

Without Prejudice

116 Fairway Avenue
West Drayton
Middlesex
UB7 7AP

First Choice Ski
Customer Services Department
Olivier House
18 Marine Parade
Brighton
East Sussex
BN2 1TL

February 11, 2004

Dear Sir or Madam;

Re: Curtailed Austrian skiing holiday

Booked in the name: Nicola Crossley
Flying: Gatwick to Salzburg, AMM637C
Hotel, resort: Gasthof Unterbräu, Hopfgarten
Departure date: 7th February, 2004

I am writing to complain about the holiday described above, from which I have just had to return early. Your representative at the resort was unable to resolve matters within an acceptable time frame, and advised me to complain when I returned home.

Enclosed is a detailed description of the events that transpired. However, the key points are;

1. My luggage was lost by your firm somewhere between Gatwick and Salzburg.
2. Your company gave me three different dates/times for when I could expect my luggage to be delivered to me, none of which it kept.
3. After wasting a significant portion of my holiday waiting, unable to ski, and spending much of my time in the hotel waiting to hear from your representative, I returned home.
4. At the time of writing, my luggage has still not been found, or, if it has, no one at your organisation has attempted to contact me.

There were additional problems, as the detailed description will make clear.

As a package holiday, the Package Travel Regulations 1992 apply; you are liable to provide compensation for the problems that were encountered, and the distress, disappointment, and out-of-pocket expenses suffered.

Should we fail to resolve this matter to our mutual satisfaction I will send a copy of this letter, enclosures, and any other correspondence to ABTA.

I await your reply.

Sincerely,

Nik Clayton

Enclosures: Copy of PIR report, detailed description of problems, copy of CSR F16476,
copy of CSR F16477, receipts
Cc: Peter Long, First Choice Chief Executive; BBC Watchdog

Details of the problems encountered on my abortive First Choice holiday in Austria

I was a member of a five-party group intending to spend a week skiing in Austria. The trip was organised by, and booked in the name of, Nicola Crossley.

The trip suffered from a litany of problem. While I can accept that mistakes and unfortunate situations can and will occur, the way your company dealt with these situations reflects badly on yourselves, and ensures that I will not be recommending FirstChoice to any of my friends and colleagues. It also left me with a number of out of pocket expenses, ruined my holiday, and has used up two of my work vacation days.

The problems commenced upon our arrival at Gatwick, on February 7th. Despite arriving more than two and a half hours before the scheduled departure of flight AMM637C, we were greeted with queues that snaked around the checkout hall, doubling back on themselves, and far exceeding the amount of cordoned off space allocated to them.

After interminable queuing we were greeted by a check-in agent who proceeded to check us, and our luggage, courteously and efficiently. Sadly, this was not to set the pattern for the remainder of the holiday.

The delay at check-in meant that we had perhaps 20 minutes to pass through security and try and purchase some lunch before proceeding to the gate. After rushing through, arriving at the gate, and having our boarding pass stubs removed, we were then told that was to be a delay before boarding.

Why was this information not communicated before allowing people to surrender their boarding passes? This would give passengers more time to enjoy lunch, and/or browse the shops in the departure hall prior to boarding, particularly when the amenities at the gate are not conducive to spending a large amount of time there?

After a wait of over an hour, we were transported, en masse, by bus to the waiting plane. Poor planning was again in evidence, as it seemed as though all the passengers had been brought along at the same time. This meant that many of us spent 10 or 15 minutes waiting on the tarmac in the cold while passengers slowly embarked.

Surely it would be better for buses departing from the gate to be staggered, so that a large mass of people is not left milling around outside the plane?

Having eventually departed, we enjoyed a quick, although turbulent, flight to Salzburg. While credit is due to the pilot and the other aircrew for the manner in which they handled the turbulence, I could see a number of people around us becoming distressed. A simple announcement would have done much to put them at rest.

It is after landing at Salzburg that things began to go seriously awry.

After proceeding to pick up our party's luggage, it eventually became apparent that my main luggage had not arrived – my smaller bag, containing ski boots, had arrived. After locating our representative, Stephen, to explain this, I was directed to fill out a Property Irregularity Report (PIR). I was assured that my luggage would be along shortly, and that this was a regular occurrence. I made sure that my mobile telephone number (which works in Austria) was on the PIR, so that the airline would have no problems contacting me when my luggage eventually arrived.

