

Tips on successfully rehoming a dog from across the border...



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Many dogs are now being rehomed here in the UK from elsewhere in Europe, and even beyond. Many of these dogs settle into their new homes with no problems at all. However others must feel as though they have been transported to another planet.

Before you decide

Do your homework. Find out AS MUCH as you can about the dog's breed, background, age and past. Was it a street dog, or a feral, or used as a hunting dog?

As with considering any new dog, it's important that breed-specific traits fit with your lifestyle.

Check with the charity that has rescued the dog that it has been tested for the many diseases that imported dogs can have, and that he or she has been given all the necessary vaccinations and health checks.

Have realistic expectations. For example, if your dog has previously been used as a working or hunting dog then being able to let him off lead in a royal park full of deer and squirrels is not a good idea! Many feral or street dogs from overseas are also used to living an outdoor existence and are inherently wary of people and new situations.

Getting your dog home

Imported dogs have all had a long, often very stressful, journey to get here. Their bodies are flooded with stress hormones and unbeknown to them, they are about to face the enormity of adaption to our world.

Give them time, they need lots of it. It can take up to two weeks for your dog to be ready to leave your house and garden. Be patient. They don't know you or your world, so move at their pace and try not to take it personally if they keep their distance or avoid you. Street dogs are hypersensitive to our moods and emotional states - it has kept them alive, after all.



Lost in translation?

There may be communication issues with your new dog, which need time and patience to overcome. For example, we might assume that the dog understands verbal cues. But why would they? Even if they were fostered before importation, their carers may have communicated in a different language, using different visual cues, in a different environment.

Think about how your new dog sees the world. Moving your hand over his head for a gentle stroke might in fact be the cue that he was about to be hit...

Be predictable

If your dog can predict what will happen next, he will feel in control of his new life sooner, feel calmer and settle better. Stick to a routine in the early days and weeks.

observe and respond

Keep a close eye on your dog's body language. Learn to recognize signs of stress which can include yawning, panting, lip-licking, toileting, drinking, and shaking. Some dogs may be so stressed that they just shut down, so don't assume that the dog who just lies quietly in the corner is finding life easy.

"Red flags" – which might indicate the dog is feeling threatened - can include direct staring, tension in the body, freezing, a tight mouth and turning their face away from you.

Reward what you like

Reinforce any and all wanted behaviours your dog offers you and ignore everything unwanted. Accept that there will be set-backs and keep everyone calm whilst you gently stick to the house rules.

Build positive associations through food. Fearful dogs nearly always find new experiences scary. Food affects how dogs see situations and effectively helps to reduce the reactivity of the emotional brain.



offer choices

Home may actually feel like a prison to your new dog. Bear in mind that he or she used to be in control of all their resources – food, exercise, toileting and so on - and now they are in control of none of it

Give your new dog choices – allow him to decide when he wants to be left alone, to go outside, and so on, to help him build confidence.

It is likely your dog has not been left alone so seek help on preventing separation issues.

out and about

Once you decide to take your dog out, try to use a well-fitted harness. They allow better control and prevent injury to the throat. Harnesses also avoid any sensitive areas where your dog may have been captured using force around its neck.

Meeting other dogs on-lead is very different from free-roaming so be prepared for some reactivity. Take professional advice early on if your dog seems to be worried by the presence of other dogs.

Your new dog may also be hyper-vigilant and spend the duration of the walk poised, ready for flight. Teach your dog to focus on you and keep the stress levels low.

If your dog is feral he or she may have a strong prey drive – this is of course innately rewarding, so you will need to work hard to curb it.

Street dogs are used to roaming and scavenging for food, so don't understand boundaries or the need to return to you. Offer treats and calm positive reinforcement every time your new dog comes back to you, and don't let him off lead until you are absolutely sure he knows the recall.



Despite all these possibilities, it's important to know that many dogs that have been rescued from overseas are living happy and healthy lives here in the UK. I know dogs who have had horrific lives in shelters who settle into their new homes quickly and become wonderful pet dogs.

So, do your research, know your limits and manage your expectations. After all, there may be a dog for you to rescue who might well just rescue you back.