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Your Rights if Your Bags are Delayed



You'd think with all the latest bag bar coding and security matching against passengers, lost and delayed bags would be a thing of the past.

Alas, for many reasons, bags still go missing and sometimes still get lost.

Use this information to minimize the likelihood and inconvenience to you of a lost/delayed bag.

Part 1 of a 2 part series - [part 2](#) tells you what to do if your bag ultimately ends up as lost forever.

Most of the time, our bag obediently appears on the carousel. But, once in a rare while, it doesn't.

The airline is under no obligation to do anything more than the bare minimum it is required to by law to help you in such a case. This article tells you what the bare minimums are, and how to hopefully persuade the airline to be more helpful.

The first part of the process - your bag doesn't arrive

So there you are, waiting for your bag by the carousel, and it doesn't appear.

What you need to do at this stage is beat the rush to get to the lost luggage claim counter. Often you'll find that you're not the only person with missing/lost luggage, and you'll almost never find more than two people working the counter (and often only one). If there are three or four people ahead of you in line, and if each claim takes 5 - 10 minutes to process, you could find yourself spending up to an hour just waiting to file a claim.

So, while you're waiting for your bag, look around and find out where you'll have to go if your bag doesn't arrive. And as soon as bags seem to stop coming up, hot foot it over to the claim counter to be the first in line.

Note that just because one of your bags arrives, that does not guarantee that any other bags you also checked will also arrive. As soon as it seems that no more bags are coming, rush to the claim counter. You can always go back to the carousel if necessary.

Which claim counter do you go to

This might seem obvious, but if you flew on two (or more) flights, operated by two (or more) airlines, which airline do you file your claim with?

Believe it or not, good sense prevails in this case. The last airline to fly you is the airline that will be responsible for solving your baggage problem. The airline that flew you the final leg to your destination will at least have an airport office, but the airline you started your journey with (perhaps in a different country) may be totally unknown at your destination.

So go to the counter for the airline you flew with to your destination. All the airlines have agreed, among themselves, that no matter who is at fault, the last airline the passenger flies is the one that will solve the problem.

What to expect at the claim counter

At this point, your bag is either delayed or missing. If it is delayed, that means the airline knows exactly where your bag is, and also is 99% sure as to when your bag will arrive at your destination.

Hopefully your bag is only delayed. But don't panic if it is declared missing.

Good news - your bag is only delayed

Sometimes, the baggage claim staff may be a bit careless with the facts, and will try and tell you 'Oh yes, don't worry. Whenever bags miss this flight, they put them on the next flight, which is due in another hour. If you just wait for an extra sixty minutes, your bag should arrive at that time.'

Don't accept this statement without querying it carefully. Ask 'Can you confirm, then, that you have located my bag in your system, and that it is (currently loaded onto that flight/due to be loaded on that flight) for sure?' Get a feeling for what they're doing with their computer. If they haven't keyed your bag tag number into their computer and paged through a screen or two of data, you know they're just making it up as they go along.

Next, if they've absolutely assured you that your bag 100% will arrive on a specific flight, consider if you want to stick around the airport or not. Chances are you've already spent close on an hour at the airport between landing, waiting for your bag, and now this. And when the rep says 'your bag will arrive in an hour' he probably means 'the plane is scheduled to land in an hour'. Even if the flight arrives on time (have him check) there's still perhaps 30 minutes from when it lands to when your bag arrives on the carousel.

Maybe you'd rather go to your hotel or wherever rather than hang around the airport for another hour (or two or three). Or maybe you have a touring schedule that doesn't allow you to stay longer at the airport. In such a case, refuse to stay and insist they send the bag on to you.

Alternatively, if you're willing to stay, ask if they can give you a meal voucher or something so you can go to a restaurant while waiting for the hour. It is usually cheaper for the airline to buy you a meal than it is to pay a courier service to deliver your bag to you, so they should agree to this.

Bad news - your bag is missing

Maybe the bag claim representative is unable to tell you what has happened to your bag.

You might think that with all the bar-coding, scanning, bag-matching, and security in general, it is impossible for bags and passengers to get separated. Unfortunately, it is still very possible for this to happen, and - suggestion - don't get into a detailed and heated discussion on this point with the lost baggage claim representative at the airport! It isn't his fault and it isn't something he can control or fix. By all means write a letter to the airline subsequently, but for now, concentrate on resolving your missing bag problem as best you can.

One more admonition. If the baggage claim representative does tell you your bag is currently completely lost, don't panic. 98% of all bags that are missing at this stage will be found in the next four or five days, and most of those will be found in the first 24 - 48 hours.

Are you at home or somewhere else?

If your bag disappeared on your final flight home, the airline isn't going to feel a need to provide much in the way of temporary assistance, for the obvious reason that you probably have more of everything you might need at home.

If you're at your home airport, you only need to consider the first two of the three points that follow. But if you're somewhere else, your focus at this point is on establishing all three of these things :

(a) How to keep in contact with the airline, and how the airline can keep in contact with you, until such time as your bag's status is resolved?

Some airlines now have websites where you can key in their lost bag tracking number and get real time information on the status of the bag. Other airlines force you to rely on old fashioned phone calls, and usually they do not have 24 hour service at their lost bag centers. Get - and give - as much contact information as possible.

