More Than Permission: What Pet Friendly Means to the People Who Travel With Pets

A Hotelier's Reading of the First Academic Definition of Pet Friendly

Reviewed before publication by the author of the original study, Nikolaos Iason Koufodontis

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Executive Summary

In October 2026 the International Journal of Hospitality Management published "Pet-friendliness in hospitality and tourism: Definition, scope, and governance", by Nikolaos Iason Koufodontis of the Department of Tourism Economics and Management at the University of the Aegean. It is the first academic attempt to define pet friendly, and it is open access.

Koufodontis has worked on pet friendly hospitality for several years, including a 2024 study with Melissourgou of what hotel guests with and without pets value. This paper is Roch Dog's reading of his new work for the people who run hotels, written with his agreement and read by him before publication. The findings are his. What they mean for a hotel is our reading.

The research has two parts. A review of some 6,000 academic sources found that in thirty years of use nobody had defined pet friendly on evidence: every definition in circulation was borrowed from a commercial website, a dictionary or a master's thesis. A survey of 1,041 people in 66 countries then asked what the phrase covers, what makes a place genuinely pet friendly, and whether nine everyday situations deserve the label.

People agree on the core. The subject is the guest's own animal, and what turns a hotel that allows pets into a hotel that is pet friendly is everything around the permission: the right facilities, clear rules, staff who know what they are doing and the basic amenities. Nine in ten would call a hotel pet friendly if it admits the pet, says plainly what its rules are and provides the basics.

People disagree at the edges, and the edges are where a hotel loses guests. Only 12% would call a hotel pet friendly if it allows dogs under 10 kilograms but not cats, and only 11.7% if it advertises as pet friendly and then charges a very high fee. Americans forgive a restricted welcome far more readily than Europeans or Asians, and people who work in tourism are more forgiving still, so a hotel judging its own rules is likely to be kinder to them than its guests will be.

From this Koufodontis separates rules, which govern how a pet behaves inside the welcome, from restrictions, which decide who is welcome at all, and defines pet friendliness as "the governance-mediated conditional inclusion of companion animals in tourism and hospitality, with safeguards for animal welfare, hygiene, safety, and coexistence."

In a hotelier's words: a hotel is pet friendly when it welcomes the guest's animal on clear terms, with the facilities, rules and people to make that welcome work, and without forgetting the animal's wellbeing or the guest who did not bring one. The sections that follow set out the history, the study, each finding, what we think a hotel should do with it, and where the Roch Dog Friendly Standard sits against this definition.

SECTION 1

A Label Older Than Its Definition

The phrase pet friendly did not come out of research. It came out of the travel pages, and research arrived decades later to find a label already in daily use. The history below comes from the supplement to the Koufodontis paper.

1.1 The phrase began in the travel pages

One of the earliest uses Koufodontis found is a 1994 column in the Post Bulletin newspaper, which urged readers to "take your pet on vacation" and listed the hotels and lodgings that would have one. By 1996 Skiing magazine was running a feature on ski trips with the family dog, and by the end of the decade travel and fashion magazines were writing about gourmet dog dining and boutique accommodation for pets. The hotel trade press was slower: Hotel and Motel Management published four articles on pet friendly hotels between 1997 and 2006.

Policy pushed in the same direction. The United Kingdom's Pet Travel Scheme of 1999 and 2000 ended six months of quarantine for vaccinated animals, and the Financial Times described it as letting pets "pack passports and venture abroad". By the 2000s, pet friendly was the standard label for any hotel, destination or service that accepted companion animals.

Pet friendly was a consumer phrase and a marketing label long before anyone studied it. Hotels have used it for thirty years without an agreed meaning.

1.2 The research arrived late

The first explicitly conceptual academic paper on the subject appeared in 2009, when Carr and Cohen wrote about holidaying with the family dog, following earlier work on pets in São Paulo hotels. Through the 2010s researchers studied why owners travel with pets and what stops them. From 2020 the hotel became the main subject, with studies of pet friendly hotel attributes, service design and how guests see them.

The field has grown fast and unevenly. Of roughly 6,000 sources screened to the end of 2025, Koufodontis assessed 364 in full and classed 162 as core, with another 30 added from the first half of 2026. Two thirds of those studies look at just ten countries, and only fifteen take a global view. Most describe what owners do and want. Very few ask what pet friendly requires of a hotel.

