

Handle with care

What is the aviation industry doing to stop luggage getting lost in the system?
Rose Dykins reports

Lost luggage is an emotive subject – which is perhaps why *Business Traveller* receives so many letters about it. The lack of control you feel when your bag doesn’t turn up on the carousel is hard to accept for someone who’s normally in charge – and is particularly distressing if you have a crucial meeting to attend.

Within the aviation sector, the term “mishandled” luggage is applied to all bags that are delayed, damaged, pilfered, lost or stolen after being checked in. The reasons behind glitches in the system can be human error, a fault in the automated systems that move luggage from check-in to aircraft, or tight transfers.

Finding out that your luggage is delayed is, arguably, no better than it being lost entirely. The uncertainty of whether you need to go shopping for more than just spare underwear, or try to rewrite that business proposal from memory at the risk of your luggage turning up the next day leaves you in state of limbo.

You may find some comfort in remembering that airlines do not simply dismiss your mishandled bag as unfortunate collateral damage. In fact, it’s a mistake that they cannot afford to make.

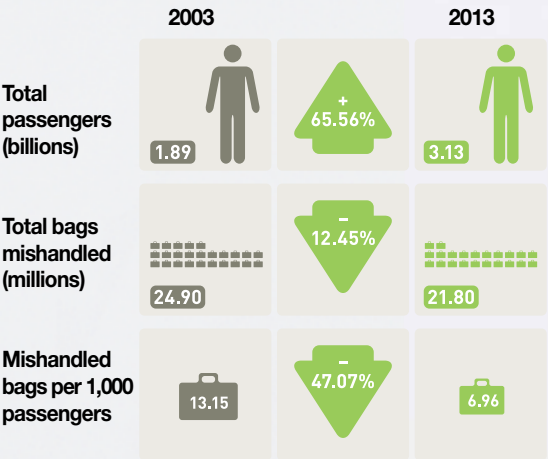
“Suddenly the delivery charges [for returning mishandled luggage to customers] have gone up, as have the payments to passengers while they wait for their luggage,” says Albert Chi, cofounder of [wefindbags.com](#), a company that uses the same tracking system as airlines to find missing bags for its customers. “There used to be a maximum amount of US dollars per kilo that passengers could claim back. A few years ago that increased, so there’s a much bigger focus on luggage now, as it’s costing the airlines so much.”

While many readers will have experienced first-hand the difficulties in claiming back compensation from airlines, if successful, passengers are now entitled to up to the equivalent of US\$1,170 per bag under the Montréal Convention (although you will probably need receipts).

In 2008, trade body IATA (the International Air Transport Association) launched its Baggage Improvement Programme, visiting 120 airports around the world and recommending how luggage handling could be perfected.

Nick Gates, portfolio director for SITA, a specialist in air transport communications and IT solutions, says: “We had seen things steadily get worse from 2003 to 2007, but there has been

LONG-TERM TRENDS FOR MISHANDLED BAGS



Source: SITA 2014 Baggage Report

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a significant improvement in the whole baggage process since then. We’ve seen airports and airlines spending money on baggage handling, sortation, tracking and reconciliations systems.”

How likely is a loss? According to SITA’s 2014 *Baggage Report*, 21.8 million bags were mishandled last year. (In other words, for every 1,000 travellers, close to seven of them had their bags mishandled, which was an all-time low.)

There are several factors that put you at a greater risk of becoming one of the unlucky few. “Generally, the larger the airport, the greater

the chance something is going to go wrong,” Gates says. “However, some airports have much better records of handling bags – a large airport in Asia will probably have a better record than a medium-sized airport in Europe.”

If you regularly take multi-sector flights then you are among the most likely to be parted with your checked luggage. “The more sectors you fly, the higher the chance of your bag misconnecting,” Chi says. “If the first sector of your flight is delayed, you may be able to rush to catch your next flight, but your bag still has to go through the same checks.”

Gates says: “Transferring bags need to be treated as priority over those that are terminating their journey. The systems need to be in place for tracking these bags and knowing in advance where there may be problems – for example, if the first sector is running 30 minutes late – so that baggage-handlers can take steps to make sure they are moved more quickly between the two flights.”

