

The 5 Most Common Types of Airport Scams and How to Avoid Them

Despite the massive increases in airport security of recent years, airport scams hook more and more travelers and tourists every day.

Indeed, the crowds and occasional chaos that result from that additional security may actually help crooks with certain crimes like pickpocketing, theft from luggage and transit-related cons.

Add to that the problems we all face when arriving exhausted and/or in a country where we don't speak the local language, and the potential for falling victim to airport scams rises significantly.

In past articles about travel scams and travel fraud, we've identified many of the most common tricks aimed at travelers, but new ones are appearing all the time.

[How to Avoid Travel Scams When Vacationing Overseas](#)

[Airport Travel Scams: Watch Out For These Airport Tricksters](#)

This week, we spotlight some of those new crimes in our summary of the 5 most common types of airport scams, with some tips on how to avoid them.

1. Concourse rip-offs

What a can of worms this is. Here are just a few of the airport scams (some of them perfectly legal) aimed at overcharging or conning you:

- Airline desk clerks who make your luggage appear overweight by not re-setting weighing machines after the previous item.
- People wearing official-looking uniforms who use the sense of authority they convey to direct you to a certain place or even to search you.
- Articles supposedly locally made when they're cheap imports from another place.
- Poor foreign exchange rates or money-changing deals that are loaded with unadvertised extras you have to pay for.
- Discount coupons and brochures pressed into your hand; they can be anything from phony money-savers or timeshare lures such as "winning" scratch cards.
- Souvenirs and mementoes that cost way more than you would pay for the same items outside the airport.
- Credit card public phones that don't display their rates; you could end up paying a fortune.
- Scammers who pretend they know you and either ask for help or offer in some way to help you so they can later rob you.
- Porters who carry your cases and then demand an exorbitant fee.
- Cell phone or car rentals with lots of extra charges in the small print.

Actions: Buy your souvenirs before getting to the airport -- but even then, shop around and compare prices. Only change your money at recognized bureaus; ideally, don't change it at the airport at all.

Don't take a uniform or a person's position as evidence of honesty or integrity. But always, always be polite in making a challenge. Try to involve another person as a third party witness.

2. Taxi tricks

Taxi-related airport scams merit a rip-off category of their own because they're so numerous and can happen in pretty much every country.

But there's much more to this than simply being "taken for a ride" on a meandering tour to your destination, a scam we covered in Scambusters #140: [Travel Scams -- Here, There and Everywhere](#).

First, there are the unofficial taxis -- vehicles driven by locals who accost you as soon as you step into the arrivals area. They may or may not take you to your destination. But if they do, it'll take you longer and cost you more.

Sometimes, if you get out of the car before the driver does, he may speed off with your luggage. Or, in a worst case scenario, he may hold you or your luggage hostage until you pay whatever he asks.

Even legit drivers have been known to tell passengers, including those who know their destination hotel, that they just took someone else there and the hotel was closed or damaged by fire. Then, of course, they take you to another place where they get paid a commission.

Your driver, even a licensed one, may inflate your fare with tricks including:

- Telling you he has to pay airport fees.
- Exaggerating road or bridge tolls he has to pay.
- Not re-setting the meter at the start of the trip.

Actions: Research bus and taxi fares from the airport to your destination before traveling. And check out the other Scambusters articles mentioned here.

The important thing is to ignore any vehicle or driver who isn't in the official metered taxi line at the airport. Even then, get an estimate of the fare, including any likely extras, and make sure he resets the meter.

3. Theft

Pickpockets thrive in crowded places and "the bump" is their favorite trick. They're so nimble-fingered you won't even feel them removing your wallet from your pocket or purse when they "accidentally" bump into you.

In a recent, bolder type of theft, a young girl greets new arrivals with an offer of a "welcome" bracelet made of colored thread. In fact, she has two bracelets, one for each wrist, and they're free -- a token of local hospitality she says.

Trouble is, they're looped together, though the young crook promises with a coy smile that she'll sever them once they're tied. Wrong! She'll take your bags and run off, leaving you handcuffed.

But airport theft goes way beyond this. In restrooms, placing your bags on the floor while you do what you have to -- even inside a cubicle -- can be an invitation to a grab-and-run thief.

Or, if you don't lock your cases -- either because of security requirements or because you plain can't be bothered -- crooked baggage handlers may help themselves to the contents.

