

How "Pet Friendly" Hotel Awards Mislead Millions of Pet Owners

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Executive Summary

"Pet friendly" is one of the most widely used and least reliable labels in global hospitality. It has no standard definition, no consistent criteria, and no requirement for verification. As a result, travellers make decisions based on incomplete or misleading information, and hotels are rewarded for visibility rather than delivery.

This paper evaluates major pet friendly hotel award schemes, including TripAdvisor and USA Today, using a structured assessment framework applied across more than 2,000 hotels in 56 countries. The findings are consistent. Nearly half of hotels describing themselves as pet friendly fail to meet basic, measurable standards when assessed systematically. At the top end of the market, the problem becomes more visible: TripAdvisor's 2025 number one ranked pet friendly hotel in the world enforces a 5kg weight limit, excluding most standard dog breeds entirely. More than half of the top 20 winners provide no publicly accessible pet policy information at all.

These outcomes are not anomalies. Across all schemes analysed, rankings are driven by user reviews, reader voting, editorial selection, or self reported data. None apply consistent, criteria based evaluation or on site verification. In practice, this means awards reflect brand strength and audience reach rather than the quality of the dog friendly experience.

The consequence is structural. Travellers are misled at the point of decision, while hotels that invest in genuine dog friendly provision are systematically under recognised. This misallocation has measurable commercial impact. Properties with clear, well designed dog friendly policies achieve higher booking rates, longer stays, increased on property spend, and stronger repeat visitation.

The analysis points to a clear gap in the market: the absence of a consistent, verifiable definition of what "dog friendly" actually means. This paper defines that gap as a category: verified dog friendly certification. Without structured standards and evidence based assessment, "pet friendly" will continue to function as a marketing label rather than a reliable signal of quality.

SECTION 1

The Problem: "Pet Friendly" Has No Meaning

The term "pet friendly" has no standard definition, no regulatory framework, and no verification mechanism in global hospitality. Any hotel can call itself pet friendly regardless of what it actually provides.

This is not just a consumer inconvenience. It is increasingly a regulatory concern. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission's 2024 Rule on the Use of Consumer Reviews and Testimonials requires businesses to disclose material connections when displaying awards or endorsements. If a hotel displays an award derived from a popularity contest or marketing partnership rather than independent evaluation, and fails to disclose that, the FTC considers it a potentially misleading practice. In the United Kingdom, the Advertising Standards Authority has upheld complaints against award organisers for implying rigorous selection processes where none existed.

Based on over 2,000 hotel assessments across 56 countries (RDDF-01), 49% of hotels that call themselves pet friendly score D or F when assessed against structured criteria. An estimated 10 to 15% of hotels using the term actually accept cats, making the label inaccurate before it is even vague.

This is the environment in which major platforms hand out awards.

SECTION 2

TripAdvisor's 2024 Pet Friendly Hotel Awards

In 2024, TripAdvisor partnered with Mars Petcare to create a new pet friendly hotel award scheme. The top winners were re-evaluated using a structured 31 criteria framework weighted across 52 scoring points (RDFS-02).

The Results

TripAdvisor Rank	Hotel	RDFS-02 Score	Grade
#1	Hyatt Centric Las Olas, Fort Lauderdale	10/52	C
#2	Shore Hotel, Santa Monica	12/52	D
#3	Celebration Suites, Kissimmee	19/52	B

For comparison: InterContinental Miami scores 43/52 (A+) under the same framework. It does not appear in TripAdvisor's awards.

What Their #1 Winner Actually Lacked

The Hyatt Centric Las Olas scored just 10 out of 52. No dog beds or food bowls provided. No complimentary treats. "Canine taxes" ranging from \$40 to \$150 per stay with minimal amenities in return. Weight restrictions that exclude most large breed dogs. Dogs excluded from bars, restaurants, and public areas.

TripAdvisor's number one pet friendly hotel in 2024 would not pass the minimum requirements of a structured standard.

Why It Happened

In practice, these awards function as a marketing partnership rather than consumer guidance. TripAdvisor and Mars applied no systematic evaluation criteria, no on site verification, and no structured assessment of what "pet friendly" actually means at each property.