We waited a further 10-15 minutes while the rep tried to determine which would be the correct coach for our onward journey to Hopfgarten. This was worrying – as customers, we expect the rep to know what

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is going on. Uncertainty on their part translates to concern on our part that things might be about to go very wrong.

After boarding we were left on the coach for approximately an hour and a half. There was no sign of our rep, and no indication from anybody as to what the delay was.

Communication, at this point, was very poor. I had no idea when my luggage would be arriving, or what would happen to it when it did. We had been left on a dark coach, by now several hours later than planned, with no information as to when we would be leaving, and what time we could expect to be at our destination.

Eventually the rep appeared, and we commenced the journey to Hopfgarten. It was at this point that Stephen explained why things had taken so long, how long the journey would take, and so on. There was still no indication of what had happened to my luggage, or when I could expect to see it again.

This was beginning to concern me. With the multitude of bar codes and scanning systems in place, I would have expected the appropriate authorities at the airport to have been able to tell me exactly which flight my luggage was on, and when it would arrive. This apparent lack of interest in luggage that has been “lost in the system” is particularly troubling given the heightened security regime that airports are widely reported to be operating under.

More importantly, Stephen’s “plan” for assisting with my missing luggage consisted of telling me that he hoped it would show up the next day, and assuring me that when these things happen the airport is normally very good at conveying the baggage to the hotel. I realize he was trying to be helpful, but I was more concerned about having to spend the next day in dirty clothes that I’d travelled in – the next day being a Sunday, so with no opportunity to purchase replacements. Concerns like this were lost on him.

We eventually arrived at Hopfgarten having switched to a smaller vehicle part way through the journey. A vehicle that was designed to carry at least one fewer people than the number that were loaded in to it. Apart from the obvious safety concerns, arriving at the hotel after a 45-minute journey bumping over roads jammed next to a complete stranger is not conducive to arriving in a positive frame of mind.

By this time it had passed 9pm, and we were over three hours late. Fortunately, the Gasthof Unterbrau’s proprietor was charming, and made us feel very welcome. Still, no word on the fate of my luggage, beyond the rep’s “hope” that it would “turn up tomorrow”.

Tomorrow (Sunday) arrived, and no sign of my luggage, forcing me to borrow clothes from my travelling companions – as expected, every shop in the vicinity being shut.

On meeting Stephen in the morning there was still no word as to my luggage, and no indication on his part that he was going to do anything about it, beyond continue to hope for its speedy arrival.

It was left to me to contact the airport later that day, having first tracked down the appropriate telephone number, to discover from the left-luggage office that my baggage would, apparently, be on a flight scheduled to arrive at 9pm that evening. After discovering this, I decided that there was little point in trying to hire replacement equipment, since it was already early afternoon, and I would get in, at most, two hours skiing.

This was to be a mistake.

We met the rep that evening (Sunday), and relayed the information about my imminently arriving luggage to him, which was, as far as I can tell, news to him. I can only assume that he had not been trying to determine the whereabouts of my luggage that day. He congratulated me on the problem being solved.

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Later that evening I proceeded to wait at the hotel for my luggage. 10pm came and went, as did 11pm. On calling the left-luggage office again, I was played a recorded message indicating that their opening hours were 9am to 11pm. By 12.10am the next morning I decided that my luggage was probably not going to appear, and went to bed.

The next morning (Monday), still without my luggage, I met with the rep again. Not at 8am, as his hours of duty posted in the hotel suggested, but 8.20, when he finally showed up. He proceeded to call his office, and have someone there start chasing up with the left luggage office to determine where my luggage was, and what time it would arrive. We parted, arranging to meet again at 10am.

By 10am, he still had not had a response – apparently, the left luggage office was still closed, despite it being well after 9am. By this time I was facing my second full day without skiing – a full third of the holiday wasted. Steven promised to keep chasing, and to call me as soon as he heard any news. By now not trusting that things were going to go well, I asked Stephen to start investigating options and costs for flying me home. I saw no point in staying in Austria if I would be unable to ski, and unwilling to expect that the rest of my party would want to curtail their skiing. We agreed to meet again in the early afternoon.