Stuff can even be stolen from hand luggage -- especially during the security/conveyor scan or even when you leave it on the floor at the departure gate or in another waiting area.

Actions: To avoid the pickpockets, conceal your wallet or pocketbook and carry a dummy one where the thief is most likely to look.

Keep valuables in your hand luggage and keep hold of your baggage at all times, even in the restroom or at the departure gate. Even with your luggage on an adjoining seat, thieves have been known to sit on the other side and slash it open with a knife.

And, although it's a pain, check the contents of all your baggage before you leave the airport. If anything is missing, tell the airline immediately and file a police report.

If there's a risk your identity may have been stolen in the process, check out these Scambusters articles on identity theft and what to do to protect your identity.

[Identity Theft Information Center](#)

[Answers to Our Subscribers 5 Biggest Identity Theft Protection Questions](#)

4. Bribes

Traveling to Third World countries takes you into the land of bribes -- often from the very people from whom you least expect to demand them, like customs and security officials.

A traveler to Egypt recently reported being searched by a customs guy, who patted the victim's shirt pocket and asked: "Is there anything in there for me?" -- the implication being that if there wasn't, there could be trouble ahead.

In another instance, a traveler with his dogs was asked by an Indian customs official: "How much is that dog worth?" The dog was a mutt, so the answer was that it was of little value.

"Ah," says the official, "but how much is it worth to you?" The frightened and weary traveler subsequently handed over more than \$200.

In extreme cases, officials have been known either to plant some banned item or substance, or tell victims they're wanted in connection with an earlier crime in the airport. Then they make it clear they'll let them through if they pay.

Actions: The trouble is that you have to decide if you want to stand firm and risk being delayed or even arrested on some trumped up charge, or pay up and get on your way.

You can ease the cost by traveling with only a small amount of cash, which you can hand over if you must. But if you are forced to hand over a significant amount, make a mental note of the individual's description. Then contact your country's consul or embassy for advice.

Making threats to the scammer is not a good idea, since you don't know how widespread the corruption is. Nor should you try to photograph the individual, though some people have been known to carry concealed recorders to capture the conversation.

5. Parking problems

Even official and legal parking fees feel like airport scams when it's time to pay. So it's no surprise that most of us shop around for cheaper alternatives like off-site parking.

Again, many of these are good and perfectly legitimate. But just because a company has a website and a secure parking area doesn't mean they'll look after your auto -- or your interests.

In most off-site parking lots, you have to hand over your keys and sign a contract. And, of course, when the parking company actually sends someone to meet you at the airport and take your vehicle, you're totally in their hands.

In a recent sting, a TV reporter booked his car in with an off-site company, installed a tracking device in his car, then handed the auto over to a representative he met at the airport.

Although the car was taken to a secure site, it was later moved out and parked in a nearby public street. After a few days, but before he was due to collect, the reporter "stole" his own vehicle from the street and drove it away.

When he returned officially to collect it, the lot owner told him it had been stolen. He said he was not responsible for insurance and advised the victim to pursue the issue with his own insurer.

The small print in his contract made clear this was absolutely true. What's more, the same small print said the lot owner could move the vehicle to wherever he wanted.

Action: Well, obviously, read the fine print so you know what you're letting yourself in for and then decide whether saving that money is worth the risks. Try to stick with companies that are well known and have an established reputation.

Better yet, if you're using a hotel at or near the airport before you travel, take advantage of the travelers' parking many of them now offer. It's usually cheaper and, with the bigger hotels, secure and monitored.

5 More Tips to Avoid Airport Scams

In addition to the points we've outlined above, here are a few more trips that will help you sidestep some of the airport scams:

1. Research your destination airport on the Internet. Some have specific scams for which they're well known.
2. Learn a bit of the lingo and carry a phrase book if you are traveling abroad to a country where you don't speak the language; in particular, know the words for individual numbers and for "police."
3. Before you leave, get to know the value of local currency and have a rough and ready way of converting it in your head to your own currency.
4. Make an inventory of anything whose theft at the airport could be serious, either from a value or ID security angle.
5. Make a note of airline and consular office phone numbers and locations before your journey.

This way, by thinking ahead, you're prepared for handling situations when you're probably not at your best -- so you can get on with enjoying your trip or vacation.

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