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travel

10 tips for preventing stolen bags at the airport

By Jane Engle
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The ubiquitous black roll-aboard is a prime target for baggage theft.
(Jupiter Images)

Worried about your bag being stolen in baggage claim? You've got plenty of company, especially since the news broke last week about police arresting a suburban Phoenix couple on suspicion of stealing nearly 1,000 bags from carousels at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

Although airlines say that they recover nearly all the bags that owners report missing, and that only a tiny percentage are truly lost — because they were misplaced, misrouted, stolen, abandoned or whatever — that's small comfort to victims, who may have numbered in the hundreds in Phoenix alone.

Here are 10 steps you can take to protect your possessions, gleaned from my research and chats with security experts:

1. Don't check bags: If you pack lightly, you can handle more trips with just a carry-on, which will also spare you from paying ever-escalating bag fees.

2. Keep valuables with you: You wouldn't believe the stuff that Phoenix police say they found at the home of the theft suspects: laptop computers, adoption papers, a valuable stamp collection, GPS systems, passports and more. What's worse, airlines generally won't compensate you for the loss of such valuable or exotic items.

On domestic flights, the law usually caps compensation for lost or damaged bags at

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\$3,300 per passenger, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. (Compensation on international flights, which is based on arcane calculations, can be even lower.)

3. Make your bag stand out: "Criminals go after the nondescript, common bag . . . because they don't want attention drawn to themselves," said Bruce McIndoe, president of iJET Intelligent Risk Systems, a travel security company based in Annapolis, Md.

If your bag looks like all the other black roll-boards, McIndoe said, a thief just a few feet away from you can swipe it from the carousel without your taking note of it. Consider buying brightly colored or oddly shaped luggage, or add neon-colored tape or handle wrap-arounds to luggage that you already own.

4. Use cheap luggage: Some thieves covet pricey designer bags as much or more than the items packed inside. Plus, an \$800 bag is a pretty good tip-off that expensive goods might lie within.

5. Don't dally: March down to baggage claim as soon as you get off the plane and park yourself right at the point where the the baggage spills down the chute onto the carousel, McIndoe suggested. You want as few people as possible to get between you and your bag.

6. Stay alert: It's tempting to step away from a cart stacked high with your luggage to grab one last bag from the carousel. Unfortunately, an

unguarded cart is equally tempting to a thief. Roll the cart up to the carousel, or ask your travel companion to watch it.

7. Avoid switching flights: If you check in for a flight at the airport and then get on a later one instead, your bag may remain on the original flight and arrive at baggage claim hours before you do. Who watches it in the meantime? Hard to say. Alert baggage staff may spot it and secure it — or not.

While researching a story in 2006, I watched many bags circle carousels for hours at a time at Los Angeles International Airport. I didn't see any staff check the claim checks against bag tags as passengers left the claims area, a practice that many airlines seem to have discontinued years ago.

Sometimes, of course, you can't avoid a last-minute switch, if for instance you get bumped from your flight or miss a connection. But sometimes you can, if for instance you volunteer to give up your seat in return for a voucher or other compensation.

8. Fly nonstop: The more connections you make, the greater the chance that your bags may be misrouted, experts say. And that may leave them to spin around on carousels at airports you're not even going to visit.

9. File claims promptly: Airlines generally set time limits for filing reports of missing bags. If you miss the deadline, you may miss the chance

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to get compensated.

10. Consider insurance: So-called bundled trip-insurance policies, which combine several types of coverage, typically include at least some compensation for baggage loss. The premiums vary; 5 percent to 8 percent of the trip cost is common. As always, read the fine print.

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