There is now a body of research on travelling with pets, but almost none of it had asked the hotelier's question: what does the label oblige me to do?

1.3 Every definition was borrowed

When Koufodontis traced the definitions academics had used, none was original. One pair came from commercial websites: a destination "where family pets are permitted" and a property that "may allow certain types of pets". Another came from the Cambridge Dictionary, a place "where you are welcome to stay with your pet". Another rested on a master's thesis, and another called the term an American expression meaning "friendly to domestic animals". Most reduced pet friendly either to permission, pets are allowed, or to amenities, pets get extras. In one case a definition was attributed to a paper that did not contain it.

That matters to a hotel for a practical reason. When a label has no agreed meaning, every hotel can claim it on its own terms, no guest can compare one claim with another, and the gap between what was promised and what is delivered turns up at the front desk. Our own study of that gap, Nobody Trusts Pet Friendly, found dog owners had stopped believing the phrase for exactly this reason.

Until this paper, academia had no definition of pet friendly it had not borrowed from the industry, which is why the industry's own use of the phrase has never been held to a standard.

SECTION 2

The Study, and the Nine Situations It Tested

Before the findings, here is what Koufodontis did, in plain words.

2.1 Who was asked

Alongside the review, Koufodontis ran a survey of five questions through the research platform Prolific. The final sample was 1,041 people in 66 countries, weighted by population and by how much each country travels. They were a mix a hotel will recognise: owners and non-owners, people who had travelled with a pet, residents of tourist towns, and people who work in or own a hospitality business.

Three further samples backed it up: an independent American sample of 181, which confirmed the American results; 268 people who answered one open question, naming in their own words the three things that make a place genuinely pet friendly; and 420 people asked how the terms pet friendly tourism, hospitality and travel are used.

Responses were screened with attention checks, time limits and a manual read. The open answers were coded by the author and cross-checked by a second researcher and a purpose trained AI, and the themes they produced broadly matched the main survey. The datasets are published openly. Two things the study cannot tell a hotel: it measures what people say they would call pet friendly, not what they book, and it asked the public at large, not a verified sample of travellers.

This is the largest and most geographically balanced study of what people mean by pet friendly yet published, and it asked the people a hotel actually serves.

2.2 The nine situations

The question the rest of this paper turns on listed nine situations and asked which ones respondents would call pet friendly. Most hotels will recognise themselves in one. A hotel that allows guest pets, clearly communicates its pet policies and provides basic pet amenities. A hotel that allows dogs under 10 kilograms but does not allow cats. A hotel that advertises as pet friendly but charges very high additional fees for pets. A hotel that bans guest pets but keeps a resident dog or cat that interacts with guests. A café that allows dogs on a lead on its outdoor terrace only. A campsite that allows pets but provides no pet specific amenities.

The other three were about whole destinations and their rules. The paper reports figures for six of the nine, from 91.3% for the hotel with clear rules and the basics down to 11.7% for the hotel with very high fees.

Every hotel can place its own pet policy on this list, and the scores that follow show how its guests see it.

SECTION 3

Which Animals the Phrase Covers

Before asking what a pet friendly hotel must do, the study asks which animals the phrase covers. The answer is narrower than some of the academic literature had suggested and clearer than most hotel marketing.

3.1 The guest's own animal is the core

Nine people in ten (89.6%) linked pet friendliness to the animals guests bring with them, and it was the most consistent answer in the survey. Every other kind of animal trailed well behind. Two thirds named the host's own pets, just over half named service animals, and fewer than four in ten named the pets of local residents. Stray animals were named by fewer than three in ten, and wildlife, captive animals and digital pets barely registered.

To almost everyone, pet friendly means the guest's own animal is welcome. Everything else sits around that core, not inside it.

3.2 A hotel cat is not a pet policy

Many hotels keep a resident dog or cat, and guests like them. The study finds that host owned animals can shape the atmosphere and warmth of a place, but that their bearing on pet friendliness depends on context and does not define it, least of all when the guests' own pets are not accepted. Our reading for a hotel is blunter. A much loved resident spaniel in the lobby of a hotel that turns away guests' dogs gives it charm, not a pet policy.

