

TRAVEL DOCTOR

Holiday nightmares and how to avoid them

Julia Brookes, aka the Travel Doctor, on what to watch out for in the year ahead

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In 2016 Travel Doctor readers suffered car rental nightmares, flight cancellation hell and holiday resort disasters. Will 2017 be any better? Here are my top tips based on the travel gripes of the year, and what we did to help you.

Complaints must be taken seriously

If there is one thing that enrages Travel Doctor readers, it's their complaints being ignored or not taken seriously. Receiving a pro forma letter mouthing corporate platitudes is just insulting. When reader Sian Smith's holiday to Turkey with Thomson was ruined because her luggage was lost for four days, the response to her complaint expressed regret at great length, but nothing else. After my intervention, £500 compensation was swiftly agreed.

Top tip If you want personal service book with smaller, specialist companies such as those belonging to the Association of Independent Tour Operators (aito.com).

Fees for name changes on airline tickets

There is a chance that airlines will amend policies on name changes this year because the Civil Aviation Authority is reviewing airline contracts to ensure they are fair. It won't be before time. As it stands, travel agents and airlines can force passengers to buy new tickets because of a tiny spelling mistake. Reader David Ronchetti booked with Jet Airways to Sri Lanka, but the price of making an error in the spelling of his daughter's middle name was rebooking the trip at an extra cost of £650, including a cancellation fee of £125. Jet agreed to refund him, but as long as a passenger has a valid passport it does not matter what their ticket says, so any name-change fee should be nominal.

Top tip Book with an agent or airline (such as British Airways) that has a 24-hour cooling off period so any mistakes can be corrected penalty free.

Failure to warn of booking changes

This year an increasing number of readers complained about emails from airlines and hotel companies that were never received, with holidays ruined as a result. Joe Ormrod booked a stay at the Holiday Inn Times Square South in New York, but when he arrived it was under construction. A missing email was to blame. Joe eventually received a full refund for the new hotel stay he had to book, but there must be a safer way to communicate significant changes to a trip?

Top tip Always check airline and hotel bookings (especially those made through third parties) before departure. A quick phone call can save a lot of bother — and you might even get a better room.

Offers of holiday discounts, not cash

If you have suffered a miserable trip, the last thing you want in compensation is a Scrooge-like discount on a holiday with the same company. Phaedra Patrick's parents went on a two-week cruise on the *Thomson Dream*, which cost almost £3,000, but suffered sleepless nights due to the sound of water pouring from the ceiling outside their door. They were so tired that even after they moved cabins in the second week they were too stressed to enjoy the holiday. After they returned, they complained and were sent a voucher for 10 per cent off another holiday. When I got involved, Thomson apologised and offered £550. As a result, they have booked with Thomson again.

Top tip Be persistent. If you are offered vouchers, ask for a cash refund. If you are offered vouchers for flight delays, under EU261 rules, you are entitled to refuse and take cash instead.

Dodging compensation claims for flight delays

Airlines continue to try to avoid paying compensation for delays and cancellations — even when the CAA has ruled that “extraordinary circumstances” don't apply. Barrie Hudson's wife and son were booked on BMI Regional from Aberdeen to Bristol to attend a funeral, but the flight was delayed for more than five hours. He claimed compensation of €250 (£220) each for the delay, but BMI claimed the flight disruption was due to a manufacturing issue and wouldn't pay up. After my intervention it did pay.

Top tip Check if your chosen carrier has signed up to one of the new Alternative Dispute Resolution schemes that have been approved by the CAA to deal with claims — and whose decisions are generally binding. A full list can be found at caa.co.uk.

Extra car-hire charges

Car rental companies woo customers with alluring headline rates and rely on high-pressure sales techniques at the desk to make money. They know that when we get to the counter,

fractious and keen to be on our way, we may sign up for excess insurance and other extras we don't need. All-inclusive rates are coming closer with changes from the Competition and Markets Authority. These insist that, by next month, young-driver surcharges, one-way fees and fuel charges are to be included in the headline price. There's still a long way to go, however, and car-hire comparison websites such as moneymaxim.co.uk are helpful for winking out hidden costs.

Top tip Buy excess insurance before you travel (insurance4carhire.com and icarhireinsurance.com are reliable) but be prepared for the car rental company to take a huge (often more than £1,000) deposit from your credit card if you do.

If you have a gripe, suggestion or question about holiday travel,
email traveldoctor@thetimes.co.uk

Courtesy of <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/how-not-to-get-ripped-off-on-holiday-our-experts-tips-6wqgj2l9s>