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A Consumer Guide to Air Travel

By MalaMaal.com

A Consumer Guide to Air Travel

NOTICE We make every effort to keep Fly-Rights up to date, but airlines frequently change the way they do business. So by the time you read this a few procedures we explain may be different. Contact DOT or your airline or travel agent if you have any questions.

The elimination of government economic regulation of the airlines has resulted in lower fares and a wide variety of price/service options. In this new commercial environment, consumers have had to take a more active role in choosing their air service by learning to ask a number of questions.

–Am I more concerned with price or scheduling? Am I willing to fly at an odd hour if it means saving \$25? –Will the airline penalize me for changing my reservation? –What will the airline do for me if it cancels my flight? This booklet is designed to explain your rights and responsibilities as an air traveler. We hope it helps you become a resourceful consumer. Because of the emphasis on price competition, consumers may choose from a wide variety of air fares. Some airlines are trying a “back to basics” approach—offering flights at bargain basement prices with few extras. For fare information, you can contact a travel agent, another ticket outlet or an airline serving the places you want to visit. Ask them to tell you the names of all airlines flying there. A travel agent can find virtually all airlines fares in his or her computer. Or, if you prefer you can call each airline to ask about the fares they charge, particularly any special promotional fares they may be offering at the time. You can also pay attention to newspaper and radio ads, where airlines advertise many of the discount plans that apply to your city. Finally, be alert to new companies serving the market. They may offer lower fares or different services than older established airlines. Here are some tips to help you decide among air fares: Be flexible in your travel plans in order to get the lowest fare. The best deals may be limited to travel on certain days of the week or particular hours of the day. After you get a fare quote, ask the reservations agent if you could save even more by leaving a day earlier or later, or by taking a different flight on the same day. Plan as far ahead as you can. Some airlines set aside only a few seats on each flight at the lower rates. The real bargains often sell out very quickly. On the other hand, air carriers sometimes make more discount seats available later. If you had decided against a trip because the discount fare you wanted was not available on the desired date, try again, especially just before the advance-purchase deadline.

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Some airlines may have discounts that others don't offer. In a large metropolitan area, the fare could depend on which airport you use. Also, a connection (change of planes) or a one-stop flight is sometimes cheaper than a nonstop.

Find out what will happen if you switch flights or dates. Does the air fare include types of service that airlines have traditionally provided, such as meals or free baggage handling? If you have a connection involving two airlines, will your bags be transferred? Can you get advance seat assignments? If you are stranded, will the ticket be good on another carrier at no extra charge? Will the first airline pay for meals or hotel rooms during the wait? Many discount fares are non-refundable; if you buy one of these fares and later cancel your trip, you will not get your money back. Some fares also have a penalty for changing flights or dates even if you don't want a refund. You may also have to pay any difference in air fares if your fare is not available on the new flight. Some airlines will not increase

the fare after the ticket is issued and paid for. (Simply holding a reservation without a ticket does not guarantee the fare.) Other airlines may reserve the right to collect more money from you if the fare that you had purchased goes up before departure time. Find out from the airline before you buy your ticket what its policy is on assessing fare increases after the ticket is purchased.

After you buy your ticket, call the airline or travel agent once or twice before departure to check the fare. Fares change all the time, and if that same fare goes down before you fly, some airlines will refund the difference. But you have to ask. Differences in air fares can be substantial. Careful comparison shopping among airlines does take time, but it can lead to real savings. Once you decide when and where you want to go, and which airline you want to use, getting reservations and tickets is a fairly simple process. You can make all of your arrangements by telephone, at the airlines ticket office, or through a travel agent or other ticket outlet. There are a few potential pitfalls, however, and these pointers should help you avoid them. If your travel plans fall into a busy period, call for reservations early. Flights for holidays may sell out weeks—sometimes months—ahead of time. Don't buy a standby fare or an open return ticket if you need to fly during a high-demand period, especially the end of August. You could be stranded for a week or more before a seat becomes available.

Ask the reservations agent for your flight's on-time performance code. Ask the reservations agent to give you the on-time performance code for any flights that you are considering. This is a one-digit code in the reservations computer that shows how often that flight arrived on time (within 15 minutes) during the most recent reported month. For example, an 8 means that flight arrived within 15 minutes of the scheduled arrival time between 80% and 89.9% of the time. If you are deciding between two flights with similar schedules and fares, you may want to choose the one with the better on-time record. (Only the largest U.S. airlines are required to maintain these codes.)

When you make a reservation, be sure the agent records the information accurately. Before you hang up or leave the ticket office, review all of the essential information with the agent—the spelling of your name, the flight numbers and travel dates, and the cities you are traveling between. If there is more than one airport at either city, be sure you check which one you'll be using. It's also important to give the airline your home and work telephone numbers so they can let you know if there is any change in their schedule.

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Your ticket will show the flight number, departure time, date, and status of your reservation for each flight of your itinerary. The status box is important. OK means you're confirmed. Anything else means that the reservation is not yet certain (e.g., waitlisted).

A direct (or through) flight can have one or more stops. Sometimes flights with only one flight number can even involve a change of planes. Ask about your exact routing. If you are flying to a small city and your flight number has four digits, you may be booked on a commuter airline that has an agreement with the major carrier in whose name the flight is held out. If you are unsure, ask the reservations agent about the airline and the aircraft type; these flights are identified in the computer. When a reservations agent asks you to buy your tickets by a specific time or date, this is a deadline. And if you don't make the deadline, the airline may cancel your reservations without telling you. Try to have your tickets in hand before you go to the airport. This speeds your check-in and helps you avoid some of the tension you might otherwise feel if you had to wait in a slow-moving ticketing line and worry about missing your flight. If your reservations are booked far enough ahead of time, the airline may offer to mail your tickets to you. However, if you don't receive the tickets and the airline's records show that they mailed them, you may have to go through cumbersome lost-ticket procedures (see the end of this chapter). It is safer to check the telephone directory for a conveniently located

travel agency or airline ticket office and buy your tickets there. As soon as you receive your ticket check to make sure all the information on it is correct, especially the airports (if any of the cities have more than one) and the flight dates. Have any necessary corrections made immediately. Bring a photo I.D. when you fly, and have your airline ticket issued using your name as it appears on that I.D. Many airlines are requesting such identification at check-in in order to reduce the re-selling of discount tickets. (Airlines don't permit tickets to be sold or given to other persons.) On international flights, make sure your name is the same on your ticket and your passport. If your name has recently changed and the name on your ticket and your I.D. are different, bring documentation of the change (e.g., a marriage certificate or court order).

