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How to Survive Holiday Travel

Forget it, getting there is not half the fun

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas

Everywhere you go.

See hysterical women and men

Traveling once again

Wishing relatives had agreed to come to them.

With apologies to songwriter Meredith Wilson, as well as crooners Perry Como, Bing Crosby, and Johnny Mathis, that fractured lyric sums up the aggravation that traditionally characterizes holiday travel.

Of course, it doesn't have to be that way.

Plan for flight delays.

A [flight delay](#) will disrupt any trip, but a flight that's supposed to deliver you home for the holidays isn't just any trip, and that's one of the immediate problems: aggravation becomes snow white-hot aggravation when holiday travel plans go awry.

If your plans take you overseas, keep in mind that holidays are favorite times for transportation strikes in the old world, notes tour leader Ann Lombardi of [The Trip Chicks](#). "Read up on your destination country's news before flying

across the pond,” she says. “Strikes can hit some countries more than others - Italy comes to mind - so have a back-up plan.” If the strike affects rail service, for instance, you might need to reserve a rental car.

Similarly, if weather strikes your home airport, or you’re connecting through Denver, say, and a blizzard strands you there, plan ahead and “book both a rental car and a hotel at either the departure airport or connecting airport,” recommends Chicago-based travel and aviation writer [Lisa Davis](#). “You can cancel both within a certain period of time,” she says, “or take a penalty. But peace of mind might be worth it.”

Also take a break from monitoring what your [Facebook](#) friends are baking for the holidays and punch up a flight tracking tool like www.flightstats.com or www.flighttracker.com, which will clue you in about flight delays, Lombardi says.

Keep the airline’s hand out of your pocket.

If you’re still in the midst of booking flights for winter or spring holidays, keep in mind that it can be cheaper to fly on the actual day of a holiday “such as Thanksgiving or Christmas day,” says Glen MacDonell, director of AAA Travel Services. “The peak days for Thanksgiving are the Tuesday and Wednesday prior and the Sunday and Monday after. Because Christmas is on a Friday this year, the last two weeks of 2009 will be fairly busy with holiday travelers. Consider looking at alternate dates to avoid traveling at peak times.”

That persistent clanging you hear at the airport might be the cheerful ringing of holiday bells, but it could just as easily be the sound of one of the [airlines](#) nickeling and diming you. The major airlines are tacking on surcharges upwards of \$20 per passenger, each way, on selected routes and dates around Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s, and in some cases around Easter and school holiday periods. As of this writing, JetBlue and [Southwest](#) were the only carriers not levying holiday travel surcharges. If you haven’t yet booked your tickets, try to avoid your airline’s surcharge days, “as those fees can add up for large families,” observes former flight attendant Beth Blair, co-founder of [The Vacation Gals](#).

Learn the art of transporting gifts.

Minimize how many presents you transport, urges longtime flight attendant Toni Vitanza, as by the time you’re done wrapping gifts and paying to check present-laden bags, “you’ll spend almost as much on [heavy and extra-bag fees] as you do on the gifts,” she says.

Shipping holiday gifts to your destination ahead of time as well as shipping received presents back home can minimize some of your holiday aggravation, Davis suggests. And if you're a last-minute shopper, frequent business traveler [Ken Walker](#) notes that "you'd be amazed at the quality and variety of gifts available in shops at the airport these days," plus many airport store managers will ship gifts "anywhere in the world. Some even do it for free, so it never hurts to ask," he says.

If you're determined to carry gifts on board, remember not to wrap them, Vitanza says, as the TSA may ask you to unwrap them, and trying to convince agents otherwise will only delay the security screening for everyone, she notes.

In lieu of wrapping paper, Walker suggests decorative cloth gift bags, which won't hamper a TSA search and can be refastened with ribbon or string. Or, pack flattened boxes, wrapping paper, and tape and wrap your gifts once you arrive, suggests travel writer Lisa Oppenheimer. "Even if you're staying at grandma's, you'll have a room and a little time for assembly," she says.

Best bet, Vitanza says: Ditch in-flight holiday gifts altogether. "Buy a gift cards, [include] a picture of what you want the person to buy with it and put it in a note with the card."

Watch out for thieving grinchies.

"Holiday travel increases foot traffic inside airports," observes [John M. Wills](#), a former Chicago police officer and retired supervisory special agent for the FBI. "The bad guys know this and capitalize on our frenzy to get to our destinations. Pickpockets are in paradise because jostling and bumping is commonplace. If you put your bag down at a food counter or other place, put it between your legs on the floor, not off to the side. It's easy pickings for someone to snatch it."

Blair adds that "the combination of similar looking luggage and holiday crowds means thieves will be ready to pounce. When I was a flight attendant, I always put flashy ribbons and jingle bells on my luggage during the holidays. And yes, it was annoying walking through the airport, but when a passenger tried to move my bag, I knew it."

Be prepared for the holiday road.

If you drive to your holiday destination this winter, prepare for unexpected icy weather, Blair advises. Ice scrapers, snow chains for your tires and extra blankets ought to be among your provisions.

Build in extra travel time to allow for holiday traffic, of course. And when you're not in traffic, refrain from showing off your aggressive driving skills, MacDonell urges, since the increased errands and commitments during the holidays

“frequently means driving faster than usual, driving more miles than usual, and becoming more distracted than usual. The result is a more dangerous driving environment,” so motorists should “deliberately adopt a more defensive driving style during the holidays,” he says.

Adds Oppenheimer, “do not assume that on a holiday, you can get food at any exit - even fast food. Do not assume you can get gas at any exit. Do not assume you can get a tow truck if your car breaks down. I have experienced each of these three scenarios personally, sitting in a car with starving children and trying to distract them by playing trivia games while waiting for the one tow-truck operator in the entire state of New York after we ran out of gas on the highway.”

“On the upside,” she adds, “the tow-truck operator who finally did show up refused our tip because he said our call had saved him from what was spiraling into the traditional family holiday chaos.”