already niche market sector, like eco-tourists traveling with dogs, or domestic travelers who value inclusivity over abundance.

• **Low Availability, Low Inclusivity.** Counties such as Arad, Călărași, Galați, or Vaslui, currently lack both sufficient accommodation volume and pet-oriented amenities. These economically marginalized or transit-heavy regions represent the most significant infrastructural gap for pet tourism in Romania and may require targeted incentives or development programs to become more accessible.

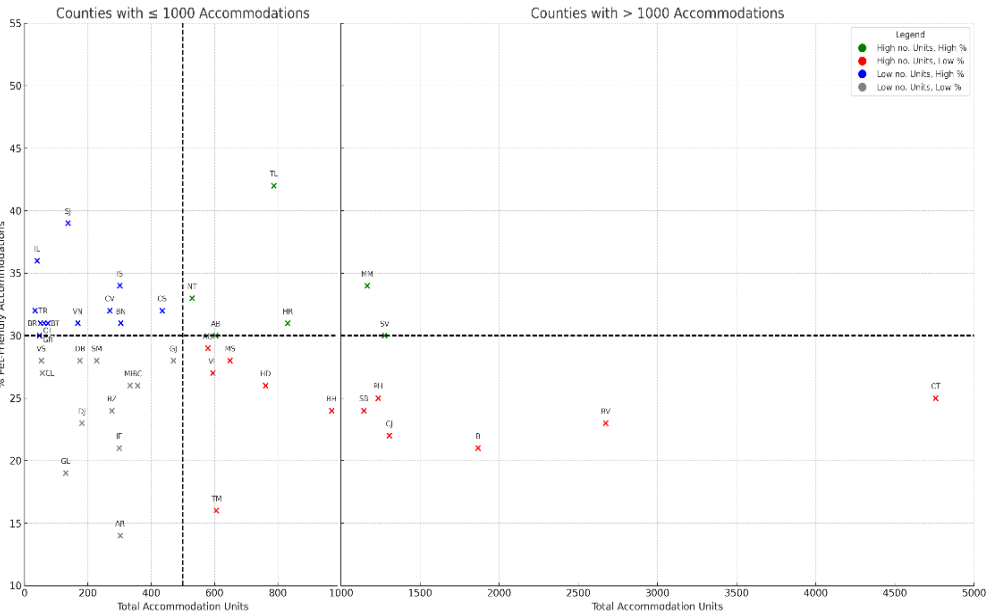


Fig. 1. Clustering of counties based on overall accommodation infrastructure (data sourced from the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship, and Tourism) and the percentage of accommodations with a dog-friendly policy (as listed on Booking.com, data retrieved in May 2025).

Note: data retrieved in April 2025 showed the same clustering pattern, with the exception of just two counties: Alba and Vaslui.

This uneven geographic distribution underscores that although urban centers dominate in absolute numbers, true pet-friendliness remains patchy and highly localized. As pet-inclusive travel continues to grow, the hospitality sector has both a strategic and ethical opportunity to expand its offer more equitably, particularly in regions underserved by current infrastructure.

While the overall figures might seem encouraging, another note is necessary: Romania ranks in the lower quarter of EU countries in terms of the share of pet-friendly accommodations listed online. Its percentage of 25.5%, places Romania alongside the Netherlands and just above Cyprus, Portugal,

Ireland, and Malta. In contrast, several northern and central European countries, such as Sweden, Austria, and Finland, show pet-friendly rates of 50% or higher. Yet again, it is important to note that this data reflects a specific moment in time (May, 2025) and is based solely on online listings from Booking.com. As such, it captures the immediately visible offer for tourists rather than the full extent of pet-friendly hospitality infrastructure in each country.

4. Conclusions

This study highlights the growing significance of pet travel within contemporary tourism, underscoring the complex interplay of emotional bonds, infrastructure, cultural attitudes, and economic opportunities. While the desire to travel with pets reflects meaningful human-animal relationships, it also reveals significant challenges, ranging from logistical constraints and social acceptance to environmental and ethical considerations.

With the growing prevalence of pet tourism, its environmental impact, particularly through increased carbon emissions (most people traveling with dogs preferring to travel by car rather than train) and possible ecological disturbances in sensitive natural areas (which can however be avoided with proper management of both dogs and space), demands greater attention. However, the potentially longer stays of travellers accompanied by dogs may support sustainability by reducing the frequency and intensity of high-impact, short-term travel (Palinkas, Kinczel, and Muller, 2024). Moreover, the ethical imperative to ensure animal well-being during travel calls for a nuanced approach that respects pets not merely as companions but as sentient beings with specific needs and vulnerabilities. The uneven enforcement of regulations and cultural variability further complicate these issues, especially in regions where pet inclusivity is still emerging.

A key contribution of this study lies in its analysis of how pet-friendly accommodations are distributed across Romanian counties. Using data collected from Booking.com and other major platforms, this section goes beyond official statistics to highlight regional disparities not only in the volume of accommodations, but also in their inclusivity toward pet owners. The findings reveal a nuanced picture: certain counties with strong tourism infrastructure remain relatively exclusive, while smaller or less central counties often display higher rates of pet-friendliness. Though not a spatial analysis in the strict sense, the data-driven clustering of counties underscores an uneven and often overlooked layer of accessibility that is increasingly relevant as pet-inclusive travel becomes more mainstream.

Looking ahead, integrating pet needs into spatial planning represents a promising path toward more inclusive and sustainable mobility. Cities that prioritize pet-friendly infrastructure exemplify how human and animal welfare can jointly advance. Addressing the future of pet travel requires a systemic perspective that balances economic benefits with social, cultural, and ecological responsibilities. By fostering policies and practices grounded in ethical care and environmental awareness, tourism stakeholders can support a more harmonious coexistence between people, pets, and the places they visit.

Ultimately, pet travel is a reflection of broader cultural geographies, of how societies define inclusion, mobility, and the human-animal bond. Understanding these cultural dimensions is essential not only for pet-friendly policies but for recognizing the diversity of ways animals are made part of the mobile human world.

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