It's a good idea to reconfirm your reservations before you start your trip; flight schedules sometimes change. On international trips, most airlines require that you reconfirm your onward or return reservations at least 72 hours before each flight. If you don't, your reservations may be canceled. Check your ticket as you board each flight to ensure that only the correct coupon has been removed by the airline agent. Paying for and refunding airline tickets

If you plan to pay in person and with your own bank check, take at least two forms of identification with you like a driver's license, major credit card, or employee I.D. card. Particularly when you purchase tickets far from your home town, airlines, travel agencies and other ticket outlets will want to confirm your identity.

Count your ticket coupons after checking in for each flight. If you paid for your ticket with cash and you have a refundable fare, you can often get an immediate refund from the issuing airline or travel agency. If you paid by personal check, the refund will generally have to be mailed to you. NOTE: In some cases tickets purchased overseas in foreign currency can only be refunded in that same currency and country, due to foreign government monetary restrictions. Keep this in mind if you are considering buying a ticket in a foreign country.

When you pay by credit card, your charge account is billed whether you use your tickets or not. You won't receive credit unless the original unused tickets are returned to the airline. You usually can't get a cash refund for a credit card purchase.

If you buy your tickets with a credit card and then change your flights, the ticket agent may want to credit the amount of the old tickets and issue another set with a second charge to your account. You may want to insist that the value of your old tickets be applied to the new ones, with the difference in price charged or credited to your account. While this creates a little extra work for the airlines, it prevents double-billing to your charge account.

Airline tickets should be treated like cash; lost tickets are not easy to refund. Payment by credit card provides certain protections under federal credit laws. When a refund is due, the airline must forward a credit to your card company within seven business days after receiving a complete refund application. If you paid by credit card for a refundable fare and you have trouble getting a refund that you are due, report this in writing to your credit card company. If you write to them within 60 days from the time that they mailed your first monthly statement showing the charge for the airline ticket, the card company should credit your account even if the airline doesn't. This procedure is particularly useful if your airline ceases operations before your flight. Lost tickets Airline tickets are similar to negotiable documents. Because of this, refunds can be difficult to obtain if tickets are lost or stolen. Many passengers believe that air tickets can be replaced as easily as travelers checks just because the reservation is in the computer, but that is not the case. Your ticket number may be shown on

your credit card receipt or travel agency itinerary. If it is not, jot down the number on a sheet of paper and carry it separately from your ticket. Bring it with you on your trip. If the ticket does go astray, the airline can process your refund application more quickly, and perhaps issue an on-the-spot replacement ticket, if you can give them this number. You should report a lost ticket immediately to the airline that is shown as the issuing carrier at the top of the ticket. You may be required to repurchase a ticket in order to continue your trip. If you no longer meet all of the restrictions on your discount fare (e.g., seven-day advance purchase) the new ticket may cost more than the old one did. In that event, however, it is generally the higher fare that is eventually refunded, as long as you don't change any of the cities, flights or dates on your trip. Once the airline establishes that you actually bought the ticket, they will begin processing your refund application. There is often a waiting period of two to six months. If anyone uses or cashes in your ticket while the refund is pending, the airline may refuse to give you your money back. Finally, there is a handling charge that the airline may deduct from the refund. All in all, getting a refund or replacement for a lost ticket is a lot of trouble, and there's no guarantee you'll receive either one. So the best advice is don't lose the ticket in the first place.

Airlines don't guarantee their schedules, and you should realize this when planning your trip. There are many things that can—and often do—make it impossible for flights to arrive on time. Some of these problems, like bad weather, air traffic delays, and mechanical repairs, are hard to predict and beyond the airlines control. If your flight is delayed, try to find out how late it will be. But keep in mind that it is sometimes difficult for airlines to estimate the total duration of a delay during its early stages. In so-called "creeping delays," developments occur which were not anticipated when the carrier made its initial estimate of the length of the delay. Weather that had been forecast to improve can instead

deteriorate, or a mechanical problem can turn out to be more complex than initially determined. If the problem is with local weather or air traffic control, all flights will probably be late and there's not much you or the airline can do to speed up your departure. If there's a mechanical problem with the plane for your particular flight or if the crew is delayed on an incoming flight, you might be better off trying to arrange another flight, as long as you don't have to pay a cancellation penalty or higher fare for changing your reservations. (It is sometimes easier to make such arrangements from a pay phone than at a ticket counter.) If you find a flight on another airline, ask the first airline to endorse your ticket to the new carrier; this could save you a fare increase. Remember, however, that there is no rule requiring them to do this. If your flight is canceled, most airlines will rebook you on the first flight of theirs to your destination on which space is available, at no additional charge. If this involves a significant delay find out if another carrier has space, and ask the first airline to endorse your ticket. Finding extra seats may be difficult, however, especially over holidays and other peak travel times.

A departure early in the day is less likely to be delayed than a later flight. Each airline has its own policies about what it will do for delayed passengers waiting at the airport; there are no federal requirements. If you are delayed, ask the airline staff if they will pay for meals or a phone call. Some airlines, often those charging very low fares, do not provide any amenities to stranded passengers. Others may not offer amenities if the delay is caused by bad weather or something else beyond the airline's control. Contrary to popular belief, airlines are not required to compensate passengers whose flights are delayed or canceled. As discussed in the chapter on overbooking, compensation is required by law only when you are bumped from a flight that is oversold. Airlines almost always refuse to pay passengers for financial losses resulting from a delayed flight. If the purpose of your trip is to close a potentially lucrative business deal, to give a speech or lecture, to attend a family function, or to be present at any time-sensitive event, you might want to allow a little extra leeway and take an earlier flight. In other words, airline delays and cancellations aren't unusual, and defensive counter-planning is a good idea when time is your most important consideration. When booking your flight

remember that a departure early in the day is less likely to be delayed than a later flight, due to ripple effects throughout the day. Also, if an early flight does get delayed or canceled, you have more rerouting options. If you book the last flight of the day and it is canceled, you could get stuck overnight. You may select a connection (change of planes) over a nonstop or direct flight because of the convenient departure time or lower fare. However, a change of planes always involves the possibility of a misconnection.

If you have a choice of connections and the fares and service are equivalent, choose the one with the least-congested connecting airport, so it will be easier to get to your second flight. You may wish to take into consideration the potential for adverse weather if you have a choice of connecting cities. When making your reservation for a connection, always check the amount of time between flights. Ask yourself what will happen if the first flight is delayed; if you don't like the answer, pick another flight or ask the agent to construct a connection that allows more time.

Overbooking is not illegal, and most airlines overbook their scheduled flights to a certain extent in order to compensate for no-shows. Passengers are sometimes left behind or bumped as a result. When an oversale occurs, the Department of Transportation (DOT) requires airlines to ask people who aren't in a hurry to give up their seats voluntarily, in exchange for compensation. Those

passengers bumped against their will are, with a few exceptions, entitled to compensation.

