

Flying with a Musical Instrument

Commercial air travel with a musical instrument can present special challenges. Many instruments are larger than the typical carry-on bag, and some are irregularly shaped. Certain instruments are fragile or valuable — or both. Here is some advice to help you have the best experience when flying with your musical instrument.

Selecting flights

Whenever possible, choose a nonstop flight before a direct flight, and a direct flight before a connection. A direct flight — sometimes called a “through” flight — has a single flight number.



It may have one or more intermediate stops, but passengers do not have to change planes. If your instrument is checked into the baggage compartment, choosing flights in this order will reduce its chances of misconnecting or being offloaded at an intermediate stop. Selecting a direct flight rather than a connection will also eliminate the need to find space for a carry-on item on a second flight. Note: nonstop flights sometimes cost more than connections.

If you book online, examine the flight listings closely. Some systems simply list the number of “stops” but in many cases those stops are actually connections. If two or more flight numbers are listed, that portion of the itinerary is a connection (i.e., you’ll need to change planes).

If you are planning to bring your instrument into the cabin as carry-on baggage, consider flying at an off-peak time such as Tuesday through Thursday, Saturday afternoon or evening, or Sunday morning. There are fewer passengers at these times, and thus less competition for space in the overhead bins. If you must fly on peak travel days, flights will often be less crowded mid-day and late in the evening.

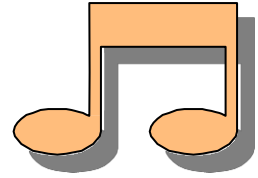
Selecting airlines

Before committing to a particular airline, check its website for that carrier’s checked and carry-on baggage allowances and fees. This information may be listed under a topic such as “Customer Service,” “Travel Information” or “Optional Services.” It might also be available during the online flight-search process. Allowances include limits on:

- Size (length + width + depth)
- Weight
- Number of pieces

Both checked and carry-on baggage are subject to allowances and may involve fees, and these allowances and fees vary among airlines. Some airlines allow one or two checked bags for no charge, while others charge for even a single checked bag. For carry-on baggage you are generally limited to one carry-on bag plus one personal item that will fit under the seat in front of you.

Many U.S. destinations are served by regional carriers that partner with a larger U.S. airline as part of a “code-share” arrangement. Code-share flights are listed under the identity of one airline but are operated by another. Flights operated by regional carriers use smaller aircraft that may have less carry-on space and a more limited carry-on baggage allowance than the flights operated directly by their major-carrier sponsors. Code-share flights are identified in online schedule listings, and telephone agents are also required to disclose when a flight is operated by a carrier other than the one that is listed. Be alert to these disclosures and investigate possible differences in carry-on space and allowances. Online services such as seatguru.com may help.



Most airline bag fees apply on an “each way” basis — you pay the fee on the way to your destination, and you pay it again on your return trip. (Airlines generally don’t charge separately for each flight in a connection.)

Pay particular attention to the size and weight limits for carry-on baggage. If you plan to bring your instrument into the cabin but it exceeds that airline’s carry-on baggage size or weight limits, the airline might require that it be checked into the aircraft’s baggage compartment. Even if you plan to carry on your instrument, if possible it is wise to pack it as though it will be checked.

Certain carriers (so-called “ultra low-cost airlines”) charge for carry-on baggage. Those carriers tend to charge more for carry-on when you pay at the gate than if you pay online or at the ticket counter. Be sure to check your airline’s website and your e-ticket itinerary/confirmation to ensure that you are aware of any charges you might incur.

Many airlines will allow you to purchase an adjoining seat for your instrument (e.g., if its size exceeds the standard carry-on limit). This is usually known as “seat baggage,” or sometimes “cargo in the cabin.” This is typically a window seat. A crewmember will assist you with approved restraints (usually seat belt extenders) to strap your instrument to its seat. A weight limit may still apply, and the shape of the instrument in its case must permit it to be strapped securely to the seat. You might be limited to certain locations in the cabin. Call the airline or check its website to determine if it offers this option.

Learning your airline’s policies

Most airlines have special policies for musical instruments that they set out in their ‘Contract of Carriage.’ DOT rules require that these contracts be available on every airline’s website. Often the contracts can be accessed via a link labeled “Legal” or sometimes “Customer Service Plan.” When you find the contract, do a word search for “music.”

If your instrument should be lost, damaged or delayed, there is a limit on the airline’s liability. At this writing the limits are \$3,500 per passenger for domestic trips, and 1,131 “Special Drawing Rights” for international trips (including the domestic portion of an international itinerary). A “Special Drawing Right” is an international currency surrogate that floats on a daily basis. At this writing 1,131 SDRs is equal to US \$1,593.47. You can visit www.imf.org to see its current value.

Some airlines disclaim liability altogether for loss of or damage to musical instruments on domestic trips. On international trips (including domestic portions of international journeys), airlines are usually prohibited by treaty from disclaiming liability for baggage that they actually carry. Passengers traveling with musical instruments whose value is higher than the limits listed above should ask their airline if it offers “excess valuation,” which permits a passenger to pay a fee to raise these limits. Some airlines might not offer excess valuation for musical instruments. You may also want to consider personal insurance that covers the instrument when traveling.

Preparing for your trip

Even if you are planning to bring your instrument into the cabin as carry-on baggage, pack it in a good-quality hardside case. On full and nearly-full flights, not all carry-on baggage will fit in the overhead bins and some items that will not fit under the seat will need to be gate-checked into the aircraft’s baggage compartment. On many regional-carrier aircraft (see above), all but the smallest items will have to be checked.



If the interior of the instrument’s case does not include suspension cushioning that is shaped to the instrument, consider supporting the narrower parts with rolled-up clothing or bubble wrap to reduce the likelihood of those parts bending or breaking.

Mark the instrument case “Fragile” — even when it’s shaped like a musical instrument.

All checked baggage should have a tag outside the bag with your name, permanent address, and phone number (preferably a cell where you can be reached during your trip). Include a note with the same information inside the instrument case.

For stringed instruments being transported as checked baggage, some airlines recommend loosening the strings to protect the neck from damage due to expansion and contraction resulting from temperature variations.

If you are planning to bring your instrument into the cabin as carry-on, check in early (online check-in is usually available the day before) and get to the gate early, so that you have the best chance of boarding before most of the overhead bin space is taken. Most airlines offer priority boarding for an extra fee – this service allows you to be in the first general boarding group (after elite frequent flyers but before most other passengers).

For security-related advice from the Transportation Security Administration about traveling with a musical instrument, see <http://www.tsa.gov/traveler-information/musical-instruments>.

Filing a Complaint

If you should have a problem during your trip, visit www.dot.gov/airconsumer/air-travel-musical-instruments to learn how to file a complaint with an airline or with DOT.