Published analysis:
rochsociety.com/tripadvisors-new-2024-pet-friendly-hotel-awards-are-broken/

SECTION 3

USA Today's 2024 Pet Friendly Hotel Awards

USA Today used a reader survey and public popularity contest to determine their winners. No expert evaluation. No direct hotel contact. No on site assessment.

The Results

The top 10 were re-ranked using the same structured framework. The discrepancies were significant:

USA Today Rank	Hotel	RDFS-02 Rank	Grade	Points
#1	The Peabody Memphis	#7	B+	28
#9	Headlands Coastal Lodge	#2	A	35+
#10	Four Seasons Austin	#3	A	33+
(Not ranked)	The Iron Horse Hotel	#9	B	22

The Pattern

Hotels with larger marketing budgets and bigger audiences win popularity contests regardless of the quality of their dog friendly provision. Hotels that are genuinely excellent at canine hospitality, like Headlands Coastal Lodge with its organized dog walking tours and oceanfront access, or Four Seasons Austin with its private garden and walking services, get buried at the bottom or excluded entirely.

Published analysis: rochsociety.com/usa-today-pet-friendly-hotel-awards-2024/

SECTION 4

What Genuine Dog Friendly Hospitality Looks Like

The contrast between award winners and genuinely excellent hotels is stark.

InterContinental Miami (RDFS-02: 43/52, A+) welcomes dogs in most areas with real food and water bowls, complimentary treats, dog walking and sitting services, staff trained in canine guest care, and a portion of pet fee profits donated to dog charities.

Limelight Hotel Aspen (RDFS-02: 37/52, A) offers free pet photoshoots, trained staff, comprehensive canine amenities, and no arbitrary weight restrictions.

Dina's Garden Hotel (RDFS-02: 25/52, B+) charges zero pet fee and welcomes dogs in public spaces. It is not a luxury property. It is simply a hotel that built dog friendly into its operations from day one.

These properties span luxury international chains, boutique independents, and mid range accommodation. They share not a price point but a set of common characteristics: a publicly available dog policy, dogs welcome in shared guest areas including restaurants or lounges, real amenities provided rather than bare tolerance, no blanket weight or size restrictions that exclude standard family dogs, and staff who treat dogs as guests rather than liabilities.

None appeared in TripAdvisor or USA Today's top rankings.

SECTION 5

The Commercial Cost of Structural Inefficiency

The failure of award schemes is not just a consumer clarity issue. It is a structural inefficiency in a large and growing market. Awards that rank hotels by popularity rather than verified quality misallocate demand, directing bookings toward properties that under deliver and away from hotels whose dog friendly investment generates measurable returns.

Industry data and published research (RDRE-01, drawing on RDDF-01 assessments and third party market reports) indicate that hotels with genuine dog friendly policies generate an estimated 28% more bookings and 30% more revenue than comparable properties. Dog owning guests stay an estimated 22% longer, spend 30% more on property, and return at a rate of 76% against an industry benchmark of 30 to 40%. Conservative estimates place the incremental annual revenue from dog friendly hospitality at \$750,000 to \$4 million per property.

The dog friendly hotel market is worth an estimated \$4.6 billion in 2025 and is projected to reach \$7.29 billion by 2029, growing at 12.2% annually. The broader pet travel services market was valued at approximately \$2.6 billion in 2025 with forecasts reaching \$3.9 billion by 2030 at 8.9% CAGR (Grand View Research). Europe alone is expected to reach \$1.16 billion in pet travel services revenue by 2030. Dogs dominate demand, expected to capture over 62.5% of pet travel service revenues by 2035 (Research Nester).

Every major international hotel chain now operates significant portfolios of properties marketed as pet friendly, representing hundreds of thousands of rooms globally. Yet there is no standardised way to verify what any of them actually provide. The properties best positioned to capture this revenue are the least likely to appear in award rankings.

SECTION 6

The Full Award Scheme Landscape (2024-2026)

Beyond TripAdvisor and USA Today, comprehensive research reveals the same structural pattern across the entire pet friendly hotel awards ecosystem. Every scheme identified falls into one of three categories: popularity driven, editorial, or directory and review based. None apply consistent, criteria based evaluation. None conduct on site verification.