Voluntary bumping Almost any group of airline passengers includes some people with urgent travel needs and others who may be more concerned about the cost of their tickets than about getting to their destination on time. Our rules require airlines to seek out people who are willing to give up their seats for some compensation before bumping anyone involuntarily. Here's how this works. At the check-in or boarding area, airline employees will look for volunteers when it appears that the flight has been oversold. If you're not in a rush to arrive at your next destination, you can give your reservation back to the airline in exchange for compensation and a later flight. But before you do this, you may want to get answers to these important questions: When is the next flight on which the airline can confirm your seat? The alternate flight may be just as acceptable to you. On the other hand, if they offer to put you on standby on another flight that's full, you could be stranded. Will the airline provide other amenities such as free meals, a hotel room, phone calls, or ground transportation? If not, you might have to spend the money they offer you on food or lodging while you wait for the next flight.

DOT has not said how much the airline has to give volunteers. This means carriers may negotiate with their passengers for a mutually acceptable amount of money—or maybe a free trip or other benefits. Airlines give employees guidelines for bargaining with passengers, and they may select those volunteers willing to sell back their reservations for the lowest price. If the airline offers you a free ticket, ask about restrictions. How long is the ticket good for? Is it blocked out during holiday periods when you might want to use it? Can it be used for international flights? Most importantly, can you make a reservation, and if so, how far before departure are you permitted to make it?

Involuntary bumping DOT requires each airline to give all passengers who are bumped involuntarily a written statement describing their rights and explaining how the carrier decides who gets on an oversold flight and who doesn't. Those travelers who don't get to fly are frequently entitled to an on-the-spot payment of denied boarding compensation. The amount depends on the price of their ticket and the length of the delay:

If you are bumped involuntarily and the airline arranges substitute transportation that is scheduled to get you to your final destination (including later connections) within one hour of your original scheduled arrival time, there is no compensation.

If the airline offers you a free ticket, ask about restrictions

If the airline arranges substitute transportation that is scheduled to arrive at your destination between one and two hours after your original arrival time (between one and four hours on international flights), the airline must pay you an amount equal to your one-way fare to your final destination, with a \$200 maximum. If the substitute transportation is scheduled to get you to your destination more than two hours later (four hours internationally), or if the airline does not make any substitute travel arrangements for you, the compensation doubles (200% of your fare, \$400 maximum). You always get to keep your original ticket and use it on another flight. If you choose to make your own arrangements, you can request an involuntary refund for the ticket for the flight you were bumped from. The denied boarding compensation is essentially a payment for your inconvenience. Like all rules, however, there are a few conditions and exceptions: To be eligible for compensation, you must have a confirmed reservation. An OK in the Status box of your ticket qualifies you in this

regard even if the airline can't find your reservation in the computer, as long as you didn't cancel your reservation or miss a reconfirmation deadline. You must meet the airlines deadline for buying your ticket. Discount tickets must usually be purchased within a certain number of days after the reservation was made. Other tickets normally have to be picked up no later than 30 minutes before the flight. You must appear at the gate at least 10 minutes before departure, even if you already have a boarding pass and seat assignment. In addition to the ticketing deadline, each airline has a check-in deadline, which is the amount of time before scheduled departure that you must present yourself to the airline at the airport. For domestic flights most carriers have a deadline of 10 minutes before scheduled departure, but some can be an hour or longer. (Many airlines require passengers with advance seat assignments to check in 30 minutes before scheduled departure, even if they already have advance boarding passes. If you miss this deadline you may lose the specific seats you were promised, although not the reservation itself.) Check-in deadlines on international flights can be as much as three hours before scheduled departure time, due partially to security procedures. Some airlines may simply require you to be at the ticket/baggage counter by this time; most, however, require that you get all the way to the boarding area. If you miss the ticketing or check-in deadline, you may have lost your reservation and your right to compensation if the flight is oversold. As noted above, no compensation is due if the airline arranges substitute transportation which is scheduled to arrive at your destination within one hour of your originally scheduled arrival time. If the airline must substitute a smaller plane for the one it originally planned to use, the carrier isn't required to pay people who are bumped as a result. The rules do not apply to charter flights, or to scheduled flights operated with planes that hold 60 or fewer passengers. They don't apply to international flights inbound to the United States, although some airlines on these routes may follow them voluntarily. Also, if you are flying between two foreign cities from Paris to Rome, for example these rules will not apply. The European Community has a rule on bumpings that occur in an EC country; ask the airline for details, or contact DOT. The best way to avoid getting 'bumped' is to check in early. The most effective way to reduce the risk of being bumped is to get to the airport early. On oversold flights the last passengers to check in are usually the first to be bumped, even if they have met the check-in deadline. Allow extra time; assume that the airport access road is backed up, the parking lot is full, and there is a long line at the check-in counter. However, if you arrive so early that your airline has another flight to your destination leaving before the one that you are booked on, either switch to the earlier flight or don't check your bag until after the first flight leaves. If you check your bag right away, it might get put on the earlier flight and remain unattended at your destination airport for hours. Airlines may offer free transportation on future flights in place of a check for denied boarding compensation. However, if you are bumped involuntarily you have the right to insist on a check if that is your preference. Once you cash the check (or accept the free flight), you will probably lose the right to demand more money from the airline later on. However, if being bumped costs you more money

than the airline will pay you at the airport, you can try to negotiate a higher settlement with their complaint department. If this doesn't work, you usually have 30 days from the date on the check to decide if you want to accept the amount of the check. You are always free to decline the check and take the airline to court to try to obtain more compensation. The government's denied boarding regulation spells out the airlines' minimum obligation to people they bump involuntarily. Finally, don't be a no-show. If you are holding confirmed reservations you don't plan to use, notify the airline. If you don't, they will cancel all onward or return reservations on your trip. Between the time you check your luggage in and the time you claim it at your destination, it may have passed through a

maze of conveyor belts and baggage carts; once airborne, baggage may tumble around the cargo compartment if the plane hits rough air. In all fairness to the airlines, however, relatively few bags are damaged or lost. With some common-sense packing and other precautions, your bags will probably be among the ones that arrive safely. Packing You can pack to avoid problems. Some items should never be put into a bag you plan to check into the cargo compartment: Small valuables: cash, credit cards, jewelry, cameras. Critical items: medicine, keys, passport, tour vouchers, business papers. Irreplaceable items: manuscript, heirlooms. Fragile items: eyeglasses, glass containers, liquids. Things like this should be carried on your person or packed in a carry-on bag that will fit under the seat. Remember, the only way to be sure your valuables are not damaged or lost is to keep them with you. Even if your bag is not lost, it could be delayed for a day or two. Don't put perishables in a checked bag; they may spoil if it is delayed. It is wise to put items that you will need during the first 24 hours in a carry-on bag (e.g. toiletries, a change of underwear). Check with the airline for its limits on the size, weight, or number of carry-on pieces. (There is no single federal standard.) If you are using more than one airline, check on all of them. Inquire about your flight; different airplanes can have different limits. Don't assume that the flight will have unlimited closet space for carry-on garment bags; some may have to be checked. If you plan to go shopping at your destination and bring your purchases aboard as carry-on, keep the limits in mind. If you check these purchases, however, carry the receipts separately; they may be necessary for a claim if the merchandise is lost or damaged. Don't put anything into a carry-on bag that could be considered a weapon (e.g. scissors, pen knife).