He adds: “The adoption of technology that communicates real-time information is becoming more prevalent – but it’s not adopted everywhere. It’s down to the airlines and the airports.”

When it comes to investing in new baggage-handling technology,

there are no rules as to who pays for what. Before making any big infrastructure changes, airports have to know that the demand is there from the airlines – and carriers have to be sure that they can generate enough revenue to justify the expense.

One example of this is radio-frequency identification (RFID). For the past decade, it has been possible to replace traditional barcodes on luggage labels with RFID memory chips. As RFID works via radio waves instead of lasers, it doesn’t need a direct line of sight between the scanner and the tag. This gives a 99 per cent readability rate (as opposed to a 70-95 per cent chance with barcodes) and means cases are less likely to be misplaced.

If you have flown via Hong Kong International or Las Vegas during the past couple of years, your luggage will have had an RFID tag attached. While other airports and airlines use the technology, these are the only airports to have implemented it across all of their flights.

Gates says: “Ten years ago, it was hoped that the whole world would move to using RFID but, unfortunately, it’s not really been adopted by airlines and airports. I think it’s down to the cost of the baggage tags themselves

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and a need to upgrade reading systems at the airport, which is a significant investment.”

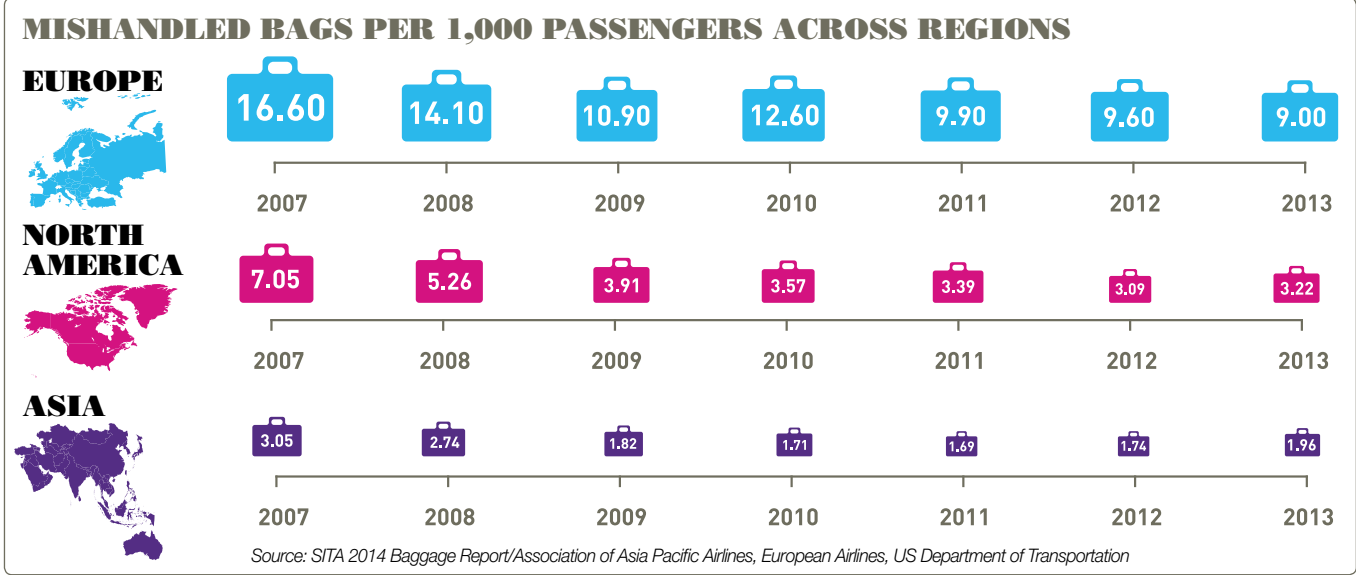
Last summer, British Airways trialled reusable digital bag tags that incorporated RFID technology with e-ink displays. Qantas has been offering such tags since 2010 – priced at AU\$30/£17 (or free for Platinum One, Platinum, Gold and Silver Frequent Flyer club members), the permanent Q Bag Tags are RFID-enabled and can be used across most of the airline’s domestic network.

