

How to Avoid Two New (and Vexing) Travel Fees

Resort fees and advance seating fees are among the latest pesky charges, but they can be avoided.

By Kathy Kristof

Travelers have become all too familiar with nagging fees for everything from checking a bag to changing a reservation. “Throw a dart – you don’t have to even aim – and you’re likely to hit a fee,” says Christopher Elliott, author of “How to Be the World’s Smartest Traveler.” And because fees help pad the bottom line, don’t look for them to disappear soon. U.S. airlines collected more than \$3.5 billion in baggage fees alone in 2014.

Some travel-related fees are easier to avoid than others. We found two increasingly common fees – one imposed by some hotels; the other by some airlines – that are trickier to dodge because they are often disclosed late in the booking process. But tricky doesn’t mean impossible. Here’s our advice for avoiding these pesky fees.

Advance seating fees

Anyone who has booked a flight in the past few years is already well familiar with fees that airlines charge for everything from an inflight meal to extra legroom. But the latest trend is to charge to reserve a seat in advance – not just a premium seat but any seat at all, says Jay Sorensen, president of IdeaWorks, an airline marketing research firm. “More and more airlines are considering a pre-assigned seat as an amenity that customers are willing to pay more for,” he says. “Your ticket gets you a seat somewhere on the plane, but unless you pay extra, you may not be sitting with your spouse.”

There’s no industry-wide standard cost for a pre-assigned seat, Sorensen adds. Airlines such as Frontier that impose this fee sometimes charge different rates for different seats, asking premium prices for seats near the front of the plane, and less for those hated middle seats near the restrooms, for example. Indeed, [FareCompare.com’s airline fee chart](#) shows “preferred/advanced seating” levies ranging from \$1 to \$199.

Notably, your ticket does entitle you to a seat, so if you don’t care where you end up on the plane, you can avoid paying the fee. You’re generally able to reserve your seat within 24 hours of the flight for free. Moreover, some airlines, such as Alaska and Virgin America, don’t charge these fees at all.

What if you do care where you sit? Say you’re traveling with your family and want to sit together, but don’t want to pay additional fees? Your best bet is to favor the airlines that don’t levy the seat fees. If those airlines don’t fly to your preferred destination, you have two choices: You can pay the fee or take your chances. Whether you should gamble

may well depend on whom you're travelling with and how painful it might be to be split up.

If you're traveling with your teenager, both you and your child might be delighted to be sandwiched among strangers. It might be trickier if you're traveling with toddlers. Still, it's worth remembering that these fees are imposed by the airline, not the flight crew. And the crew has no interest in sitting your screaming two-year-old next to the nice elderly couple on their second honeymoon. If you check in early and explain to the agents why you're trying to sit together, they may be able to work something out.

What if you booked your ticket solely based on price and this seat fee puts the cost of your current reservation over the cost of the closest contender? You can cancel the ticket, as long as you do it within 24 hours of making the booking, says Elliott. The Department of Transportation's 24-hour rule allows you to cancel or "hold" a ticket that's just been booked. Airlines will usually refund your money, he says, though some might give you a credit for a future flight.

Hotel & resort fees

Hotel shopping online? Beware the fine print. An increasing number of hotels are tacking on "resort" and "hotel" fees that are not included in the base room price. The end result is that all of the major price-comparison Web sites – Priceline, Travelocity, Expedia and TripAdvisor – can show misleading prices for these hotels.

Consider, for example, a recent search for Las Vegas hotels. The three-star Downtown Grand Las Vegas showed a stunningly cheap rate of \$35 per night. But look more closely and you'll see that the cost excludes a \$20.34 daily resort fee. In other words, the cost of the room is actually \$55.34 per night, or 58% more than the advertised price.

And, although the fee supposedly gives you access to certain services, such as Wi-Fi, travelers usually don't have the option to decline those services and expect the hotel to waive the fee. The fee is in reality part of the room price, broken out to make price comparisons more difficult.

Of course resort fees are not brand new. They sprung up years ago, but had largely died out earlier this decade because the Federal Trade Commission started investigating resort fees as the result of numerous consumer complaints. However, when the FTC probe was completed, all that happened was the FTC sent out 22 warning letters in 2012 demanding better disclosure. Since the agency didn't demand that the fees be folded into the room price, this practice has since taken off.

In some tourist-heavy cities, such as New York, Orlando and Las Vegas, the fees have become common. Still, they're not universal, so careful consumers can avoid them if

they're meticulous about reading the fine print. However, if you're booking via Priceline's "name your own price" or "express deals" tools that obscure the hotel's name until after booking, you will need to be particularly vigilant. The fees are disclosed before the reservation becomes non-refundable, but they're likely to be buried near the bottom of the page amidst more standard fees, such as state and local hotel taxes. If you want to avoid the fee, you must cancel the transaction at that point and start over.

When booking on other sites or simply price-comparing hotels by city, the fees are generally listed below the bold-faced advertised price with a notation "excludes \$xx hotel fee."

Most commonly, the fees are collected at the hotel – not by the booking service. If you didn't see the fee when booking, you can dispute the charge when it's collected at check-out. Some hotels will waive it, Elliott says. If they don't, however, you have one more option – dispute it with your credit card company. If you can legitimately claim that it was not disclosed before purchase, the card issuer may be willing to erase the charge from your bill.

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