Bring toiletries and a change of underwear in a carry-on bag, in case your checked luggage is delayed. Checked baggage is also subject to limits. On most domestic and international flights, it's two checked bags (three if you don't have any carry-on luggage). There can be an extra charge if you bring more, or if you exceed the airline's limits on the size of the bags. On some flights between two foreign cities, your allowance may be based on the weight of the bags rather than the number of pieces. The same two bags that cost you nothing to check when you started your trip could result in expensive excess-baggage charges under a weight system. Ask the airlines about the limit for every segment of your international trip before you leave home, especially if you have a stopover of a day or two or if you are changing carriers. The bags you check should be labeled inside and out with your name, address and phone number. Add the name and address of a person to contact at your destination if it's practical to do so. Almost all of the bags that are misplaced by airlines do turn up sooner or later. With proper labeling, the bag and its owner can usually be reunited within a few hours. Don't overpack a bag. This puts pressure on the latches, making it easier for them to pop open. Also, lock your bags. The locks aren't very effective against pilferage, but they help to keep the latches from springing. If you plan to check any electrical equipment, glassware, small appliances, pottery, typewriters, musical instruments or other fragile items, they should be packed in a container specifically designed to survive rough handling* preferably a factory-sealed carton or a padded hard-shell carrying case. Check-in Don't check in at the last minute. Even if you make the flight, your bag may not. If you miss the airline's check-in deadline, the carrier might not assume liability for your bag if it is delayed or lost. If you have a choice, select flights that minimize the potential for baggage

disruption. The likelihood of a bag going astray increases from #1 to #4 below (i.e., #1 is safest):

1) nonstop flight 2) direct or 'through' flight (one or more stops, but no change of aircraft)

3)online connection (change of aircraft but not airlines) 4)interline connection (change of aircraft and airlines) When you check in, remove straps and hooks from garment bags that you are sending as checked baggage. These can get caught in baggage processing machinery, causing damage to the bag. The airline will put baggage destination tags on your luggage and give you the stubs to use as claim checks. Make sure you get a stub for every bag. Don't throw them away until after you get your bags back and you check the contents. Not only will you need them if a claim is necessary, but you may need to show them to security upon leaving the baggage–claim area. Each tag has a three–letter code and flight number that show the baggage sorters on which plane and to which airport your luggage is supposed to go. Double–check the tag before your bags go down the conveyor belt. (The airline will be glad to tell you the code for your destination when you make reservations or buy your tickets.) Your bags may only be checked to one of your intermediate stops rather than your destination city if you must clear Customs short of your final destination, or if you are taking a connection involving two airlines that don't have an interline agreement. Be sure all of the tags from previous trips are removed from your bag, since they may confuse busy baggage handlers.

Claiming your bags Many bags look alike. After you pull what you think is your bag off the carousel, check the name tag or the bag tag number. Remove straps and hooks from garment bags; they can get caught in the machinery. If your bag arrives open, unlocked or visibly damaged, check right away to see if any of the contents are missing or damaged. Report any problems to the airline before leaving the airport; insist on filling out a form. Open your suitcase immediately when you get to where you are staying. Any damage to the contents or any pilferage should be immediately reported to the airline by telephone. Make a note of the date and time of the call, and the name and telephone number of the person you spoke with. Follow up immediately with a certified letter to the airline.

Damage If your suitcase arrives smashed or torn, the airline will usually pay for repairs. If it can't be fixed, they will negotiate a settlement to pay you its depreciated value. The same holds true for belongings packed inside. Airlines may decline to pay for damage caused by the fragile nature of the broken item or inadequate packing, rather than the airline's rough handling. Carriers may also refuse to give you money for your damaged items inside the bag when there's no evidence of external damage to the suitcase. But airlines generally don't disclaim liability for fragile merchandise packed in its original factory sealed carton, a cardboard mailing tube, or other container designed for shipping and packed with protective padding material. When you check in, airline personnel should let you know if they think your suitcase or package may not survive the trip intact. Before accepting a questionable item, they will ask you to sign a statement in which you agree to check it at your own risk. But even if you do sign this form, the airline might be liable for damage if it is caused by its own negligence shown by external injury to the suitcase or package.

Delayed bags If you and your suitcase don't connect at your destination, don't panic. The airlines have very sophisticated systems that track down about 98% of the bags they misplace and return them to their owners within hours. In many cases they will absorb reasonable expenses you incur while they look for your missing belongings. You and the airline may have different ideas of what's reasonable, however, and the amount they will pay is subject to negotiation. If your delayed bag is declared lost, you will have to fill out a second form. If your bags don't come off the conveyor belt, report this to the airline before you leave the airport. Insist that they fill out a form and give you a copy, even if they say the bag will be in on the next flight. If the form doesn't contain the name of the person who filled it out, ask for it. Get an appropriate phone number for following up (not the Reservations number). Don't assume that the airline will deliver the bag without charge when it is found; ask them about this. Most carriers set guidelines for their airport employees that allow them to disburse some money at the airport for emergency purchases. The amount depends on whether or not you're away from home and how long

it takes to track down your bags and return them to you. If the airline does not provide you a cash advance, it may still reimburse you later for the purchase of necessities. Discuss with the carrier the types of articles that would be reimbursable, and keep all receipts. If the airline misplaces sporting equipment, it will sometimes pay for the rental of replacements. For replacement clothing or other articles, the carrier might offer to absorb only a portion of the purchase cost, on the basis that you will be able to use the new items in the future. (The airline may agree to a higher reimbursement if you turn the articles over to them.) When you've checked in fresh foods or any other perishable goods and they are ruined because their delivery is delayed, the airline won't reimburse you. Carriers may be liable if they lose or damage perishable items, but they won't accept responsibility for spoilage caused by a delay in delivery. Airlines are liable for provable consequential damages up to the amount of their liability limit (see below) in connection with the delay. If you can't resolve the claim with the airline's airport staff, keep a record of the names of the employees with whom you dealt, and hold on to all travel documents and receipts for any money you spent in connection with the mishandling. (It's okay to surrender your baggage claim tags to the airline when you fill out a form at the airport, as long as you get a copy of the form and it notes that you gave up the tags.) Call or write the airline's consumer office when you get home.