(b) What the process will be between now and the time at which your bag will either be delivered to you or declared lost for good?

Ask them when is the soonest they might get an update on the bag's status. Ask what hours their lost bag service center is open for taking phone calls.

Ask them how they will get your bag to you, and how long that takes from when the bag arrives on a flight to when it is delivered to your hotel/home/wherever.

Also ask them how long it would be before your bag is declared lost and gone for good. Will you then need to fill out a lost bag form (almost certainly, yes). If so, and just in case the worst does come to the worst, can you take a copy of that form with you now, so as to avoid an extra trip to the airport?

(c) What level of reimbursement can you expect for anything you need to buy between now and when your bags arrive?

In the good old days, a delayed bag was a good thing - you could go on a shopping spree and the airline would pay for the cost of quite a lot of clothing and toiletries. I've managed to get several free suits that way. These days, don't plan to profit or benefit from your bag's delay at all.

The airline will expect you to meet them at least halfway in dealing with your delayed bag. You'll also find their definition of what 'halfway' might be can vary depending on if you're a very frequent flier with them, or someone they've never knowingly dealt with before, and if you bought the most expensive first class fare, or the cheapest discounted coach ticket.

Try and get a feeling for reimbursement guidelines from the person at the airport. He will probably try and avoid this question - it is a difficult question, and there are probably people behind you waiting for their turn, too. But insist on understanding what you can and should do immediately, and then what extra you can do the next day and the next day, until such time as your bag arrives or is declared lost. Explain your reasonable needs and ask how to resolve them.

If, for example, you were traveling in casual clothes over the weekend, but on Monday have an important business meeting to attend, you clearly need to buy some business attire. However, the airline will reason that you've now bought clothing that will have a lasting value to you, which is of course correct.

You could offer to return the clothing you bought to the airline in return for full reimbursement, because you might say 'instead of the \$1000 suit in my bag, I bought a \$250 suit that was better than nothing, but isn't something I'll regularly use in the future'. Of course, the \$250 suit is useless to the airline, other than as a tax write-off for whatever value they can give it away for, so they'll probably try and encourage you to keep it by upping their offer of reimbursement.

Most airlines seem to require a 24 hour delay in getting your bags to you before they'll start to consider reimbursing you for new clothing.

Ask if they have any overnight kits or immediate cash advance or something they can give you if it seems you'll be without your bag overnight.

Suggested claim strategy

My suggestion is to be conspicuously fair with the small things, in the hope that the airline, in turn, will be fair with the big things.

I usually tell the airline that I won't bother to claim the cost of a replacement toothbrush or overnight toiletries, or any small things like that, and offer to wash out socks and underwear that night in the hotel rather than insist on everything new for the next morning. This seems like a generous offer on my part, but in reality, I know the airline is unlikely to give me anything much until the bag has been missing for 24 hours. But by voluntarily appearing to concede something up front, I seem more like a good guy, and someone that hopefully the airline rep will choose to then use his discretion positively with.

After this gracious concession, I add 'obviously, I can't continue like this for ever, and if it looks like you can't get my bag to me tomorrow, I think it only fair to buy a change of

clothing for the next day.' If the person makes any sort of sound of agreement, I then ask them 'could you put that in the record, please so that there are no misunderstandings when I go to claim the expense'. I back up this request by making sure I have the name of the person I was speaking with, and when I leave the airport, I call the baggage service to confirm that the authorization is in the record.

But, remember. This is not a chance for a free shopping spree. Buy sensible priced moderate clothing, and only the bare minimum needed, unless you've got the airline's approval to be more generous.

The airline will probably insist on seeing receipts for anything you claim, and may even require you to return the items to them in exchange for full reimbursement of their cost.

Cash or travel vouchers

The airline will often offer to give you travel vouchers instead of cash, and if it doesn't offer, you should suggest. My rule of thumb is that \$1 in cash should be worth at least \$2 in travel vouchers, and generally that seems to be accepted by the airline.

Note that there are different forms of travel vouchers they might give you. The best sort is an 'MCO' - a 'Miscellaneous Charges Order'. This is a bit like a gift certificate, and can be used to pay for any and all future charges on the airline (unless it has restrictions written on it).

The airline might try and give you discounted travel vouchers which are capacity controlled and subject to various restrictions and blackouts. These are not nearly as good as MCOs. Perhaps - if offered this type of voucher - you might ask for three times the value of your claim.

Don't think you're profiteering by doing this. These restricted certificates cost the airline next to nothing - their actual direct cost to the airline is perhaps 1/20th of their face value, and maybe even less. On the other hand, the cost to the airline of writing you out a check for your claim is clearly and exactly the sum involved. Accepting three times as much restricted travel value is much better to the airline than giving you cash up front.

Maximum claim value

The airline isn't going to pay you more, for delayed luggage, than it would for lost luggage. See next week's article for their liability limits.

Read more in Part 2

In [Part 2](#) we explain the airlines' liability for lost luggage, and the various catches and exceptions where they might end up not paying you, at all, for the most valuable things in your luggage.

We also warn you how to avoid paying 100 times the fair cost of extra luggage insurance, and give suggestions for how to minimize the chances of having your luggage go missing in the first place.

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