
What can you bring aboard? It depends.

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It's not easy flying on commercial airlines these days. Complicated ticket pricing, endless security checks, disappearing niceties such as complimentary food — then add to the mix a long list of confusing rules about what is or is not allowed aboard planes, and air travel can be downright difficult.

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You know you can't bring a gun or knife into the cabin. You probably figure you can't bring certain chemicals, including spray paint, tear gas, and common household bleach. You can't bring certain sporting goods, such as baseball bats. But what about the not-so-obvious items?

You might not, for example, be allowed to bring on board a large musical instrument such as a cello, even if you pay for a separate passenger seat to hold it. Then again you just might. (See story next page.)

The confusion, experts say, is a result of the Transportation Security Administration having one set of rules and airlines having their own.

"I know it can be tough, but we always encourage people to check the TSA website to see what they can have aboard a plane," says Jim Fotenos, a TSA spokesman. "Even better is our mobile app, which can also be accessed online — not just on mobile devices — where you can search for specific items and their permissibility. But in the end, our goals and the airlines' are different. We set our rules with passenger safety in mind. And those aren't negotiable. Beyond that, the airlines do have the ability to establish their own rules for permissible items on flights. They are businesses."

April Masini, who writes the advice column "Ask April," says she often fields questions about air travel. Masini tells readers to try to bring valuables in the air cabin with them and not check those items — not over safety concerns, but because they may get lost.

Last Tuesday she advised a woman whose son had purchased a seat for his \$8,000 tuba. TSA agents had no problem with the tuba, once it was screened by airport security personal, Masini says.

"[It] was too valuable to pack along with the suitcases in the underbelly of the plane and too large to ship Fed-Ex when the price of a seat on a commercial plane ran about \$400 one way," Masini said in a phone interview. "The rumors around the high school were that the gifted musician's tuba flew first class. It didn't. It flew coach. And, no, the tuba does not have its own frequent-flier number. Although a well-versed lawyer could probably argue discrimination against a musical instrument that is treated other than, say, a piccolo or a more petite clarinet!"

Dave Carroll, a Canada-based musician and cofounder of Gripevine.com, a consumer advocacy website, made headlines in 2009 with a YouTube video about an incident in which United Airlines employees told him before a trip that he could bring his guitar into the cabin with him. When it came time to board the plane, airline personnel told Carroll the company had a no-guitars-in-the-cabin policy. His guitar went into the cargo hold and was broken during the flight.

In subsequent communications with the company about the conflicting statements, Carroll says he was told "there was a policy in place that allowed guitars, but that the employees down the line weren't aware of it yet. . . . So it really is a

matter of lack of communications on all levels, not just between TSA and airlines, but sometimes between airlines and their own employees. The problem is these airlines are so large that they become compartmentalized, where one hand doesn't know what the other's doing.

"And it's frustrating, because at the end of the day consumers are always the ones inconvenienced. And all they want to do is get where they're going with the seats that they purchased and the items they're traveling with."

Of course, musical instruments aren't the only items with foggy status when it comes to what can and can't be brought on board. The TSA policy prohibiting most knives from airplane cabins policy does allow knitting needles. Ice skates don't immediately come to mind when the discussion is potential weapons, but they can be razor sharp, and they're permitted in air cabins by TSA and most commercial airlines. If the pointy fin on your wakeboard is properly covered, you can bring it aboard. Fishing rods that meet individual airline size requirements may be brought aboard. And while cabin doors are carefully monitored by flight attendants, the TSA allows parachutes to be brought on board.

Corey Caldwell, spokeswoman for the Association of Flight Attendants, says she's not sure the confusion between TSA and airline passenger rules can be avoided.