Lost luggage Once your bag is declared officially lost, you will have to submit a claim. This usually means you have to fill out a second, more detailed form. Check on this; failure to complete the second form when required could delay your claim. Missing the deadline for filing it could invalidate your claim altogether. The airline will usually refer your claim form to a central office, and the negotiations between you and the airline will begin. If your flight was a connection involving two carriers, the final carrier is normally the one responsible for processing your claim even if it appears that the first airline lost the bag. Airlines don't automatically pay the full amount of every claim they receive. First, they will use the information on your form to estimate the value of your lost belongings. Like insurance companies, airlines consider the depreciated value of your possessions, not their original price or the replacement costs. If you're tempted to exaggerate your claim, don't. Airlines may completely deny claims they feel are inflated or fraudulent. They often ask for sales receipts and other documentation to back up claims, especially if a large amount of money is involved. If you don't keep extensive records, you can expect to dicker with the airline over the value of your goods. Generally, it takes an airline anywhere from six weeks to three months to pay you for your lost luggage. When they tender a settlement, they may offer you the option of free tickets on future flights in a higher amount than the cash payment. Ask about all restrictions on these tickets, such as "blackout" periods and how far before departure you are permitted to make a reservation.

Limits on liability The airlines' domestic liability limit is generally \$1250 per person. If your bags are delayed, lost or damaged on a domestic trip, the airline can invoke a ceiling of \$1250 per passenger on the amount of money they'll pay you. When your luggage and its contents are worth more than that, you may want to purchase "excess valuation," if available, from the airline as you check in. This is not insurance, but it will increase the carrier's potential liability. The airline may refuse to sell excess valuation on some items that are especially valuable or breakable, such as antiques, musical instruments, jewelry, manuscripts, negotiable securities and cash. On international trips, the liability limit is set by a treaty called the Warsaw Convention. Unless you buy excess valuation, the liability limit is \$9.07 per pound (\$20 per kilo). In order to limit its liability to this amount, the airline must use one of the following procedures:

- 1) The carrier weighs your bags at check-in and records this weight on your ticket. The airline's maximum liability to you is that weight multiplied by \$9.07 (or by \$20, if the weight was recorded in kilos).
- 2) Instead of weighing your luggage, the carrier assumes that each of your bags weighs the maximum that it agrees to accept as checked baggage, usually 70 pounds (32 kilos). This yields a liability limit

of about \$640 per bag. This international limit also applies to domestic segments of an international journey. This is the case even if the domestic and international flights are on separate tickets and you claim and re-check your bag between the two flights. Keep in mind that the liability limits are

maximums. If the depreciated value of your property is worth less than the liability limit, this lower amount is what you will be offered. If the airline's settlement doesn't fully reimburse your loss, check your homeowner's or renter's insurance; it sometimes covers losses away from the residence. Some credit card companies and travel agencies offer optional or even automatic supplemental baggage coverage. Hazardous Items Except for toiletries and medicines totaling no more than 75 ounces, it is illegal and extremely dangerous to carry on board or check in your luggage any of the following hazardous materials: Hazardous materials Aerosols*Polishes, waxes, degreasers, cleaners, etc. Corrosives*Acids, cleaners, wet cell batteries, etc. Flammables*Paints, thinners, lighter fluid, liquid reservoir lighters, cleaners, adhesives, camp stoves or portable gas equipment with fuel, etc. Explosives*Fireworks, flares, signal devices, loaded firearms, gunpowder, etc. (Small arms ammunition for personal use may be transported in checked luggage if it is securely packed in material designed for that purpose. These may not be placed in carry-on baggage.) Radioactives*Betascopes, radiopharmaceuticals, uninstalled pacemakers, etc. Compressed gases*Tear gas or protective-type sprays, oxygen cylinders, divers' tanks (unless they're empty), etc. Infectious substances Poisonous materials*Rat poison, etc. Matches (both æstrike anywhere' matches and safety or æbook' matches) may only be carried on your person. If you must travel with any of these materials, check with the airline's air freight department to see if special arrangements can be made. A violation of the hazardous materials restrictions can result in a civil penalty of up to \$25,000 for each violation or a criminal penalty of up to \$500,000 and/or up to 5 years in jail. On U.S. airlines, you are guaranteed a no-smoking seat worldwide.

Under U.S. government rules, smoking is prohibited on all domestic scheduled-service flights except for flights over six hours to or from Alaska or Hawaii. This ban applies to domestic segments of international flights, on both U.S. and foreign airlines (e.g., the Chicago / New York leg of a flight that operates Chicago/ New York / London). The ban does not apply to nonstop international flights, even during the time that they are in U.S. airspace (e.g., a Chicago / London flight). The prohibition applies in the passenger cabin and lavatories, but not in the cockpit. Smoking is also banned on other scheduled-service flights by U.S. airlines that are operated with planes seating fewer than 30 passengers (e.g., certain ôcommuterö flights to Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean). Cigar and pipe smoking is banned on all U.S.-carrier flights (scheduled and charter, domestic and international). The following rules apply to U.S. airlines on flights where smoking is not banned (e.g. international flights, domestic charter flights). These regulations do not apply to foreign airlines; however, most of them provide non-smoking sections (although they may not guarantee seating there or expand the section). The airline must provide a seat in a non-smoking section to every passenger who asks for one, as long as the passenger complies with the carrier's seat assignment deadline and procedures. (Standby passengers do not have this right.) If necessary, the airline must expand the non-smoking section to accommodate the passengers described above. The airline does not have to provide a non-smoking seat of the passenger's choice. It doesn't have to seat you with your traveling companion, and you don't have the right to specify a window or aisle non-smoking seat. Also, the airline is not required by this rule to provide advance seat assignments before the flight date in the non-smoking section, as long as they get you into the non-smoking section on the day of your flight. The flight

crew must act to keep passengers from smoking in the non-smoking sections. However, smoke that drifts from the smoking section into the non-smoking section does not constitute a violation. No smoking is allowed while an aircraft is on the ground or when the ventilation system is not fully functioning. Carriers are not required to have a smoking section. An airline is free to ban smoking on a particular flight, or on all of its flights. None of the regulations described in this chapter apply to charter flights performed with small aircraft by on-demand air taxi operators.

