

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER



KIICHIRO SATO/AP

Orbitz switched her Aruba vacation — but not her hotel in Tahiti

By Christopher Elliott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. We had a vacation to Tahiti booked through Orbitz. My husband recently called Orbitz to see how much it would cost to change the vacation to Aruba. Orbitz rebooked our tickets without permission.

But they didn't completely switch the vacations. Now we have flights to Aruba, but our hotel remains in Tahiti. I have tried numerous times to get this corrected, with absolutely no help. I've done this through phone calls, e-mails, Facebook Messenger, and the Orbitz website chat.

The Orbitz error has cost me several hundred dollars because of change fees and penalties. Our original flight was refundable with a \$250 change fee per person. Can you help us?

JENNIFER WATERS, *Salem*

A. Orbitz never should have changed your original reservation. I don't know why it did. I think unless we went back to the call, we wouldn't know who said what.

That's one reason I always recommend that you use the website to make any changes to your reservation with an online agency. Orbitz, like most major online agencies, keeps a record of every click and keystroke. Also, you would have received an immediate e-mail verifying the change to your itinerary.

Whatever happened here — and after a full investigation, that's still not entirely clear — a lot of things went wrong.

According to your account, you were on the phone with an Orbitz representative discussing flight options. You wanted to change your ticket because you were concerned that you might not get to Tahiti because of COVID-19 testing requirements. Then the call either got cut off, or the agent hung up — you're not sure which.

A web chat or an e-mail could have provided a paper trail. But it looks like you tried to call Orbitz after the dropped call, so there was no paper trail. Any record of the conversations would be in call center recordings that Orbitz won't let you listen to. You don't know definitively what you said or what the agent said.

In a perfect world, you would be able to record every phone call with Orbitz and have access to the transcript. But recording a phone conversation is a hassle, and call center employees are often instructed to hang up when you tell them you're recording the call. I guess only they can record.

Your vacation was part of a package, which means that you booked all of the components together, so it's even more confusing to me that Orbitz could have changed your flight but not the hotel. Yep, this one's a head scratcher.

You could have reached out to an executive at Orbitz to find out how to fix this. I list the names, numbers and e-mail addresses of the customer service managers at Orbitz (Expedia) on my nonprofit consumer advocacy site at www.elliott.org/company-contacts/expedia-customer-service-contacts.

It turns out Orbitz had already offered you a credit for the price difference between the Tahiti vacation package and the one in Aruba. I contacted Orbitz, and it reviewed your case. "A refund of \$1,185 was processed back to the customer's card due to the miscommunication that occurred," a spokeswoman told me. That resolution worked for you.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Elliott's latest book is "How To Be The World's Smartest Traveler" (National Geographic). Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.

THE VIP LOUNGE

Seth Sikes on beach massages, Judy and Liza, and his upcoming show at Club Café

Ever since he was a young boy, Seth Sikes was "obsessed" with Judy Garland. "While other kids would be singing, you know, Mariah Carey and other pop music singers' songs, I would run around the playground singing 'I got rhythm, I got music ...' [from Judy Garland's rendition of the George and Ira Gershwin song "I Got Rhythm"]. It's been in my blood forever," Sikes said on a recent phone call from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, where he is performing and vacationing. "I got off lucky as a kid in Texas who liked Judy Garland. I think other kids thought I was weird, but I wasn't bullied, thank God." Sikes, 37, is bringing his affinity for Garland and other "musical theater divas" including Liza Minnelli and Barbra Streisand, to a one-night performance — his Boston debut — at Club Café on Jan. 29. "The difference in what I do and what other people do is that I don't do any sort of impersonation. It's a loving tribute to my obsession with these people that I've had since I was a little boy," said Sikes of his show, "Seth Sikes Sings Judy and Liza and Barbra, etc." He added: "What you get to hear is old songs from a youngish guy with a modern twist." In addition to playing at New York City piano bars and other musical venues (including some in Provincetown), Sikes has worked as a production assistant and assistant director on several Broadway shows, including, most recently, the Tony Award-winning "The Band's Visit," for which he was an assistant director. We caught up with the Paris, Texas, native, who lives in New York City, to talk about all things travel.

Favorite vacation destination?

It's a toss up between Fire Island Pines [on New York's Long Island] and my new favorite getaway, which is Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Last year I went down [to Puerto Vallarta] for three weeks and stayed for four months. That seems to be a common trend among its visitors. There are so many shows to see every night — performers like myself, as well as concerts and drag shows. Great restaurants. You can rent a chair on the beach and people will bring you drinks all day and stop by to offer outdoor massages. Most importantly, it's amazingly cheap. They basically pay you to eat the food, which is often very good.

Favorite food or drink while vacationing?

Margaritas — especially at the beach. I could drink them all day, but in order to function properly, I usually stick with white wine. And when in Europe, it's great to drink carafes of local wines, which are, again, insanely cheap and often delicious. For food ... I'm from Texas, so I grew up loving Tex-Mex food — which is different than Mexican food. It's all about the hot sauce.

Where would you like to travel to but haven't?

Israel. I'm not religious, but I'd like to visit all of the holy sites and see the splendor of the Western Wall. Also, I've heard the parties are great in the Holy Land.



Seth Sikes at Fire Island Pines, N.Y.

One item you can't leave home without when traveling?

A book. As the quote goes: A book is a loyal companion always. Actually, I take several books. I'm an avid reader of fiction, and I don't like e-books. I'm terrified of being stuck somewhere without a novel, so I always bring several books, which make my luggage heavier ... but it's so worth it.

Aisle or window?

Window, because it's easier to sleep, although it's not usually very good sleep. Those little neck pillows, of which I've bought probably 20 over the years, do absolutely nothing. In fact, I've decided that they make matters worse — and yet I still bring one with me.

