

Airline Travel in an era when the skies are crowded

There are more people traveling every year – especially during the summer – than there have ever been before. Not surprisingly, the increase in numbers has brought with it logistical hassles that are usually out of the control of the airlines and other suppliers, such as trains, rental cars, hotels, coach companies, and yes, even trip organizers. The increase in regulations regarding ‘safety’, in the form of enhanced screening, new limits on carry on bag size and weight, and what items may be carried on, has added to previously existing problems such as unpredictable weather and unannounced airline or airport employee work stoppages. It is very likely that you will have your patience tried as you travel, and you are likely to tolerate annoying situations better if you prepare yourself mentally and physically for various forms of inconvenience.

Carry On Bags

Carry on bags have weight and size limits that are now being enforced more often, especially in the UK, where there is currently a limit of one carry on bag per person. Your airline will also have a *weight* and *size* limit that varies between differing airlines. Make sure to *check with your airline in advance*; if you exceed the limit, some airlines may force you to check one of the bags you planned to carry on, and if you did not pack that bag to protect breakable or fragile objects, something of value might break. Don’t rely on the story of what happened to someone else to determine your airline’s rules, which vary between domestic (in the US) and international (out of the US) travel. Check directly with the airline that you are flying.

The British government – not the individual airlines – limits passengers to one carry on bag per person for persons arriving in or transiting through the UK. The law was put into place after a security scare, but a significant factor in creating the law had to do with the very bulky size of the carry on bags that passengers were bringing on board, which was slowing down the additional security checking process. Start by taking a reasonable size bag that will suffice for your needs. On a recent trip to Greece I changed planes in London in each direction, and because of the vast number of people that they were processing through customs and security, minimal attention was given to the number of bags. Perhaps that was because there were no large carry on bags to be seen; at busy airports there may not always be time to strictly enforce the law, but you don’t want to test that.

British security screeners did check every bag for liquids and they did make people throw away bottles of water or any other beverages, including some forms of makeup. Small bottles of toiletries of less than 3 ounces are currently being accepted if they are contained in a see-through plastic bag, such as a zip lock bag. Fortunately for us, I observed several musicians traveling with violin cases with one additional very small personal item, such as a (reasonable) size purse. *Please note that US security inspectors are not currently allowing bottles of liquid (specifically items such as alcohol purchased at a Duty Free Shop) to be carried on to airplanes returning to the US).*

There is a loophole in the one bag law and you should consider using it to your advantage: a long raincoat / jacket / trench coat *with large pockets* does not count as your one personal item. If you are traveling to a country (such as Scotland) where the hills are kept green by regular rainfall, you will want to bring protection from rain. *One American airline is actually telling it’s passengers to bring a large coat* and put things in the pockets that they may need or want on the flight, such as non-liquid medications, reading material, cross word puzzles, a notebook, ear plugs, eye shades --- you name it! That would leave your one carry on bag to be used for some emergency clothing (in case your suitcase takes a different flight or vacation than you do). If you are bringing a musical instrument with you, the raincoat *with large pockets* could hold a lot of other things for your use.

Your suitcase: Going on a different trip?

There aren’t many things that are as unsettling on a trip as it is to arrive safely at your destination only to discover that your suitcase has gone somewhere else. There are various ways that you can give yourself some

peace of mind and also help facilitate a speedy return of your wayward bag. No airline will accept a piece of checked luggage that is not clearly labeled with your name on it, and the key word here is *clearly*. Print the information on your bag tag in block letters.

For the moment, put yourself in the position of the person in the cavernous baggage store room who has your suitcase sitting there in front of him / her, and who is trying to figure out where it is supposed to go to. That person will be looking at the airline issued bag routing tag, but what if your bag tag has the wrong airport code? So, before you leave any suitcase at the check in counter, ask the check in agent to show you your bag tags (many of them are already trained to do that) and check to see if the correct airport code is shown.

Sometimes the automated baggage sorting machines can accidentally remove or destroy the identity tags, which make it nearly impossible for our baggage sorter to identify. For safety sake, write your name, destination, and contact information on paper and place that inside your suitcase where it would be visible with no effort in case it's necessary to open your bag. It's also a good idea to repair any tears to soft-sided suitcases with duct tape before you start your travels.

Take a digital photo of your suitcase and keep that with you in case you have to file a lost baggage claim. Usually people are tired and travel weary when they arrive and have to fill out one of those claim forms, so carry a copy of your hotel contact information with you so that you're not frustrated by lack of memory. If you file a missing baggage report or claim, make sure that you do not leave the counter without knowing how to reach the baggage tracing office by telephone, and don't leave without a copy of the claim.

Consider carrying a change of underwear, socks and shirt in your carry on bag – being able to change in to some of your own clothes will make you feel much better if your main bag is delayed. If you're headed to a beach destination and you are wearing heavy clothes, pack a swimsuit or lightweight shorts to change in to.

Unreasonable delays

The most common cause of flight delays is when bad weather at one airport has a ripple effect on airline flights: a thunder storm can cause the FAA to temporarily stop all flight landings and departures at one airport which might mean that the physical airplane that is going to carry you doesn't arrive at your airport when it should, so it leaves late, and in a domino effect it typically gets worse as the day progresses. When an airline gives weather as the cause of a delay, they are essentially precluding compensation for what could be a significant inconvenience. "Equipment" problems typically involve more responsibility from the airline so listen carefully to the reason that is given in the case of a delay. Personally, if I think that a situation is completely out of hand, or I think that I'm being given a run-around, I jot down the name of the airline representative just as a backup. (I try to do that unobtrusively).

A few years ago there was justifiable public outrage when airlines were loading their passengers, pulling back from the Gate, and then sitting somewhere on the tarmac for hours without food, fresh air, or the ability to move. (By the way, they did that because if a plane had pulled away from the gate, the airline was allowed to say that it had left on time, therefore contributing to a better "on time record"). Governmental regulation was avoided when the airlines pleaded that they would "do the right thing for their passengers in the future" but as the number of passengers has increased there has been some return to those old tricks. Unfortunately unless a national law is implemented, there is very little that can be done about these unreasonable delays.

Telling the airline representative at the Gate if you have a special circumstance can be helpful in obtaining treatment that is appropriate to you needs, (such as dietary or eating requirements, or other physical problems). Carry a good book in case there is along delay. Remember that copy of your hotel contact information mentioned above? This could be another time when it's useful to have it in your carry on bag, so that you could easily find the phone numbers to contact people who are expecting you. Earplugs can screen out a lot of the hustle-bustle of noisy people in airports and they don't take up much room.

Most of all try and keep calm. Yelling and anger won't accomplish much with the airline representatives on the ground or on the plane; and it won't get you to your destination any quicker. Airline gate agents do have a lot of discretion in the solutions that they are able offer inconvenienced passengers and if they have a choice, they are more likely to go beyond the call of their duty for passengers who have not behaved in a needlessly ugly way.

We all hope that our travel by airline will be uneventful, but be prepared in case it doesn't, and don't loose your cool. Don't let a mishap in getting you there ruin your vacation!

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