

# Jump In My Car

Driving with Dogs, Cats and Other Pets By Brent Davison

**H**ave you seen that television advert for Ford's latest Focus small car? Sure you have. It has a radio celebrity who is distracted while getting into her Focus. She puts her pink handbag, with pet Chihuahua inside, on the car's roof and drives away. She tootles around the city, stops, starts and pretty much does everything that would, in any other reality, send her pursed pocket pet sailing merrily off the roof and generally in the opposite direction of travel to the erstwhile Focus. When the car finally comes to a halt, the poor man's Paris and pup are reunited and it's all thanks to the superb handling and smoothness of the wondrous new Ford (of course). That, plus a couple of pop rivets, animal trainers and visual trickery.

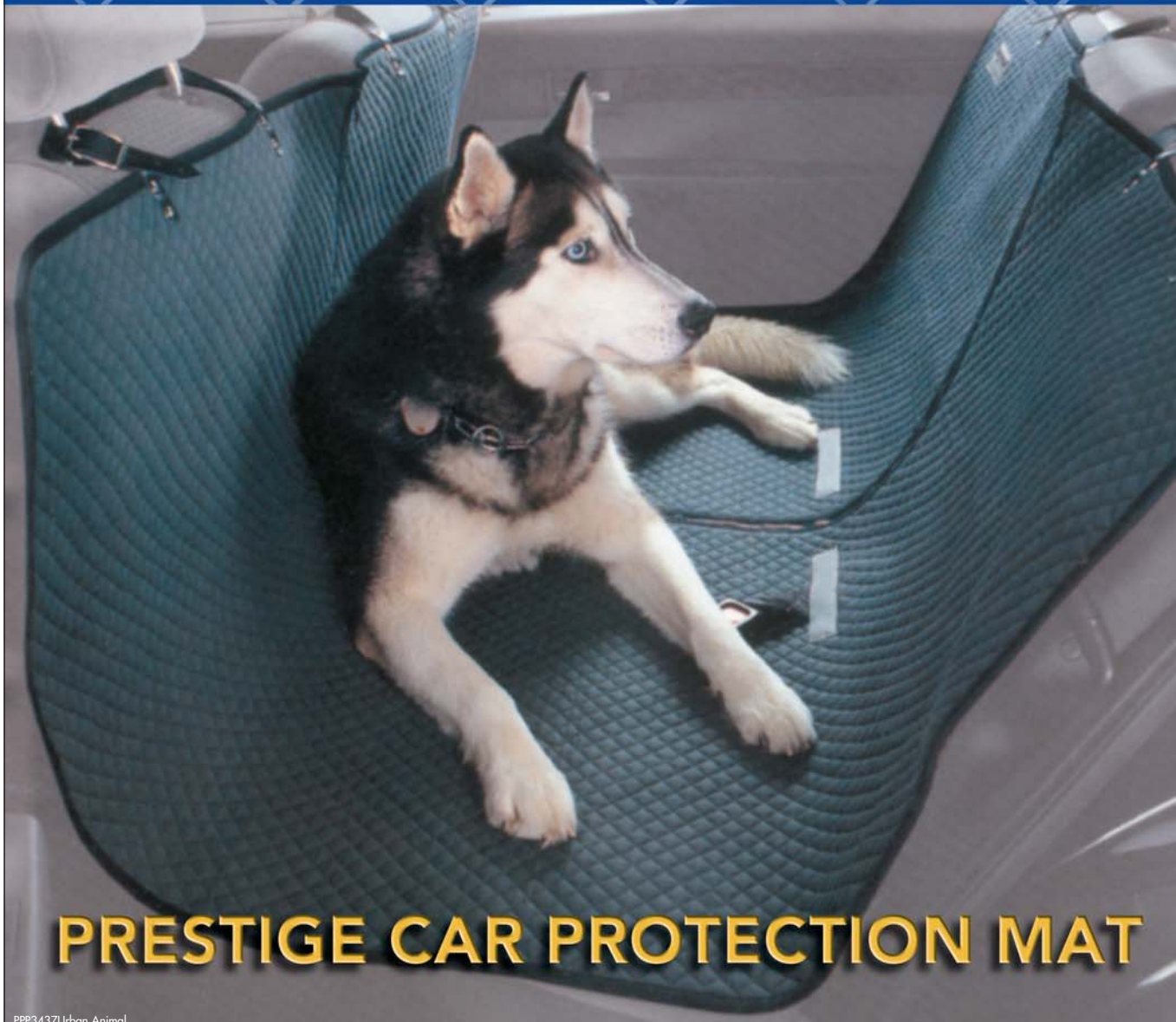
It goes without saying though that what the Ford Motor Company and a faux Paris Hilton can get away with in TV land is a little different to what we mere mortals on 'Planet Reality' deal with every day. Here we have to worry about legalities and practicalities and know full well that the closest we'll get to carrying the pet pooch on the

roof is to sling Blue, the family dog, in the back of the ute. And if we do decide to let Blue ride up front there is the little matter of cleaning hair out of the upholstery and wiping slobber—that universal symbol of canine happiness—from the windows.