A resident animal is a welcome touch. It does not stand in for welcoming the guest's own pet.

3.3 Service animals are a separate matter

More than half of respondents linked service animals to pet friendliness, and those who did were more likely to name guests' pets as well. Koufodontis is clear that the two should not be merged. Service animals have a rights based status of their own, and in our reading that means a hotel's duties to a guide dog do not depend on whether it calls itself pet friendly or on what its pet policy says.

A hotel's obligations to a service animal come from the law, not from its pet policy, and the two should never be confused at the front desk.

SECTION 4

What Makes a Hotel Pet Friendly

This is the heart of the paper, and the part a hotel can use. The central finding is that allowing pets is where pet friendliness begins and not what it consists of.

4.1 Permission is the start, not the claim

Asked what a place must have to be genuinely pet friendly, respondents did not stop at the door. In the open question, access was the most common theme, named by 166 of 268 people, but facilities (153), rules (135), amenities (129) and staff (95) followed close behind. Among the scenarios, the one endorsed most strongly, at 91.3%, was the hotel that allows guests' pets, clearly communicates its pet policies and provides basic pet amenities. Koufodontis puts it in one line: "permission and amenities are not sufficient on their own". A place may allow pets without the material, procedural or frontline support that lets the welcome work safely and reliably.

A hotel that allows pets has made a decision. A hotel that is pet friendly has built the facilities, rules and habits to carry it out.

4.2 Facilities and rules come before amenities

The elements named most often were spaces and facilities adapted to pets (77.8%), clear and transparent rules (76.4%), the attitudes and practices of staff (73.0%) and amenities (70.7%). The order is the lesson. Facilities, meaning designated areas, rooms and paths, are what make a welcome usable. Clear rules tell the guest what to expect before they book, and pet owners were markedly more likely than non-owners to endorse the hotel with clear rules, so the guests who most want rules are the ones travelling with a dog.

Amenities, the bed, the bowl and the treat, are valued. But the study finds they work mainly as complements once access and facilities are in place, and that part of their value is what they say about the hotel's care.

That agrees with a choice experiment the paper cites, which found that the tangible parts of a stay can drive what owners will pay more strongly than pet extras. Our guide to that experiment, What Dog Owners Will Pay For in a Hotel, reaches the same conclusion from the other side.

Guests judge a pet friendly hotel first by its facilities and its rules, and only then by its amenities. A hotel that buys the extras before it fixes the basics has the order the wrong way round.

4.3 Staff make the claim credible

Nearly three quarters of respondents named the attitudes and practices of staff, and the paper explains why. Knowledgeable staff reduce uncertainty, communicate the rules, resolve conflicts and decide, in practice, whether a pet friendly claim is believed. A hotel can have a generous policy on paper and lose the guest at check-in because the person at the desk has never read it.

The pet policy is only as good as the person explaining it. Staff are where a pet friendly claim is proved or disproved.

4.4 The guest without a pet is part of the picture

Six respondents in ten (62.6%) said a pet friendly place must balance the comfort and rights of guests with and without pets. Koufodontis calls this coexistence: pet owners, guests without pets, staff and the animals share the same spaces and have to be balanced rather than dealt with separately. Worries about hygiene, allergies, noise and shared space grow when a place is poorly managed or its rules are inconsistent, and shrink where there is sensible zoning, proper cleaning, someone on hand to step in, and rules enforced the same way every time.

One figure here deserves a hotelier's attention. The provider's discretion to manage or limit pets when necessary, with restricted areas and quiet hours as the examples, was the least endorsed element of all, at 38.5%. Fewer than four people in ten count the hotel's right to limit pets as part of being pet friendly. They do not deny the right. They do not see it as part of the welcome.

Looking after the guest without a pet is not the opposite of being pet friendly. It is part of it, and good management does more for that guest than any ban.

4.5 Welfare is the line

More than half (55.8%) named the ethical and humane treatment of animals as a requirement. The paper is firm on this: a place cannot be meaningfully pet friendly if pets are allowed but their needs are neglected, however good its rules, extras or marketing. Welfare, hygiene, safety and coexistence are not always the first things people mention, but they decide whether a good first impression survives. The study also warns against pushing all the responsibility for managing an animal onto its owner.

