

How To Avoid Getting Charged Extra For Your Airline Luggage

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I'm a consumer advocate. I write about customer service.

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Don't get charged extra for your luggage this summer. Here's how. [GETTY](#)

It happened to Dayna Cooley on a recent flight from Los Angeles to New York. A ticket agent looked at her regulation-size carry-on and shook her head.

"The bag was too big," says Cooley, who runs a [nonprofit organization](#) in Mesa, Ariz. "I would have to pay an additional fee of \$75 to bring it on board."

Cooley is not alone. The airline industry [collected \\$29 billion in baggage fees last year](#), according to a new report by IdeaWorksCompany. Baggage fees now account for 4 percent of airline revenues.

How are airlines getting people to pay? They're doing what Cooley's airline did — demanding that they pay up or leave their luggage at the airport.

"I didn't want to risk abandoning my bag or missing my flight," she says, "so I paid the fee."

Don't let that happen to you. I have a few strategies to avoid paying extra for your airline luggage. They include studying the airline's luggage rules, adopting unconventional methods of getting your stuff on a plane, taking practical steps to ensure your bags are underweight, and other shortcuts.

But the best way may be avoiding the most avaricious airlines. I'll tell you how to do that, too.



Passengers waiting to check their luggage. GETTY

Make sure you're following the airline luggage rules — and then some

Look up the size and weight requirements on your airline's website. "Familiarize yourself with the airline's policy regarding checked and carry-on luggage *before* you book your flights," says Pallavi Sadekar, head of operations at [VisitorGuard.com](https://www.VisitorGuard.com).

And here's a trick I've learned from years spent as a consumer advocate and air traveler: Make sure your luggage is smaller and weighs less.

Why? Because gate agents have a lot of flexibility in how they apply the rules, and they've been a little overzealous lately. Of course they have! Airlines incentivize their agents to collect as much money as possible from passengers. If they think you're an easy mark, they'll require you to pay a baggage fee.

It's not worth it. Get a smaller carry-on and make sure it weighs less than the maximum, and they won't be able to touch you.



Luggage that didn't make the flight — don't let this happen to you. GETTY

Wear your luggage

A few weeks ago, a Virgin Australia ticket agent tried to squeeze \$75 from me, too. My solution? I unpacked my winter coat and stuffed clothes and electronics into the pocket to lighten the luggage.

If you're serious about wearing your luggage, you can buy a vest from a company like [SCOTTeVEST](#), which allows you to comfortably fit a tablet computer, phone, and even a change of clothes into your jacket — and still do it in style. (My spontaneously unpacked winter jacket did not look very stylish.)

Even if you don't wear your winter coat, you might want to dress strategically for your flight, says Narendra Khatri, principal of [Insubuy](#).

"Consider wearing some of your heavier items on board, such as boots and sweaters, to keep your bag below the limit," he told me. "Since most flights are fairly cool onboard once they reach cruising altitude, you can afford to overdress a bit to save on bag fees."



Airline luggage being weighed. GETTY

Weigh it yourself — before you leave

The most common airline charge is for overweight checked bags, says Bob Bacheler, managing director of [Flying Angels](#), a medical transport service.

"Invest in a luggage scale," he says. "You can purchase one online for under \$10. Make sure your luggage is under the weight limit, usually 50 pounds for a domestic flight."

Bacheler is right. Airlines have gotten super-strict when it comes to weight, particularly if you're flying on a domestic flight abroad. If you're just a fraction of a kilo overweight, they'll order you to lighten your bag or abandon it. I'm serious.



Credit cards give you "free" checked bags. But mind the fine print. GETTY

Membership has its privileges, but ...

Stop me if you've already heard this, but you'll get a "free" checked bag if you belong to an airline's loyalty program.

"Open an airline miles reward credit card," advises money-saving expert Andrea Woroch. "Not only will an airline miles credit card help you earn miles towards free flights for all the purchases and expenses you pay for using the card, but you will also get other travel perks including free checked bags with the airline for you and a partner as long as you use the card to book the flight."

I've heard that advice, too. Of course, airlines are trying to get you to join their rewards program, so they're nudging you into becoming a member by offering you "free" checked bags and "free" miles.

Sigh. If you go down that road, remember there's ain't no such thing as a free lunch. You will pay for that free bag, and you will definitely pay for the miles somewhere down the line. But Woroch is right, it's a temporary fix worth considering.

Book an airline that doesn't charge for luggage

Maybe the easiest way to avoid baggage fees is to avoid an airline that charges them. Oh yeah, they still exist.

Summary of Economy Class Baggage Fee Policies Top 20 Non-Low Cost Carriers					
Airlines Based in:	Top 20 Carriers	General Policy		Where Fees Apply	
		All Fares Include Baggage	Fee or Free Determined by Fare *	Domestic & Short/Medium Haul **	Transatlantic
Asia / Pacific	Air China				
	Cathay Pacific				
	Korean Air				
	Qantas				
	Singapore				
Europe	Air France/KLM			<i>Fees apply network-wide</i>	
	British Airways			<i>Fees apply network-wide</i>	
	Lufthansa				
	Scandinavian			<i>Fees apply network-wide</i>	
	Turkish			<i>Europe routes</i>	
Middle East	Emirates				
	Qatar Airways				
Latin America	Avianca			<i>Fees apply network-wide</i>	
	LATAM Airlines			<i>Fees apply network-wide</i>	
North America	Air Canada				
	Alaska Group			<i>Fees apply network-wide</i>	
	American				
	Delta				
	Southwest				
	United				

Data source: Airline websites reviewed by IdeaWorksCompany April 2023.
** Lower fares, such as basic economy, don't include baggage (not all markets have these fares).*
*** Typically includes flights within the US, Canada, Mexico, and Caribbean region, and flights within Europe and the Mediterranean region. Minor fee waiver exceptions may exist for each carrier, and are often due to local regulations which require the inclusion of a checked bag for all fares.*

Airline luggage policies. IDEAWORKS COMPANY

In the United States, Southwest Airlines doesn't charge for most checked bags.

In the Asia/Pacific region, Air China, Cathay Pacific, Korean Air and others waive their checked baggage fees. And of course, the two Gulf carriers, Qatar and Emirates, don't charge.

In most cases, if you do the math before booking your flight, you'll find that it's less expensive — and often more comfortable — to fly on one of these full-service airlines instead of a carrier that nickel-and-dimes you.



Luggage being loaded on an aircraft. GETTY

Be luggage-smart this summer

Bottom line: Airlines want more of your money this summer.

They know passengers won't leave their bags behind, so they are changing them extra for their luggage, and especially their carry-on bags. I know because I hear from them all the time at my [nonprofit consumer advocacy organization](#) — and I've been a target, too.

And while there are many ways to outsmart an airline, the most effective way is still to vote with your pocketbook. Avoid any airline that changes you for checked luggage, and never, *ever* do business with an air carrier that charges you for a carry-on bag.



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[Christopher Elliott](#) is the founder of [Elliott Advocacy](#), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that empowers consumers to solve their problems and... **Read More**