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Have Gun, Will Travel

If your hunting trips involve airports, you need to know how to deal with the inevitable inconveniences.

By Craig Boddington

Traveling with firearms is subject to the same problems as traveling with any other form of checked baggage. Sure, I've heard the horror stories. But I think they're very rare. I doubt that a lot of folks travel with firearms any more than I do, and I've had relatively few problems.

This means that I can't count the number of times bags--including gun cases--have been delayed or misdirected. But they've always shown up eventually. Out of hundreds of flights with guns, I've never lost a firearm for more than a couple of days. And most delays have simply involved waiting for the next flight. Breakage? Three times I have opened gun cases and found a broken stock. Two of these were the same rifle, repaired with epoxy and Superglue the first time and requiring restocking the second time.

I don't think I've been just lucky. Rather, I've tried to follow the airline rules, Federal Aviation Administration and now Transport Security Administration rules and my own rules based on experience. And in all honesty, most of my problems, albeit minor, have occurred when I've tried some shortcuts.

First off, it's absolutely mandatory that you follow both the airline and TSA rules. In general, these are quite simple. And surprisingly, traveling with firearms has not become more difficult since September 11, 2001. If anything, it's easier. My theory is that most security personnel now recognize there is a genuine threat out there and actually pay a bit less attention to honest shooters and hunters who follow the rules.

Firearms and ammunition must be in checked baggage and must be declared when you check in your bags. Firearms must be in sturdy, lockable hardcases. Ammunition is limited to five kilograms (11 pounds) per passenger. Firearms must be unloaded and will probably be inspected by either airline or TSA personnel. Expect to sign a little fluorescent card that states the firearms are unloaded--and expect confusion as to whether this should be placed on the inside or the outside of the gun case. Recently, this form has gone inside, but this little rule seems to change back and forth.

If traveling out of the country, it is now a requirement that you "register" the firearms with U.S. Customs. This is a very simple form (Customs Form 4457), the same one used for jewelry and cameras. It does not constitute registration of your firearms; rather, it is proof that you took the rifle out of the U.S. to begin with, thus allowing you to bring it back in. Customs does not keep a record of it, and the form is good for as long as you own that firearm.

For me this is an onerous procedure since the nearest Customs office is about three hours from where I live, but any U.S. Customs office in a major airport will have the forms. Fill out one--including make, model, caliber and serial number--and sign it. The Customs officer will verify the serial number, so have the firearm with you if you intend to get the form ahead of time, and that's it.

Equally important--and much more complex, depending on your destination--is a firearms permit if one is required at your foreign destination. Often this is handled by your outfitter and will await you at the other end. If at all possible, get a copy of it faxed to you. If this is not possible, make sure up front that there will be an appropriate firearm available to borrow at your destination because if you don't have a copy of your foreign gun permit--even if one is waiting at the other end--you may not be allowed to take your gun with you.

Since rules vary and are subject to change, always call the airline. Work your way through the recorded menus until you talk to a real person, write down the name of that person, and find out what the current rules are. It used to be that ammo had to be packed separately from firearms. This is changing; just last week I was allowed to put it in the case with the firearms on one specific airline. Packaging of ammunition also varies. Most of the time "original factory container" will suffice. (Note to handloaders: Put your ammo in an original factory box.) However, a few airlines specify ammo to be in a locked wooden or metal container. I use a military ammo can fitted with a hasp, and I put it in my duffel--accessible so I can haul it out if inspection is desired.

The allowable number of firearms is also changing. You are very safe to take two firearms per traveler (and 11 pounds of ammo per traveler). However, not long ago I had three firearms in a tube case, and the airline stated unequivocally that I could carry no more than two. I returned to my truck, stowed the third firearm behind the seat and left it there (not recommended at a major urban airport).

Here are some tips to help smooth the way:

AVOID TIGHT CONNECTIONS

The best way to land without your firearms is to allow your travel agent to book a short connection. For domestic travel, an hour is absolutely minimal, 90 minutes much safer. For international travel, two hours is minimal, three is better. Book your flights so that you can check your baggage, including your firearms, all the way through to your final destination. This is especially true with foreign travel.

CHECK IN WELL AHEAD OF TIME

You cannot do curbside check-in with firearms; you must go to the ticket counter, declare your guns and have them inspected. This takes time. Some airline personnel are very nervous about firearms, and inexperienced ticket agents may be absolutely clueless as to what is required. Allow plenty of time, and make sure that you understand the rules, even if the ticket agent doesn't. And keep smiling. I have a little trouble with this sometimes, but a temper tantrum will make things worse.

PACK WITH CARE

Start by making absolutely certain your firearms are unloaded. This is apparently not as obvious as it sounds. Twice I have seen firearms discharged in airports during normal inspection to ensure they were unloaded (no wonder some people are nervous). Use a hard case that locks securely and offers plenty of padding. Make sure one firearm cannot rub against the other. If your firearm disassembles, pack it disassembled. This will make the inspection much simpler.

On bolt actions always remove the bolt. There are two reasons for this. First, it makes the inspection simpler and easier and prevents you from having to wave a firearm around the airport. Second, an inserted bolt causes an unnatural projection or lump in the guncase. On one of my "stock-breaking" episodes the rifle was in a darn-near-bulletproof and well-padded steel case--but I left the bolt in. I have no idea what the baggage smashers dropped on it, but the stock was shattered all around the action. I am convinced the stock would have survived had I removed the bolt.

Ever since, I have wrapped the bolt in a pair of socks and put it separately in the case. When possible, I usually pack knives, binoculars and a spotting scope in the gun case. And make darned sure you don't have any loose cartridges anywhere in your luggage--especially not in your carry-on.

WATCH YOUR WEIGHT

Baggage weight restrictions have gone down considerably. Pack as light as you can, restricting yourself to two bags if at all possible including your gun case. Keep individual bag weight for domestic travel under 50 pounds, under 70 pounds per bag for international travel (actual baggage allowance on international carriers might be much less).

Stuff like sleeping bags, cold-weather gear and optics add weight fast, so on some trips it is not possible to stay within the weight or bag allowance. If you are over the limits on either weight or number of bags, expect to pay through the nose. Also understand that you increase the risk of your bags catching a later flight. On very full flights the airlines may hold back a certain amount of baggage because of aircraft weight restrictions.

Make sure your bags are marked with all of your contact information, and put the same information inside the bag. My best lost-bag story happened in 1989 when I went hunting in Mozambique. I changed planes in Frankfurt, Germany, and I learned there that my guncase made the flight from L.A., but my duffel bag did not. I had several hours in Johannesburg, South Africa, to purchase socks, underwear and a few other necessities. I also had to find .500 Nitro Express ammo, a real trick back then. A local gunshop called a cartridge collector, and I went elephant hunting with five rounds of vintage Kynoch (it was enough). My duffel bag chased me to Harare and wound up in storage there. It was returned to me some 18 months later, all my hunting clothes still neatly folded and only slightly musty. But absolutely nothing was missing.