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Never lose your luggage again

By CHASE BINDER For the Monitor

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Bring up the subject of lost luggage with a group of travelers and you could be in for hours of horror stories - more than 250,000 bags went astray in the United States last year. But you can do a lot before you even leave home to make sure your bags don't become a 2008 statistic.

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Identify, identify, identify: Begin with luggage tags (notice the plural . . . tags!) Bright colors are best and sturdy leather or heavy plastic is imperative. Use a minimum of two, and three or four are better. Print your address, phone number, cell phone number and e-mail address. And we love the colored luggage straps embroidered with your name - order them online at idmybag.com for less than \$20, or take your own straps to Say it in Stitches (stitchesnh.com) on Hall Street in Concord and get them embroidered for \$10 each. Neon luggage-handle wraps made by Samsonite and Tagco make your bag stand out even more and are available (\$10 for two) at Amazon.com, or sometimes locally in the travel sections of discount and department stores.

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Put your itinerary inside your bag: Suppose your bag still wanders - in spite of the tags, straps and wraps. Your chances of a happy reunion improve dramatically if you type out your itinerary (complete with dates, hotels, phone numbers, e-mails, any other airlines with flight numbers, dates and contact numbers), put it in a plastic sheet protector or baggie and lay it on top of your clothes before you shut your bag. The airline WILL open your bag if they can't find you - and how nice if they can find where (and when) to send it! If you are on a tour, a cruise or have booked through a travel agent, the itinerary (or most of it) may be provided - ask! If you have booked a complicated itinerary on your own, this step could save your vacation.

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Watch your luggage get tagged at the airport: Check your tickets for the three-letter airport codes for your destination airport and any connecting airport. Some are intuitive (BOS for Boston); some are not (MCO for Orlando). The computer-generated tags that the agent attaches to the handle on your bag should show those same three-letter codes along with bar codes for the automatic sorters. Your final destination should be closest to the handle, and connecting airports should be in the order you arrive at/depart from them. This simple check saved our bags in Las Vegas, Bali and South Africa - flying coach, business and first class. Mistakes happen at all levels.

Still worried? Use your cell phone to snap a photo of your bag. If you have to fill out a form describing it, you'll be accurate (and oh so happy when it's found).

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