Welfare is where pet friendliness has to be real. A hotel that admits an animal takes on a share of the responsibility for its wellbeing while it is there.

SECTION 5

Where Guests Draw the Line

The study finds strong agreement about what pet friendly means and much less agreement about how far it stretches. For a hotel, the second finding is the commercial one.

5.1 Agreement at the core, disagreement at the edges

Koufodontis sorted respondents into groups by the pattern of their answers, a method called latent class analysis, which looks for people who answered the same way. Two groups came out. Most people (83.7%) belong to what he calls the rule selective group: they strongly endorse the hotel with clear rules and the basics and almost never accept selective restrictions or high fees. A smaller group (16.3%) is more tolerant of conditions: they endorse the hotel with clear rules too, but are far more willing to accept partial or restricted arrangements. Both groups agree on the core. They differ only on how much restriction they will forgive.

Guests do not hold different ideas of what pet friendly means. They hold different thresholds for how much restriction they will put up with, and most have a low one.

5.2 Fees and selective restrictions score lowest

Of the nine situations tested, the two people were least willing to call pet friendly were the hotel that allows dogs under 10 kilograms but does not allow cats (12.0%) and the hotel that advertises as pet friendly but charges very high additional fees for pets (11.7%). Among the larger rule selective group, the chance of accepting either was below one in fifteen. Partial arrangements fared little better: the café that allows dogs on a lead on its outdoor terrace only was accepted by 27.4%, and the campsite that allows pets but provides nothing for them by 27.2%. What a fee should buy, and what guests will pay it for, is the subject of our own The Hotel Pet Fee.

A selective restriction or a high fee costs a hotel its pet friendly claim in the eyes of nearly nine guests in ten. A welcome confined to the terrace fares little better.

5.3 Rules are not restrictions

The most useful idea in the paper for a hotelier is a distinction. In Koufodontis's words, "Restrictions are not equivalent to rules": rules structure conduct inside a pet friendly setting, while restrictions limit who is included at all. A lead in the lobby is a rule. A weight cap is a restriction. The paper names size, breed, number and permitted area as the usual restrictions, and does not argue that a hotel should have none. Pet friendliness, he writes, is not opposed to restriction. Restrictions are accepted when they are transparent, proportionate and workable, and justified by the management of a shared space, and seen as illegitimate when they look arbitrary or exclusionary.

The Friendly Dog Policy in The Fine Print was built to pass that test: it judges every dog by its behaviour, a rule, and drops the breed list and the weight limit, which are restrictions. Weighed and Found Wanting looked for the shared space case behind the weight limit, one figure for every room with no reason given, and could not find one.

Every hotel needs rules. Every restriction needs a reason a guest would accept, stated plainly. A restriction that cannot explain itself reads as exclusion.

5.4 The hotel is the most forgiving judge of its own rules

People who work in tourism were noticeably more willing to accept selective restrictions than everyone else, with about double the odds. Odds are the statistician's measure rather than a plain doubling, but the direction is clear. Koufodontis suggests professionals see the operational trade-offs that guests do not, which is fair. It also carries a warning. The people who write a hotel's pet policy are likely to be more comfortable with its restrictions than the guests who read it.

A pet policy that feels reasonable from behind the desk may not feel reasonable to the guest reading it. Test it on someone who travels with a dog.

SECTION 6

The Regional Divide

The largest differences in the survey were not between owners and non-owners, or between young and old, but between regions. For any hotel that welcomes guests from more than one country, this is the finding to remember.

6.1 Americans accept far more restriction

Acceptance of conditional arrangements ran from just over one in five in Europe and Asia to more than half in the United States. Compared with Europeans, Americans had about four and a half times the odds of accepting restricted access, and respondents in Oceania and Africa also accepted it more readily. The independent American sample confirmed the pattern. The more tolerant group described in section 5.1 makes up more than a quarter of Americans (26.7%) and fewer than one in ten Asians (8.5%).

Asian respondents stood out in a different way. They were more likely than Europeans to value consistent pet rules across a destination's hotels and public spaces, which two thirds of the whole sample endorsed, and less willing to accept a place that admits pets but provides nothing for them.

The restricted welcome common in American hotels is tolerated by American guests far more than by anyone else. Guests from Europe and Asia are much less forgiving of it.

