

Travel Outlook

When airlines lose your bags

There you are, just off the airplane after a long flight to your holiday destination - and there's no sign of your luggage. Your heart sinks with every turn of the luggage carousel at the airport.

Statistics show that the vast majority of undelivered suitcases turn up within 12 to 24 hours, but that's small consolation at the moment you discover your loss. After all, how do you know that your bag won't be among the small minority?

The old chestnut about an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure certainly applies in this case, because your holiday could well be ruined before the pound of cure - that is, your precious luggage - arrives.

The one sure-fire method of prevention is to reduce the amount of your luggage to the volume of a carry-on bag that will fit under an airplane seat or into the overhead bin. Granted, that's difficult or impossible in many cases, and yet some experienced travellers have refined their needs with such surgical precision that they can keep their belongings with them throughout the trip. They are, of course, the first to clear customs and immigration upon arrival.

BE PREPARED

If you can't travel as lightly as that, there are nevertheless some steps that you can take to reduce the risk of losing your luggage:

-Don't overpack. Suitcases are necessarily bounced around in transit, and if they are tightly packed they may burst open even if locked.

-Never pack essentials, or breakable items. Carry your camera and lenses by hand, and keep cash, tickets, travel documents, electric shaver, medicine (such as cold and headache preparations), keys, toothbrush, etc., in your shoulder bag.

The definition of "essentials" can be even broader than that - for example, formal clothing you may be taking to wear at a wedding.

Couples taking two suitcases would be well advised to divide their non-essential items between two pieces. If one bag is lost, they can at least get by with the contents of the other.

NAME, ADDRESS

-Before you close up your luggage, affix a sticker to the inside, giving your name, home address and the addresses at which you can be reached while away, as well as telephone numbers.

Each piece of luggage should have a tag permanently attached to the handle, showing your name and address. (Most people prefer a business address or a relative's home address, to avoid advertising the fact that their home may be vacant).

-Remember that the time of arrival at the airport has a decided bearing on the matter. If you are taking the first flight of the day, be vigilant when you check your baggage, to ensure that a half-awake airline employee doesn't misdirect it. And if you arrive only a few minutes before take-off, chances are high that your luggage may be left behind while you run to the gate.

-Early, late, or just right, don't allow yourself to be distracted while your luggage is being tagged at the check-in. Ask what the three-letter code of your destination is, if you don't already know, and check to see that that code is on the stub given to you and on the other half that is attached to your bag (making sure that it is, indeed, your bag and not another passenger's).

IT'S LOST

If worse comes to worst and your luggage doesn't arrive at the destination, put aside that sinking feeling and report your loss to the proper person at the airport. At large terminals, there is almost always a so-called customer-service desk in the luggage delivery area.

You will be asked to fill out a report with the help of the employee - who may not appear to be as con-

cerned about the loss as you are. Keep a lid on your emotions, provide the description requested, keep your luggage check (or ask for a photocopy of it), and make a note of the employee's name. Let the airline know where you will be staying, and at what telephone number.

At this point, your memory will probably dredge up all the lost-luggage myths that you have heard, about per-diem allowances or lump-sum payments by the airlines, about emergency survival kits and reimbursement for personal inconvenience.

In fact, there's no universal policy. Some carriers will do a lot, others little. It seems to depend partly upon corporate policy, and partly on the extent of the fuss made by the victim.

COMPENSATION

If you bought a package tour from your travel agent, whom do you hold responsible for your loss - agent, tour packager, or airline? The answer is the airline. Nevertheless, you should seek emergency compensation from the tour operator's representative at the destination, if

there is such a person.

While waiting for your luggage, your out-of-pocket expenses will be considerable - such as taxis to and from the nearest shopping area. (Hotel boutiques seldom carry an adequate range of clothing). Keep a


record of these outlays.

An Ottawa couple, off to the Turks and Caicos Islands recently on a scuba-diving holiday, found that bags containing their specialized equipment had been sent to Calgary in error.

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