Over 40 million Americans have disabilities. The Air Carrier Access Act and the DOT rule that

implements it set out procedures designed to ensure that these individuals have the same opportunity as anyone else to enjoy a pleasant flight. Here are some of the major provisions of the rule. A person may not be refused transportation on the basis of disability or be required to have an attendant or produce a medical certificate, except in certain limited circumstances specified in the rule. Airlines must provide enplaning, deplaning and connecting assistance, including both personnel and equipment. (Some small commuter aircraft may not be accessible to passengers with severe mobility impairments. When making plans to fly to small cities, such passengers should check on the aircraft type and its accessibility.) Airport terminals and airline reservations centers must have TDD telephone devices for persons with hearing or speech impairments. Passengers with vision or hearing impairments must have timely access to the same information given to other passengers at the airport or on the plane concerning gate assignments, delayed flights, safety, etc. New widebody aircraft must have a wheelchair-accessible lavatory and an on-board wheelchair. Airlines must put an on-board wheelchair on most other flights upon a passenger's request (48 hours' notice required). Air carriers must accept wheelchairs as checked baggage, and cannot require passengers to sign liability waivers for them (except for pre-existing damage). Most new airplanes must have movable armrests on half the aisle seats, and on-board stowage for one folding passenger wheelchair. Carriers must allow service animals to accompany passengers in the cabin, as long as they don't block the aisle or other emergency evacuation route. FAA safety rules establish standards for passengers allowed to sit in emergency exit rows; such persons must be able to perform certain evacuation-related functions. FAA rules also prohibit passengers from bringing their own oxygen. Most airlines will provide aircraft-approved oxygen for a fee, but aren't required to. Airlines may not charge for services that are required by this rule. Airlines must make available a specially-trained Complaints Resolution Official if a dispute arises. There must be a copy of the DOT rule at every airport. It's wise to call the airline again before your trip to reconfirm any assistance that you have requested. For additional details, see "Other Sources of Information" at the end of this pamphlet for information on ordering the booklet *New Horizons for the Air Traveler with a Disability*.

Virtually all major U.S. airlines have a frequent-flyer plan, and many foreign carriers are starting them. These programs allow you to earn free trips, upgrades (e.g., from Coach to First Class) or other awards based on how often you fly on that airline. In some programs you can earn credit by using specified hotels, rental car companies, credit cards, etc. It doesn't cost anything to join a program, and you can enroll in the programs of any number of different airlines. However, it may not be to your advantage to "put all your eggs in one basket" with one plan by accumulating a high mileage balance only to find out later that another carrier's program suits your needs better. Here are some things to look at when selecting a frequent-flyer program.

Does the airline fly where you're likely to want to go? Are there tie-ins with other carriers, especially those with international routes? Is some of the airline's service provided by commuter-carrier partners? In both cases, can you earn credits and use awards on those other airlines? How many miles (or trips) are required for particular awards? Is there a minimum award per flight (e.g., you are only flying 200 miles but the airline always awards at least 500)? Is there a deadline for using accumulated miles? Carefully examine the number and length of any blackout periods during which awards cannot be used. On some carriers, the Thanksgiving blackout may last a week. If you are planning a big trip and are thinking about joining that airline's frequent-flyer program, enroll before you travel. Airlines usually won't credit mileage that was flown before you became a member. After you join a program, there are other things that you should know: Is there a deadline for using accumulated miles? Airlines reserve the right to make changes to their programs, sometimes on short notice. The number of miles required for particular awards might be raised, requiring you to use your old mileage (i.e., your current balance) under the more restrictive new rules. The airline may

cease service on a route that you were particularly interested in or it may drop the city you live in! The carrier may eliminate attractive frequent-flyer tie-ins with particular airlines or hotel chains. Cashing in your mileage frequently will limit your losses in case the carrier changes the rules, merges, or goes out of business. (Some private companies sell insurance covering some of these eventualities.) Accumulating a larger mileage balance will entitle you to bigger awards, however. Carriers often limit the number of seats on each flight for which frequent-flyer awards can be used. You may not be able to get reservations on your first- or second-choice dates or flights. Awards can often be issued in the name of immediate family members. However, if you sell or give an award to someone not named on the award or the travel document and the airline finds out, the recipient could have his or her ticket confiscated, and the carrier may penalize the program member's account balance. Ask the airline how mileage is registered; you will probably have to identify yourself as a program member when you book your flight or when you check in. Keep your boarding passes and the passenger coupon of your ticket until you receive a statement from the frequent-flyer program reflecting the correct mileage earnings for that trip. If a problem arises, get the names of the people you speak with and keep notes of your conversations.

Throughout this booklet, we have tried to provide you general information about airline travel. It is important to realize, however, that each airline has specific rules that make up your contract of carriage. These rules may differ among carriers. They include provisions such as check-in deadlines, refund procedures, responsibility for delayed flights, and many other things. Domestic Travel For domestic travel, an airline may provide all of its contract terms on or with your ticket at the time you buy it. Many small commuter carriers use this system. Other airlines may elect to incorporate terms by reference. This means that you are not given all the airline's rules with your ticket—most of them are contained in a separate document which you can inspect on request. If an airline elects to incorporate by reference it must provide conspicuous written notice with each ticket that: 1) it incorporates terms by reference, and 2) these terms may include liability limitations, claim-filing deadlines, check-in deadlines, and certain other key terms. The airline must also: Ensure that passengers can receive an explanation of key terms identified on the ticket from any location where the carrier's tickets are sold, including travel agencies; Make available for inspection the full text of its contract of carriage at each of its own airport and city ticket offices; Mail a free copy of the full text of its contract of carriage upon request. There are additional notice requirements for contract

terms that affect your air fare. Airlines must provide a conspicuous written notice on or with the ticket concerning any incorporated contract terms that: Restrict refunds; Impose monetary penalties; or Permit the airline to raise the price after you've bought the ticket. If an airline incorporates contract terms by reference and fails to provide the required notice about a particular rule, the passenger will not be bound by that rule. International Travel Not all of the detailed requirements for disclosing domestic contract terms apply to international travel. Airlines file tariff rules with the government for this transportation. Passengers are generally bound by these rules whether or not they receive actual notice about them. Every international airline must keep a copy of its tariff rules at its airport and city ticket offices. You have a right to examine these rules. The airline agents must answer your questions about information in the tariff, and they must help you locate specific tariff rules, if necessary. If the airline keeps its tariff in a computer rather than on paper, there are additional disclosure requirements which are similar to those for domestic contract terms. The most important point to remember, whether your travel is domestic or international, is that you should not be afraid to ask questions about a carrier's rules. You have a right to know the terms of your contract of carriage. It is in your best interest, as well as that of the airline, for you to ask in advance about any matters of uncertainty. Unlike most products, travel services usually have to be paid for before they are delivered. This creates opportunities for disreputable individuals and companies. Some travel packages turn out to be very different from what was presented or what the consumer