6.2 What it means for a hotel with international guests

A pet policy written to American expectations and read by a European or Asian guest will look less welcoming than it was meant to. A weight limit, a single dog rule or a terrace only welcome that an American guest takes in their stride is, for most guests from elsewhere, a reason to doubt the claim. Koufodontis reads the regional differences as differences of culture, regulation and governance, not as different ideas of what pet friendly means. Everyone wants the same thing. Guests from different places forgive different amounts of falling short of it.

A hotel that sells to the world should write its pet policy for the least forgiving guest it hopes to welcome, not the most forgiving.

SECTION 7

What a Hotel Should Do

The paper is written for researchers, but its discussion speaks to providers, and Koufodontis offers what he calls a diagnostic tool: a way of testing whether a hotel's pet friendly claim matches what it can deliver. Read for a hotelier, it comes down to five steps, in this order. They are our reading of his findings, not his instructions.

7.1 Write the rules down and publish them

Clear rules were the second most named element in the survey, and the arrangement people endorsed most depended on them. A guest should be able to read, before booking, what the hotel accepts, what it costs, where the pet can go and what is expected of the owner. Our study of 236 published pet policies, The Fine Print, sets out how to write one and offers a model, the Friendly Dog Policy, that any hotel may adapt.

A rule the guest can read before booking is part of the welcome. A rule they meet at check-in is a surprise, and surprises are what guests remember.

7.2 Get the basics right before the extras

The paper is explicit that meeting the baseline requirements and disclosing them clearly should come before expanding optional pet offerings, because weak rules, uneven enforcement and poor staff routines damage a pet friendly reputation more than the absence of extra services ever will. The order of spending follows from the survey: facilities first, then rules, then people, then amenities.

Guests ranked facilities, rules and staff ahead of the extras. Spend in that order, and buy the dog menu last.

7.3 Train the people guests meet

Staff were named by nearly three quarters of respondents, and they are where a policy becomes an experience. Everyone who takes a booking, answers the phone or works the front desk should know the policy, the reasons behind it and what to do when a guest without a pet raises a concern. That is a morning's briefing, not a programme.

A pet policy the staff can recite protects the hotel. A pet policy they have never read protects nobody.

7.4 Make every restriction earn its place

For each restriction in the policy, ask three questions. Does it manage a shared space or simply exclude? Is it proportionate? Is the reason written down where a guest can see it? Keep the ones that pass. Reconsider the ones that do not, starting with selective restrictions and high fees, the two the survey rejected most firmly. A hotel that wants a single test it can defend to any guest has one ready in the Friendly Dog Policy: judge the dog in front of you by how it behaves.

A restriction with a reason is a rule guests will accept. A restriction without one is the reason they book elsewhere.

7.5 Look after the guest without a pet

Coexistence is part of the definition. Sensible zoning, proper cleaning between stays, someone on duty who can deal with a problem, and rules enforced the same way every time do more for guests without pets than a restriction does, and they protect the welcome for everyone else. The guest with an allergy is served by a dog free floor, not by a weight limit.

The hotels that earn the pet friendly label do the basics well, say so clearly, and make sure the people at the front can deliver it. The extras come last.

SECTION 8

The Definition in Practice

8.1 What the paper asks for next

Koufodontis is clear about what should follow his definition. The framework, he writes, "clarifies what should be standardized, namely minimum operating conditions, communication, and responsibility allocation, and what can vary by property", and the work that should come next is to "develop measurement instruments, certification criteria, and benchmarking tools based on the proposed core dimensions and legitimacy thresholds". In other words: fix the floor, publish it, check hotels against it, and let everything above the floor vary.

That is what a certification standard is. Roch Dog has been running one for hotels and dogs since before his paper was published, built from hotel assessments rather than from the literature, and this section sets out how it answers each part of his call. The mapping is ours. He has not reviewed the standard against his framework.

He asks for criteria and benchmarks built on his dimensions. A standard built from what hotels actually do had already reached the same ground.

8.2 Minimum operating conditions: the six requirements

The Roch Dog Friendly Standard sets six minimum requirements, and each sits under one of the things his respondents named as the basics.