Popularity Driven Schemes

TripAdvisor x Mars Petcare launched a "Travelers' Choice Best of the Best: Pet Friendly Hotels" category in 2024 through a strategic partnership with Mars Petcare (Cesar brand). Winners are determined by traveler ratings and reviews, with "Best of the Best" representing the top 1% of listings. Pet friendly listing status is self reported by hotels. The Mars partnership adds a co-branded pet travel hub but does not replace the ratings based approach. 2026 awards have not been published as of March 2026.

USA Today 10Best runs a recurring Readers' Choice category. Nominations are curated by an expert panel and 10Best editors, then ranked by open reader voting during a set period. Hotels with larger audiences have a structural advantage.

Editorial and Pay to Enter Schemes

GoPetFriendly has run Pet Friendly Travel Awards since at least 2017, using community nominations followed by editorial selection. No formally codified methodology. No independent auditing.

Business Awards UK operates pay to enter business awards including a "Best Pet Friendly Hotel" category in 2023. Entrants submit information and judges select winners. This is the clearest example of the "pay to play" model: recognition is gated by an entry fee, not by verified performance. In 2024 the hotel category was replaced by kennels and catteries categories.

Directory and Review Platforms

Legacy Source is principally a directory using a "dog bone" rating system with periodic ranked lists. Not a formal awards program. Hotels list pet policies and receive user reviews with no systematic compliance checks. Staypineapple was ranked #1 in Legacy Source's list of Top Dog Friendly Hotel Chains in 2023, the same year it was removed from the RDDF-01 dataset for failing to meet structured assessment criteria.

Booking.com and Hotels.com do not operate pet friendly hotel awards. Booking.com runs general Traveller Review Awards with no pet specific subcategory. Pet friendly status is an

amenity flag set by properties themselves.

Hilton, Marriott, and IHG run internal pet friendly positioning and partnerships but none operate external award schemes with winners, methodology, and year on year continuity.

The Global Vacuum

No European or Asia Pacific specific pet friendly hotel award schemes with formal structure were found for 2023 to 2026. No new global or regional schemes launched in 2025 or 2026 beyond continuation of existing categories. The landscape for structured, verified pet friendly hotel certification is empty on every continent.

The Common Thread

Across all schemes analysed, none were found to conduct on site verification, apply structured criteria consistently, remove winners who fail to deliver on their claims, or revoke an award after it was granted. Partial attempts at structure exist but none establish a consistent, enforceable definition of what dog friendly actually means at the property level.

TripAdvisor 2025: The Problem Persists

One year after the 2024 analysis, TripAdvisor published its 2025 "Best of the Best Pet Friendly Hotels in the World" list. The actual pet policies of all 20 winners were researched. The results confirm that nothing has changed.

The #1 Winner Has a 5kg Weight Limit

Hotel Moments Budapest, TripAdvisor's number one pet friendly hotel in the world for 2025, has a weight limit of 5kg.

Five kilograms. A Golden Retriever weighs 30. A Labrador weighs 30. A Border Collie weighs 20. A Beagle weighs 10. None would be allowed through the door.

The hotel charges 15 to 40 EUR per pet per night (sources conflict), does not allow dogs in the restaurant or wellness area, and restricts access to common areas. Under any structured standard, this hotel would fail on size restrictions alone.

TripAdvisor's best pet friendly hotel in the world is not dog friendly by any measurable definition.

60% of Winners Have No Published Pet Policy

Of the 20 winners, 12 had no publicly accessible pet policy details at all. No fees listed. No weight limits stated. No access rules published. No amenities described. For hotels that won the world's most visible pet friendly award, the basic information a dog owner needs to plan their stay was not available on any public page.

The most fundamental requirement of any credible standard is that the hotel's dog policy must be publicly available before a guest initiates a booking. More than half of TripAdvisor's 2025 winners would fail this single requirement.