expected. Some don't materialize at all! If you receive an offer by phone or mail for a free or extremely low-priced vacation trip to a popular destination (often Hawaii or Florida), there are a few things you should look for: Does the price seem too good to be true? If so, it probably is. Are you asked to give your credit card number over the phone? Are you pressured to make an immediate decision? Is the carrier simply identified as a major airline, or does the representative offer a collection of airlines without being able to say which one you will be on? Is the representative unable or unwilling to give you a street address for the company? Are you told you can't leave for at least two months? (The deadline for disputing a credit card charge is 60 days, and most scam artists know this.) If you encounter any of these symptoms, proceed cautiously. Ask for written information to be sent to you; any legitimate travel company will be happy to oblige. If they don't have a brochure, ask for a day or two to think it over; most bona fide deals that are good today will still be good two days from now. If they say no to both requests, this probably isn't the trip for you. Some other advice: If you are told that you've won a free vacation, ask if you have to buy something else in order to get it. Some packages have promoted free air fare, as long as you buy expensive hotel arrangements. Others include a free hotel stay, but no air fare. If you are seriously considering the vacation offer and are confident you have established the full price you will pay, compare the offer to what you might obtain elsewhere. Frequently, the appeal of free air fare or free accommodations disguises the fact that the total price is still higher than that of a regular package tour. Get a confirmed departure date, in writing, before you pay anything. Eye skeptically any promises that an acceptable date will be arranged later. If the package involves standby or waitlist travel, or a reservation that can only be provided much later, ask if your payment is refundable if you want to cancel, and don't pay any money you can't afford to lose. If the destination is a beach resort, ask the seller how far the hotel is from the beach. Then ask the hotel. Determine the complete cost of the trip in dollars, including all service charges, taxes, processing fees, etc. If you decide to buy the trip after checking it out, paying by credit card gives you certain legal rights to pursue a chargeback (credit) if promised services aren't delivered. For further advice, see Other Sources of Information at the end of this

brochure for details on how to order the Federal Trade Commission's pamphlet *Telemarketing Travel Fraud*.

Flying is a routine activity for millions of Americans, and raises no health considerations for the great majority of them. However, there are certain things you can do to ensure that your flight is as comfortable as possible. Changes in pressure can temporarily block the Eustachian tube, causing your ears to *æpop'* or to experience a sensation of fullness. To equalize the pressure, swallow frequently; chewing gum sometimes helps. Yawning is also effective. Avoid sleeping during descent; you may not swallow often enough to keep ahead of the pressure change. If yawning or swallowing doesn't help, use the *ævalsalva maneuver'*: Pinch your nostrils shut, then breathe in a mouthful of air. Using only your cheek and throat muscles, force air into the back of your nose as if you were trying to blow your thumb and finger off your nostrils. Be very gentle and blow in short successive attempts. When you hear or feel a pop in your ears, you have succeeded. Never force air from your lungs or abdomen (diaphragm); this can create pressures that are too intense. Babies are especially troubled by these pressure changes during descent. Having them feed from a bottle or suck on a pacifier will often provide relief. Avoid flying if you have recently had abdominal, eye or oral surgery, including a root canal. The pressure changes that occur during climb and descent can result in discomfort. If you have an upper respiratory or sinus infection, you may also experience discomfort resulting from pressure changes. Postpone your trip if possible. (Check to see if your fare has cancellation or change penalties.) A final tip on pressure changes: they cause your feet to swell. Try not to wear new or tight shoes while flying. Airliner air is dry; if you wear contact lenses, blink often and limit reading. Alcohol and coffee both have a drying effect on the body. Airliner cabin air is relatively dry to begin with, and the combination can increase your chances of contracting a

respiratory infection. If you wear contact lenses, the low cabin humidity and/or consumption of alcohol or coffee can reduce your tear volume, leading to discomfort if you don't blink often enough. Lens wearers should clean their lenses thoroughly before the flight, use lubricating eye drops during the flight, read in intervals, and take the lenses out if they nap. (This may not apply to extended wear lenses; consult your practitioner.) If you take prescription medications, bring enough to last through your trip. Take along a copy of the prescription, or your doctor's name and telephone number, in case the medication is lost or stolen. The medicine should be in the original prescription bottle in order to avoid questions at security or Customs inspections. Carry it in a pocket or a carry-on bag; don't pack it in a checked bag, in case the bag is lost. You can minimize the effects of jet lag in several ways: Get several good nights' sleep before your trip. Try to take a flight that arrives at night, so you can go straight to bed. Sleep on the plane (although not during descent). During the flight do isometric exercises, eat lightly, and drink little or no alcohol. Try to use a rest room in the airport terminal before departure. On some flights the cabin crew begins beverage service shortly after the *Fasten Seat Belts* sign is turned off, and the serving cart may block access to the lavatories.

Air travel is so safe you'll probably never have to use any of the advice we're about to give you. But if you ever do need it, this information could save your life. Airline passengers usually take safety for granted when they board an airplane. They tune out the crew's pre-flight announcements or reach for a magazine instead of the cards that show how to open the emergency exit and what to do if the oxygen mask drops down. Because of this, people are needlessly hurt or killed in accidents they could have survived. Every time you board a plane, here are some things you should do: Be

reasonable about the amount of carry-on luggage that you bring. FAA rules require airlines to limit the amount of carry-on baggage, and if you try to carry too much with you, the crew may insist that you check in some items. (There is no universal limit; it depends on the aircraft type and the passenger load.) A bag that is not properly stowed could turn into an unguided missile in an accident or block the aisles during an evacuation. Count the number of rows to the nearest emergency exit.

Be careful about what you put into the storage bins over your seat. Their doors may pop open during an accident or even a hard landing, spilling their contents. Also, passengers in aisle seats have been injured by heavy items falling out of these compartments when people are stowing or retrieving belongings at the beginning or end of a flight. Please be considerate of others and put hard, heavy items under the seat in front of you; save the overhead bins for coats, hats, and small, soft bags. As soon as you sit down, fasten and unfasten your seat belt a couple of times. Watch how it works. There are several kinds of belts, and in an emergency you don't want to waste time fumbling with the buckle. Listen carefully and if there's anything you don't understand ask the flight attendants for help. The plastic card in the seat pocket in front of you will review some of the safety information announced by the flight attendant. Read it. It also tells you about emergency exits and how to find and use emergency equipment such as oxygen masks. As you're reading the card look for your closest emergency exit, and count the number of rows between yourself and this exit. Remember, the closest exit may be behind you. Have a second escape route planned in case the nearest exit is blocked. This is important because people sometimes head for the door they used to board the plane, usually in the front of the first class cabin. This wastes time and blocks the aisles. Oxygen masks aren't the same on all planes. Sometimes they drop down in front of you. On some aircraft, however, you'll have to pull them out of a compartment in front of your seat. In either case, you must tug the plastic tube slightly to get the oxygen flowing. If you don't understand the instructions about how the mask works, ask a flight attendant to explain it to you. When the plane is safely in the air and has reached its cruising level, the pilot usually turns off the "fasten seat belt" sign. He or she usually suggests that passengers keep their belts buckled anyway during the flight in case the plane hits rough air. Just as