By 11.30 or so I still hadn't heard back from Steven, so called the left-luggage office myself, and discovered that my luggage might (note: not “will”, “might”) be on the flight arriving from Amsterdam at 3.40pm. There was no explanation as to why my luggage had gone to Amsterdam, nor was there any explanation -- or apology -- for the fact that my luggage wasn't on the previous night's 9pm flight as I'd been promised.

Stephen and I met again in the early afternoon. He had also discovered that my luggage was supposed to be on the 3.40pm flight. Despite obtaining this information earlier he had not bothered to call me with the news. He had also obtained prices for returning home, recommending a flight costing some €450. Two minutes browsing the web at the Gasthof Unterbrau showed that I could do the same trip for €169. However, both these flights departed the following day, so I determined to wait until later that evening to see if my luggage did, in fact, arrive.

Stephen and I agreed that he would find out by 3pm that day whether or not my luggage was on the inbound flight, contact me with the news, and I would decide what to do then.

In the interim, I investigated the possibility of hiring replacement ski equipment, and purchasing replacement clothes. As an uncommonly tall individual, I am used to having problems finding clothes that fit, and, as expected, after enquiring at the local hire centres, it became apparent that there was no clothing of a suitable size for rent. Purchasing replacement clothing was out of the question, as, for insurance purposes, First Choice considered my luggage to be temporarily rather than permanently lost.

3pm came and went, with no sign of Stephen. By this point I was getting used to him not keeping me informed. When I eventually saw him, at 6pm that evening, he confirmed that I was right not to trust the information that I'd been given earlier that day, and that my luggage had not arrived. He told me that he'd discovered this information at around 3pm, and, after some prompting, remembered that he was supposed to have told me then, and managed a quick apology. He said that he believed, but could not confirm, that my luggage would be on the 9pm flight.

With 2 days now spent luggage-less, with the prospect of a third looming in sight, and with no faith in the ability of your staff to accurately predict when my luggage might arrive, I decided to cut my losses, and proceeded to book myself on the first Ryanair flight out of Salzburg the next morning. Stephen, did, at this point, make himself useful, and went down to the local station to check train and bus times. Unfortunately, none of them were convenient, and the best he could do was book me a taxi with a local taxi firm at “mates rates”, which still came to €150.

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Leaving by taxi at 6am the next (Tuesday) morning, I took the opportunity to check – as expected, my luggage had **not** arrived on the 9pm flight.

At this time (approximately 12.30pm UK time, Wednesday afternoon) I have still not received any word as to the fate of my luggage, despite leaving my mobile telephone number on the PIR form, and ensuring that Stephen also had it in order to contact me.

Communication

At almost every stage when something went wrong, communication was poor. From the delay at the gate, through to the delay on the coach, through to the complete lack of communication (without requiring me to constantly chase) regarding my missing luggage, we were not told what was going on, what efforts were being made to solve the problem, or how long the situation might last for.

Pro-activeness

As a customer, I am on holiday to relax and enjoy myself. I do not expect to have to run around chasing after problems and need to have to try and resolve them myself. Throughout the saga of my missing luggage the rep did not appear to be making much effort to track down what was happening, and to keep me informed of progress. As I have said, all the information I received from the airport about the location of my luggage and when I might expect to receive it I had to obtain from the airport on my own time, and at my own expense.

No apologies or suggestion of fault

From the numerous delays we encountered to the problems with my luggage, at no time did we receive anything approaching a sincere apology from First Choice or its representatives, or any suggestion that they might somehow be at fault.

Reimbursement.

As a minimum courtesy, I expect FirstChoice to reimburse the following:

- The full cost of the holiday - £525
- Expenses involved in returning home
 - €150 taxi from Hopfgarten to Salzburg
 - €164.09 flight from Salzburg to London Stansted
 - £16.50 train fare from Stansted to West London
- The cost of the numerous mobile telephone calls I had to make to chase up information about my luggage following your rep's inability to keep me informed. I do not yet have the appropriate mobile telephone bill, but I expect these to run to somewhere between £20 and £30.

I also expect an appropriate level of compensation for the distress and inconvenience caused, for a ruined holiday, and for the two fewer vacation days now available to me this year.