What the Policies Revealed

Hotel	TripAdvisor Rank	Pet Fee	Weight Limit	Published Policy?
Hotel Moments Budapest	#1	15-40 EUR/night	5kg max	Partially (conflicting)
Hotel Vision Budapest	#2	Not stated	Not stated	No
South Lawn Hotel, UK	#4	8.50 GBP/night	Any size	Yes
The Verb Hotel, Boston	#8	\$75 fee + \$75 deposit	Not stated	Partially
FivePine Lodge, Oregon	#12	\$25/night (packages)	Not stated	Yes
Kimpton Maa-lai Bangkok (IHG)	#13	Free	No limit	Yes
Widder Hotel, Zurich	#19	CHF 25/day	No limit	Yes
Chileno Bay Resort, Mexico	#20	\$125/stay	40 lb max	Partially
12 other winners	Various	Not stated	Not stated	No

The Exception Proves the Rule

Kimpton Maa-lai Bangkok stood out: no pet fee, no size or weight limit, pets welcome in common spaces, beds and bowls and toys provided. It is an IHG brand property following Kimpton's established pet policy. One hotel out of twenty that a structured standard would actually recognise.

The Widder Hotel in Zurich has been independently assessed. Dogs are welcome in all restaurants and the bar. Beds and bowls are provided. Staff arrange walking routes and dog walking services.

South Lawn Hotel in the UK accepts dogs of any size, provides dedicated "doggy dining" in the restaurant, and offers a secure dog paddock. Reasonable provision at a reasonable price.

Three out of twenty. The rest are either unverifiable, restrictive, or both.

SECTION 8

The Alternative: Verified Dog Friendly Certification

The evidence presented in this paper points to a gap that no existing scheme fills: the absence of consistent, verifiable, criteria based certification for dog friendly hospitality.

The Roch Dog Standard (RDFS-02) is designed to fill that gap. It is a 31 criteria assessment framework, weighted across 52 scoring points, that evaluates hotels on specific, measurable dimensions of dog friendly provision. Hotels must first pass seven binary requirements (R1 through R7) covering published policy, in room welfare provision, shared area access, fee transparency, and capacity limits. Hotels that pass proceed to scored assessment, where the weighting reflects what drives guest experience and revenue: garden access, real food and water bowls, dogs staying free, and most rooms being dog friendly carry the highest positive weights. Restrictions, deposits, and limited room availability carry negative weights.

The standard is published in ten languages at rochstandard.com/standard/. The methodology is open for industry review. Hotels that fail to meet the standard are removed, including paying customers. The framework has been evolved from RDFS-01 to RDFS-02 based on industry feedback.

This model aligns with the regulatory direction already established by the FTC's 2024 rule on consumer reviews and the ASA's rulings on misleading award communications. Both signal that the market is moving toward transparent, criteria based evaluation and away from manufactured prestige.

The distinction is simple. Certification is based on what is actually delivered. Awards are based on who voted.

Conclusion

The global "pet friendly" hotel landscape is not lacking in visibility, demand, or marketing effort. It is lacking in definition, verification, and accountability.

Across every major award scheme analysed, recognition is driven by popularity, self reported data, or editorial judgment rather than measured performance. The result is a system that rewards exposure over execution. Hotels with limited or highly restrictive dog policies rank above properties delivering genuinely high quality canine hospitality. In some cases, the highest ranked hotels are not meaningfully dog friendly at all.

This is a structural inefficiency, not just a consumer clarity problem. Demand is being directed toward properties that do not meet expectations, while hotels that invest in dog friendly infrastructure, services, and staff training are under represented. The outcome is lost revenue, reduced trust, and a degraded experience for a rapidly growing segment of travellers.

Partial solutions exist but remain insufficient. Review platforms, editorial lists, and multi factor rating systems improve discovery but do not solve verification. None establish a consistent, enforceable definition of what dog friendly actually means at the property level.

The market requires a new category: verified, criteria based certification.

The current model does not fail because of lack of intent. It fails because it lacks structure.

Until verification replaces self declaration, and standards replace ambiguity, "pet friendly" will remain a label that signals very little.

SOURCES

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Roch Dog is the dog friendly standards and certification body. We define what dog friendly means, then assess, certify and rank hotels, workplaces, and residences against the Roch Dog Friendly Standard.

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Roch Dog is an independent certification body. We assess, certify, and verify hotels against the Roch Dog Friendly Standard (RDFS-02). The standard, framework, and supporting reference documents are published at rochstandard.com.

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