seat belts should always be worn in cars, they should always be fastened in airplanes. If you are ever in an air accident, you should remember these things: Stay calm. Listen to the crew members and do what they say. The cabin crew's most important job is to help you leave safely. Before you try to open any emergency exit yourself, look outside the window. If you see a fire outside the door, don't open it or the flames may spread into the cabin. Try to use your alternate escape route. Remember, smoke rises. So try to stay down if there's smoke in the cabin. Follow the track of emergency lights embedded in the floor; they lead to an exit. If you have a cloth, put it over your nose and mouth. After an air accident, the National Transportation Safety Board always talks to survivors to try to learn why they were able to make it through safely. They've discovered that, as a rule, it does help to be prepared. Avoiding serious injury or surviving an air accident isn't just a matter of luck; it's also a matter of being informed and thinking ahead. Are you one of those people who jumps up as soon as the plane lands, gathers up coat, suitcase and briefcase, and gets ready to sprint while the plane is still moving? If so, resist the urge. Planes sometimes make sudden stops when they are taxiing to the airport gate, and passengers have been injured when they were thrown onto a seat back or the edge of a door to an overhead bin. Stay in your seat with your belt buckled until the plane comes to a complete halt and the "fasten seat belt" sign is turned off. Never smoke

in airplane restrooms. Smoking was banned in all but the designated smoking sections after an accident killed 116 people in only 4 minutes, apparently because a careless smoker left a burning cigarette butt in the trash bin. There is a penalty of up to \$2,000 for disabling a lavatory smoke detector. Also, don't smoke in the aisle. If there is a sudden bump you could stumble and burn yourself or another passenger. Lit cigarettes have also flown out of passengers' hands and rolled under seats. When passengers comment on airline service, most airlines do listen. They analyze and keep track of the complaints and compliments they receive and use the information to determine what the public wants and to identify problem areas that need special attention. They also try to resolve individual complaints. Like other businesses, airlines have a lot of discretion in how they respond to problems. While you do have some rights as a passenger, your demands for compensation will probably be subject to negotiation and the kind of action you get depends in large part on the way you go about complaining. Start with the airline. Before you call or write to DOT or some other agency for help with an air travel problem, you should give the airline a chance to resolve it. As a rule, airlines have trouble-shooters at the airports (they're usually called Customer Service Representatives) who can take care of many problems on the spot. They can arrange meals and hotel rooms for stranded passengers, write checks for denied boarding compensation, arrange luggage repairs and settle other routine claims or complaints that involve relatively small amounts of money.

A complaint letter should always include a daytime phone number.

If you can't resolve the problem at the airport and want to file a complaint, it's best to call or write the airline's consumer office at its corporate headquarters. Take notes at the time the incident occurs and jot down the names of the carrier employees with whom you dealt. Keep all of your travel documents (ticket receipts, baggage check stubs, boarding passes, etc.) as well as receipts for any out-of-pocket expenses that were incurred as a result of the mishandling. Here are some helpful tips should you choose to write a letter. Type the letter and, if at all possible, limit it to one page in length. Include your daytime telephone number (with area code). No matter how angry you might be, keep your letter businesslike in tone and don't exaggerate what happened. If the complaint sounds very vehement or sarcastic, you might wait a day and then consider rewriting it. Describe what happened, and give dates, cities, and flight numbers or flight times. Send copies, never the originals, of tickets and receipts or other documents that can back up your claim. Include the names of any employees who were rude or made things worse, as well as anyone who might have been especially helpful.

Don't clutter up your complaint with petty gripes that can obscure what you're really angry about. Let the airline know if you've suffered any special inconvenience or monetary losses. Say just what you expect the carrier to do to make amends. An airline may offer to settle your claim with a check or some other kind of compensation, possibly free transportation. You might want a written apology from a rude employee or reimbursement for some loss you incurred—but the airline needs to know what you want before it can decide what action to take.

Be reasonable. If your demands are way out of line, your letter might earn you a polite apology and a place in the airline's crank files. If you follow these guidelines, the airlines will probably treat your complaint seriously. Your letter will help them to determine what caused your problem, as well as to suggest actions the company can take to keep the same thing from happening to other people.

Contacting the Department of Transportation If you need assistance or want to put your complaint about an airline on record with DOT, call the Office of Consumer Affairs at (202) 366-2220 or write: Office of Consumer Affairs, I-25 U.S. Department of Transportation 400 Seventh Street, S.W. Washington, D.C. 20590 If you write, please be sure to include your address and a daytime telephone number, with area code. We can provide information about what rights you may or may not have under Federal laws. If your complaint was not properly handled by the airline, we will contact them and get back to you. Letters from consumers help us spot problem areas and trends in the airline industry. We use our complaint files to document the need for changes in DOT's consumer protection regulations and, where warranted, as the basis for enforcement action. In addition, every month we publish a report with information about the number of complaints we receive about each airline and what problems people are having. You can write or call us for a free single copy of this Air Travel Consumer Report, which also has statistics that the airlines file with us on flight delays, oversales and mishandled baggage. If your complaint is about something you feel is a safety or security hazard, write to the Federal Aviation Administration: Community and Consumer Liaison Division, APA-200 Federal Aviation Administration 800 Independence Avenue, S.W. Washington, D.C. 20591 or call: (800) FAA-SURE. After office hours, if you want to report something that you believe is a serious safety hazard, call the Aviation Safety Hotline at 1-800-255-1111. Local consumer help programs In most communities there are consumer help groups that try to mediate complaints about businesses, including airlines and travel agencies. Most state governments have a special office that investigates consumer problems and complaints. Sometimes it is a separate division in the governor's or state attorney general's office. Check your telephone book under the state government's listing. Many cities and counties have consumer affairs departments that handle complaints. Often you can register your complaint and get information over the phone or in person. A number of newspapers and radio or TV stations operate Hot Lines or Action Lines where individual consumers can get help. Consumer reporters, with the help of volunteers, try to mediate complaints and may report the results as a news item. The possible publicity encourages companies to take fast action on consumer problems when they are referred by the media. Some Action Lines, however, may not be able to handle every complaint they receive. They often select the most severe problems or those that are most representative of the kinds of complaints they receive. Your last resort If nothing else works, small claims court might be the best way for you to help yourself. Many cities have these courts to settle disputes involving relatively small amounts of money and to reduce the red tape and expense that people generally fear when they sue someone. An airline can generally be sued in small claims court in any jurisdiction where it operates flights or does business. You can usually get the details of how to use the small claims court in your community by contacting your city or county office of consumer affairs, or the clerk of the court. As a rule, small claims court costs are low, you don't need a lawyer, and the procedures are much less formal and intimidating than they are in most other types of courts.

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By Mike Yeager

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You know how it is; you're busy with your work and career, deadlines, meetings etc. One afternoon you look over at the calendar and realize that in only 6 weeks, a mere 42 days, you'll be taking off for 10 days of fun, sun and excitement. You get a good, warm feeling knowing that your air travel vacation is just around the corner. Sometimes just knowing that your going on a vacation is all it takes to brighten your day.

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