Favorite childhood travel memory?

We never went very far, but when we did, we'd always drive. I remember long road trips when my parents would fold down the seats of the SUV to make a

big play area in the back for me and my brother with lots of toys and snacks. I remember being in the car more than the time we spent in, say, Branson, Mo. But now that I recall my brother and I rolling around in the back of the car, it seems incredibly dangerous, doesn't it? It was a different time.

Guilty pleasure when traveling?

Aforementioned cheap beach massage.

Best travel tip?

Pack half of what you think you need. I've never been anywhere where you couldn't drop off your laundry to be done overnight. And if you forget something, you can always buy something when you get there. But that's easier said than done. I should follow my own advice: I just got to Puerto Vallarta and my bag was so full I had to sit on it to close it and then pay extra because it was so heavy.

JULIET PENNINGTON



HERE

STOWE-AWAY

Skiers, hikers, and mountain bikers heading to Vermont have a new affordably hip place to stay in Stowe. Tälta Lodge, a mountain-base camp along the bank of the Little River, is the third property launched by Lark Hotels in their Bluebird Hotels portfolio. Designed to be accessibly priced, the 51-room, pet-friendly hotel offers a variety of room configurations, from standard kings to bunk rooms — revamped with plush beds and mountain-style furnishings — including many with handy modular gear walls, access to the Stowe recreation trail, and private decks to take in views of Mount Mansfield. Amenities include sauna, year-round indoor pool, firepit (s'mores, anyone?), ski and mountain biking storage, and more. Rates from \$109. 802-253-7525, www.bluebirdhotels.com/hotels/talta-lodge

HISTORIC HOUSE WALKING TOUR

Take a walking tour of a dozen of Salem's historic buildings with the new audio postcard series launched by the Peabody Essex Museum. Entitled PEM

Walks, the tour explores the rich architectural heritage found within the museum's three city block campus, including a unique collection of buildings, gardens, and architectural fragments spanning three centuries. Simply look for a sign with a QR code, located in front of each historic structure, and scan with your phone to hear the audio postcard — for free. PEM Walks is hosted by Dinah Cardin, PEM's content producer, and Steven Mallory, manager of historic structures. www.pem.org/visit/historic-houses/pem-walks

THERE

STREAMLINED CAMPING

If you've ever wanted the experience of staying in an Airstream — without having to actually purchase one — you're in luck. The recently opened Auto-Camp Joshua Tree, located adjacent to California's Joshua Tree National Park, offers 47 custom-built Airstreams, four accessible suites and four X Suites on its 25-acre property. All units are equipped with updated HVAC systems, kitchenette with essential cookware, outdoor firepit with grill, luxury linens,

robes and towels, and more. Features communal clubhouse, outdoor bar with a full beverage program, fully stocked general store, and hybrid hot tub and plunge pool. Designed for minimal environmental impact, including dark sky-compliant lighting to preserve a clear view of the stars. A \$25 per night amenity fee includes breakfast granola, craft coffee and tea, bicycles, pool towels, lawn and board games, weekly events such as yoga and stargazing, and more. Rates from \$129. autocamp.com/joshua-tree

CARIBBEAN WEDDING PACKAGE

Your 2022 destination wedding is now a whole lot more affordable with all-inclusive brand Sandals Resorts' new Free Tropical Wedding package. Yes, we said free. The catch? Couples must book three nights or more to qualify for a seaside luxury wedding at one of the brand's many resorts, from Jamaica to Antigua to Barbados and more. Package includes personal wedding planning team (partnered before arrival); preparation of marriage documents; ceremony (held on grass or sand); music of choice; flowers; professional wedding photo; a two-tiered white fondant wedding cake with Dendrobium orchids; table settings with linens, silverware and crystal; cocktail reception with sparkling wine and hors d'oeuvres; and bride and groom signature cocktail. The honeymoon celebration includes 15-percent discount at the Red Lane Spa, mimosa breakfast-in-bed and more. Rates from around \$1,300 per room, per night for all-inclusive stay. (Prices vary by resort and season.) www.sandals.com/weddings

SKYSPACE DEBUTS IN URUGUAY

Make your next art pilgrimage to the

Uruguayan seaside town of Jose Ignacio and experience a new work by internationally renowned light-artist James Turrell, located on the property of the 17-room hotel Posada Ayana. Two years in the making, Turrell's first freestanding Skyspace in South America — titled Ta Khut (The Light in early Egyptian) — is made of 44 tons of pure white marble from Laas, South Tyrol. The immersive light installation, carving out a 16-foot piece of the sky and framing it as a canvas with infinite depth, is set atop a rectangular temple-like structure clad in earth and grass with entrances on both sides. Spacious hotel guestrooms, offering private gardens or ocean views, are drenched in natural light with floor-to-ceiling windows. Public spaces are designed to reflect the glamour of the Cote d'Azur of the '50s and '60s An adult-only hotel. Rates from \$450/night. www.posada-ayana.com

EVERYWHERE

ART HITS THE SLOPES

Be the hippest skier on the slopes this winter with the limited-edition Artist Series skis offered by Bomber, designers of artisan-crafted ski products located at the foot of the Italian Alps. The creative spirits of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring can be seen in the bright colors and bold designs of each series which are as functional as they are beautiful. Each ski set is hand-crafted with modern technology, and available in different sizes, including four Jean-Michel Basquiat models (Black Crown, Evil Thoughts, Third Eye, In Italian) and three Keith Haring models (Bright Vibes, Flag, Luna Luna). From \$2,050. bomberski.com/collections/artists-series

NECEE REGIS