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How to prevent your luggage getting lost



Despite advances, luggage still insists on getting lost, writes Jane E. Fraser.

It's an impressive achievement: a 22 per cent reduction in the amount of luggage lost or misdirected by airlines last year. Yet it still leaves nearly 33 million pieces of mishandled luggage - and that's a lot of grumpy passengers.

Lost, delayed, stolen or damaged luggage remains a significant issue for travellers and airlines, who incur cost and inconvenience.

Only a fraction of bags are permanently lost but significant time and resources are wasted on tracing and returning mishandled luggage.

Aviation consultancy SITA, which produces the annual baggage statistics, attributes the reduction in mishandled luggage to improved technology and to airline policies resulting in fewer bags being checked in.

It says while the 2008 figures are a great improvement after years of consecutive increases, "it's still not good enough". Here are our top tips for improving the chances of your bag arriving with you.

DON'T PUSH IT If you are going to be checking in luggage, the most important thing is to avoid tight connections.

"The single biggest problem for baggage handlers is when bags are being transferred from one aircraft to another," SITA says. Bags mishandled in transit accounted for 49 per cent of all mishandled luggage last year. The second-biggest cause was "failed to load", which accounted for 16 per cent of missing bags.

Make sure you arrive at the airport in plenty of time before your flight to lessen this risk.

CARRY IT When possible, travel with carry-on baggage only. Some airlines are starting to charge fees for checked bags, so this will not only reduce the likelihood of lost luggage but save you money too.

Pack mix-and-match clothes, make do with one or two pairs of shoes, buy toiletries when you get there and use hotel laundry facilities or hand washing as you go. US Airways reports that checked-in luggage has reduced by 20 per cent since it introduced luggage fees - it seems people can travel light when they want to.

TAG IT An obvious piece of advice but one that many travellers still fail to follow. Checked-in bags need to be tagged with tough labels, not flimsy ones that rip off when snagged. It is best for security reasons to get a tag that hides your home address inside the tag and you should always include your mobile number with country code. If the airline gives you a label, put that on too. You can't have too many.

PREPARE FOR THE WORST If you are checking in your luggage, it is a good idea to have a change of clothes and some toiletries included in your hand luggage.

Always carry your documents and money on you, rather than in luggage.

And if you are travelling to a cold climate, carry your warm coat on board rather than check it in (you only make that mistake once).

DON'T TEMPT FATE While a nondescript black suitcase is awfully hard to find in a mountain of lost luggage, flashy luggage is not a great idea either.

Expensive-looking luggage is more of a temptation to thieves, while valuable contents are more of a temptation to unscrupulous baggage handlers.

Tamper-evident seals or cable ties can be used but remember countries such as the USA require that all luggage can be opened by security staff.

INSURE FOR THE WORST Make sure you have adequate travel insurance to cover your luggage and any electronic items.

Many policies have per-item limits that are not enough to cover expensive items. Also, be sure to look for a policy that provides an allowance for essentials such as clothes and toiletries in the case of delayed luggage.

TRACE IT If you do lose a bag in your travels, make sure you hang onto the baggage receipt usually stuck to the back of your boarding pass folder. Baggage numbers drop out of airline systems after a few days and once that happens the chances of getting your bag back are considerably less.

HONESTY SYSTEMS High-tech baggage tags have been heralded as one solution to misplaced baggage, providing a back-up to airlines' own tracing systems. Services such as Trace Me Luggage Tracker (www.tracemeluggagetracker.com) and I'm Honest (imhonest.com) allow travellers to identify bags and valuables with individually coded labels.

Trace Me records owners' details on a database accessible to airlines, police and other authorised agents. The barcode on the tag is scanned then the owner receives a phone call, SMS or email to say the luggage has been located.

The magazine Budget Travel tested three such systems by deliberately leaving bags on planes, baggage carousels and in the back of New York taxis. It got mixed results, with five of the nine abandoned bags returned.

All of the returned bags were those left on planes or in airports - the bags left in taxis disappeared without trace.

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