In these days of upwardly urban mobility, more and more of us are catering for the family pet in our daily motoring meanderings. And the term 'pet' is all-encompassing, no longer standing merely as a euphemism for Blue and others of his species. Cats, rabbits and reptiles (who needs costly electronic theft deterrents when you have a 10-metre python asleep on the back seat?) are common in cars and I've even seen kid goats hopping happily in Hyundais.

So when it comes to choosing the new wheels for the family, how much allowance needs to be made for the non-human family members? Put another way, just how much leeway do Fido, Mrs Claws and Terrence the Tortoise really need to give us?

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These days there are almost as many varieties and types of cars as there are breeds of cats and dogs (and possibly tortoises). An innocent Saturday morning tyre kicker wandering around Max's Multi-franchise Motors on a sunny Saturday morning could be confronted with the full gamut of vehicles.

So let us assume for now that mechanical motivation is not high on your list of requirements and assume instead that practicality, space and standard equipment are. Which way do you want to go and how clever do you want to be?

Think size for starters and dwell on the fact that big is not always better. Thanks to clever engineering and modern packaging many small and most medium-sized cars are almost as roomy as your average large car but easier to drive and park and loads cheaper to run. New small cars from Nissan (Tiida) and Toyota (Yaris) are great examples of space efficiency and internal versatility with folding back seats for spread-out room.

Want to move into something quasi-station wagon? There are a host of hatchbacks out there ranging from the cheap and cheerful (\$12,990 plus costs for Holden's Barina) to the hot and horny (\$60,000-plus for sporty jiggers like Alfa Romeo's 147 GTA, Volkswagen's Golf R32 or BMW's 130i Sport) and, surprisingly, even the sports ones are still extremely useful for moving Mutley and the crew.

Compact, practical station wagon sounds like an oxymoron. Yet look no further than Mitsubishi's Lancer, Peugeot's 307 or Toyota's Corolla, all of them spacious enough to make the big wagons look clumsy but small enough to negotiate the average shopping centre car park. Moving further up the size scale but still staying small, practical and reasonably affordable brings things like Suzuki's Grand Vitara, Hyundai's Tucson or Kia's Sportage. They're all small four-wheel-drives and more user-friendly than you might think—although the smaller pets might need a leg up. Consider also that Hyundai has a cheaper, smaller-engined, two-wheel-drive Tucson model (the City) designed to fill the gap between family wagon and full-on offroader.

It almost goes without saying there is plenty of choice for those who have a yen for impracticality. Convertibles are plentiful and priced anywhere between affordable and 'you've-got-to-be-joking'. Some have electrically folding fabric roofs, some do it manually and some even have electrically-folding steel roofs that disappear into the boot. Regardless, a long-haired dog doing its best Thelma and Louise impersonation is going to need a good de-tangle at journey's end and puss might not like being wind-blasted into the back of its carrier.

Expensive Italian and German sports cars? A Lowchen in a Lamborghini or a Persian in a Porsche might look good but both will be guaranteed to drop their last meal in your lap if you start getting all Formula One with them onboard. And while small cars are thrifty and maneuverable in the city think about the bulk of the animal that will go in your new Mini Cooper or Suzuki Swift. Three Saint Bernard's squished onto the back seat and fighting for shoulder room? I don't think so!

Special consideration should be given to the comfort of the pet. Fancy stereos are not important to gold fish but air-conditioning always goes down a treat for anything mammalian. Come to think of it, making the car nice and cold will send terrapins, reptiles and amphibians into a nice, deep sleep. Which might explain why Nissan puts a cooler in its small all-wheel-drive X-Trail and why Mercedes-Benz and Lexus have cool boxes between the front seats on some models—so Terrence the Tortoise can have a quiet ride.

Also keep in mind the upholstery and consider upkeep and cleaning. Cheap nylon seat fabrics really hold onto animal hair, velour is reasonably quick and easy to clean and leather is wonderful for cleaning but is sometimes hot and always slippery and while you might see the funny side of Fifi sliding from side to side during hard cornering the odds are that she won't.\*

And for those who think that size really does matter and are in need of something spacious and impressive, a vehicle in which the Saluki or Borzoi can drape (nothing drapes quite like a Borzoi) then consider luxury cars from Jaguar, BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Lexus or Audi. If you happen to have wine tastes on a beer salary you can sneak under the radar in a Chrysler 300C, a mid-\$60,000 luxury barge that looks like it costs twice that sum. Or if none of that suits then just plonk your 'Paris Hilton special' in a pink handbag. Just don't leave it on the roof when you drive off!

*About the Author:*

*Brent Davison and his wife Maree have owned, exhibited and bred Bearded Collies for almost 30 years and Brent's passion for things automotive goes back even further than that. Brent has been an automotive journalist since 1989 when he started writing about cars, motorcycles and motorsport for Brisbane's Quest Newspapers group. Twice winner of the Queensland Motoring Writers' Award, he has been motoring editor for the Newcastle Herald for the past decade and is also motoring writer for the Illawarra Mercury and other newspapers.*

\* Editor's note: We here at Urban Animal recommend harnesses for safe dog drives and obtaining pet carriers for smaller critters that can be buckled in.

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