There has also been a flurry of tech companies creating RFID tags and cellular tracking devices (such as Rebound Tag, Trackdot and Trace Me Luggage Tracker) that attach to or slip inside suitcases. Many of these come with a smartphone app, so passengers can track their luggage themselves and receive texts when it has been found. Prices typically range from £12 to £50, but many charge annual subscription fees on top.

However, Donald McIntosh, co-director of wefindbags.com, warns that this technology alone will not necessarily help you get your lost luggage back any faster. “The problem with these units is that if you’re standing in London and your bag is sending you a message telling you it’s airside in Miami, that’s great, but what do you do?”

In addition to offering a trackable tag, wefindbags.com employs a team of experts who have experience of using World Tracer software – the global system developed by SITA for finding lost bags. Rather than simply contacting the airline on your behalf on a publicly available number (as some of the other bag tracking companies do), it uses its expertise to locate your luggage and speed up its repatriation.

Over the past few years, airports worldwide have adapted their infrastructure to bring their sorting systems up to speed, with a focus on improving the mishandling rates of transferring luggage.



Heathrow has been developing an underground baggage tunnel linking its terminals, with the network between T3 and T5 now operational, which will “lead to a reduced misconnect rate because transfer bags will travel more quickly and reliably,” John Beasley, Heathrow’s head of baggage strategy, was quoted as saying in the 2014 SITA report.

When Terminal 2 opens next month, its departing and transfer bags will be processed by T1’s systems. A later stage of development will see T2 get its own system, which will “incorporate new technologies to reduce manual handling and improve baggage delivery performance”. In general, there has been a move towards systems that are as automated as possible, rather than relying on manpower, to increase the speed and reliability of sorting.

The challenge is coping with the year-on-year growth of passengers and, therefore, the number of bags that systems have to deal with. That said, in 2013 the number of global airline passengers increased to 3.13 billion (up 5.1 per cent from 2012), yet the total number of mishandled bags dropped 21.2 per cent. So it could be worse. ■

BAG A BARGAIN
Jenny Southan visits a luggage auction

AFTER SIX MONTHS, if a suitcase remains unclaimed, Greasby’s in London will sell it to the highest bidder on behalf of the airline or baggage handling company who found it – it then gives the money to charity. I got up early one morning to head down to the auctioneers in Tooting Bec, hoping to discover a hoard of pricey-looking Tumi suitcases filled with expensive suits, cameras and wads of cash.

Instead, the venue was a sad-looking over-sized garage. The auction, it turned out, wasn’t just for lost luggage (cheap and battered), but for everything from bottles of booze, packs of cigarettes and old X Box consoles (impounded by the county court), to used DVD players, musical instruments and stolen watches.

I went upstairs to collect a bidder’s registration form (you need to pay a £100 cash deposit if you want to take part) and bought a copy of the sales catalogue (£2) to get more of an idea of what was up for sale, as you couldn’t open the suitcases to see what was inside.

“You won’t find nothing in those cases, love,” one of the Greasby’s guys told me. “They have already been gone through three or four times. If we find iPads we sell them separately – they have to be searched by customs too to make sure there are no prescription drugs or passports inside.” The contents of the cases had been sorted “by the governor” and repacked, so that you got a mix of “ladies clothing” from different owners or “used toiletries and cosmetics”, for example.

The cases sell for anywhere between £6 and £110, with 80 to 100 bidders turning up for the day’s auction. I asked one woman if she had bought anything in the past. “Yes, I won a red case once full of hats and bags. I kept a couple of the straw hats and sold the rest at a car boot sale.” Convinced I wasn’t going to discover a Louis Vuitton trunk full of Chanel dresses, I abandoned the auction before it started, and vowed to make sure my suitcase was always securely labelled in future. greasbys.co.uk