Clear and transparent rules, named by 76.4%, are four of the six: a written dog policy available to every guest before they book, published or supplied on request; the dog fee disclosed, with zero a valid answer; whether a deposit applies and, if so, how much; and the maximum number of dogs a room may hold. Basic provision is the fifth: real food and water bowls in the room. A welcome not confined to the edges of the property, the terrace scenario that only 27.4% accepted, is the sixth: the dog allowed to accompany its owner in at least one shared indoor space, a bar, lounge or restaurant, unless the law forbids it and the hotel says so.

Every hotel is assessed and ranked whether or not it asks to be. A hotel that meets all six carries the designation Meets the Roch Dog Friendly Standard at any rank. A hotel that misses any of them is still listed, but ranks no higher than C, because the things it is missing are the things guests said come first.

The six requirements are his minimum operating conditions written down for a hotel: the rules, the basics, and a welcome that reaches indoors.

8.3 Communication, responsibility and benchmarking

His second and third standardised items are communication and responsibility, and the standard treats them as part of the assessment rather than as promises. Every answer a hotel gives is checked independently through the year, with housekeeping, the front desk, reservations and the concierge, and against what guests say in their reviews, because his finding and ours agree that weak rules and uneven enforcement undo a welcome faster than a missing amenity.

Above the floor, where he says offerings can vary by property, the rank does the benchmarking. It credits the facilities, services, staff training and amenities a hotel offers, in roughly the order his respondents named them, and it publishes the result from A+ to F so that a guest can compare one hotel's claim with another's. That is the comparison the borrowed definitions of section 1 never allowed.

The standard is firmer than his definition on one point, and we say so plainly. His framework accepts a size or number limit where it is transparent and proportionate. Ours rules out blanket size and weight limits on the normal family dog, and the rank credits a hotel that sets none, for the reasons set out in Weighed and Found Wanting. His own figures sit on our side of that line: only 12% of his respondents would call a hotel pet friendly that admits dogs under 10 kilograms but not cats.

His framework says what to standardise and what to leave free. The standard fixes the floor, checks it, and ranks what hotels build above it.

SECTION 9

Conclusion

Two things follow from this study, and the first is the one every hotel should take to heart. A hotel that allows pets has not yet done anything that guests count as pet friendly. Nine in ten of the people Koufodontis asked put the guest's own animal at the centre of the phrase, then named the facilities, the rules, the staff and the basics as what makes the welcome real. Permission is where the claim starts. The claim rests on everything built around it.

The second is that a hotel's restrictions cost it more than its managers think. Only 12% would call a hotel pet friendly if it takes dogs under 10 kilograms but not cats, and only 11.7% if it advertises the welcome and then charges a very high fee. The people who write pet policies are more forgiving of such restrictions than the guests who read them, and an American hotel writing for the world should know that guests from Europe and Asia forgive them least. A rule tells the guest how to behave. A restriction tells them they are not wanted, unless the hotel can say why.

None of this asks a hotel to give up its rules. Rules are part of the definition. So the ask of this paper is small. Open your pet policy, read it as the people in this survey would, and for every restriction in it write down the reason a guest would accept. If you cannot, take it out. A hotel that does that has earned the label it has been using all along, and the Roch Dog Friendly Standard is there to show it has.

Methodology and Limitations

This paper is a reading for hoteliers of Koufodontis, N. I. (2026), Pet-friendliness in hospitality and tourism: Definition, scope, and governance, International Journal of Hospitality Management 141, 104929, published open access under a Creative Commons Attribution licence. All figures are taken from the paper and its supplementary material, and are reported as the paper reports them. Where this paper says what a finding means for a hotel, that is Roch Dog's reading, not the author's claim, and the sections on the Roch Dog Friendly Standard and Roch Dog's own research are ours alone. The author reviewed this paper before publication.

The study's limitations are the author's to state, and he states them. Its evidence reflects the roles and samples examined, and may not capture every variation across cultures, legal systems, markets and types of accommodation. The survey describes what people perceive and expect, which is not the same as how pet friendliness is delivered on the ground. The definition still needs testing at the level of individual providers and destinations. Two cautions of our own. The scenario figures describe whether respondents would call a situation pet friendly, not whether they would book it. And where the paper reports odds ratios we have written "about double the odds", which is what the statistic says and is not the same as twice as likely.

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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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