

Luggage Lessons

What to do when your bag takes a detour

BY LAURA DAILY

You can't brush your teeth with an iPad. Alas, that's all Chris Gahl of Indianapolis had when he arrived in Wellington, New Zealand—and his luggage didn't. "In 30 years, I've stepped on five continents and more than 40 islands and never had a bag go missing," he says.

In fact, Gahl hadn't checked a bag in 10 years. But when his favorite golf shoes wouldn't squeeze into his carry-on, he opted for a larger suitcase and checked it; so confident it would arrive, he carried only his iPad as a flight companion.

The good news is airlines "mishandle" fewer bags each year. Only three out of every 1,000 passengers report an issue (delayed, damaged, or lost), but that's little comfort if yours goes missing.

Under U.S. Department of Transportation regulations, you're entitled to up to \$3,300 in compensation on flights within the United States should something happen to a checked bag. For international airlines, which operate under a special treaty, it's about \$650.

And while it's easy for seasoned road warriors to preach, "Never check a bag," the reality is sometimes you have no choice. Our advice is to minimize the chances of your luggage taking an unscheduled detour or, at least, be prepared if it does.

Gahl's suitcase did appear, though two days late. He made do in the interim with some toiletries courtesy of his hotel and a new shirt he bought in Wellington—and, of course, his iPad for company.

PREFLIGHT

- Book direct or nonstop flights. Each time the airline handles your luggage represents another opportunity for it to be lost.
- Take photos of your luggage, and keep them on your phone or laptop. That makes it easier to describe your bags to airline personnel.
- Buy brightly colored luggage that stands out.
- Label inside and out. Put your name, contact information, a packing list, and your destination address on a sheet of paper inside each bag. Keep a copy for yourself.
- Pack your carry-on wisely, so you can live out of it for a few days.

AT THE AIRPORT

- Remove any old tags.
- Confirm that the new tag is attached and that it lists the correct destination.
- Hang onto the baggage claim ticket, often attached to your boarding pass.
- If you must pack pricey items, buy the airline's "excess valuation insurance," suggests Andrew Schrage of Money Crashers, a personal finance website. On most domestic flights, \$1 buys \$100 worth of extra coverage up to a maximum limit of \$5,000.

UPON ARRIVAL

- No bag? File a report *before* leaving the airport and get a copy, including reference number.
- Keep receipts for any purchases. Most airlines reimburse basic clothing and toiletries, but some won't cover expenses incurred in the first 24 hours, hoping your bag will turn up.
- Create accountability. Gahl got the name, direct phone number, and email address of the Air New Zealand agent, making her part of the recovery effort. **W**

Denver-based Laura Daily writes about consumer travel strategies.



Read "Found: Lost Luggage" at AAA.com/westways to find out what happens to unclaimed luggage.