

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

My trip to Iraq was canceled, so why can't I get my \$7,590 back?

By Christopher Elliott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. I paid \$7,590 for a Modern Mesopotamia tour to Iraq through MIR Corporation for last fall. I also purchased insurance from AIG Travel Guard at a cost of \$766, which offered 100 percent coverage for trip interruptions or cancellations. Just 14 days before the trip was supposed to start, I received a letter from MIR Corporation that they were canceling the trip because the United States government raised the security risks. They offered a voucher, which was only good for a trip to Iraq in the next two years — if there was any travel allowed to Iraq. I believe it is a worthless voucher.

I filed a claim with AIG Travel Guard, but it denied my claim. I also disputed the charge on my credit card, but my credit card company sided with MIR Corporation. I'm very frustrated by this and hope that you might be able to help me recover this money.

DIANE GOTTLIEB, *Chicago*

A. It doesn't seem fair for a tour operator to cancel a trip and not offer a refund. But the terms of your tour say otherwise. They allow MIR Corporation to keep your money and issue a voucher for a future tour, which is exactly what they did.

Let's break this one down. MIR Corporation specializes in tours of "under-explored destinations" (those are its words) like Mongolia, Saudi Arabia, and Uzbekistan. The paper trail between you and the company shows that it warned you of the risks of traveling to Iraq and urged you to buy travel insurance. It also clearly disclosed its terms, which were that it offers an expiring voucher when it cancels a tour.

A representative explained the reason why MIR Corporation has this policy. The tour operator had already paid its vendors and could not get a refund. But the arrangements between a tour operator and its vendors are none of your concern. The only thing that matters is the agreement you have with the tour operator.

MIR Corporation did the right thing by recommending travel insurance. But the policy you bought through AIG Travel Guard, which MIR Corporation helped facilitate, did not cover a cancellation by the tour operator. You could have bought a "cancel for any reason" policy, although it was considerably more expensive. This would have given you a refund between 50 percent and 75 percent of your prepaid, nonrefundable trip costs.

MIR Corporation also did the right thing by canceling. The US Department of State had issued a warning against travel to Iraq. You wouldn't want to be there during an armed conflict.

Your case is a reminder to always read the contract when you sign up for a tour, or any other travel product for that matter. It's also a reminder to read the fine print in your travel insurance. Your policy did not offer "100 percent coverage" for a cancellation, as you stated. Rather, it was a policy with a named exclusion that did not include a cancellation for security concerns.

But there were special circumstances. MIR Corporation's voucher had to be used within two years and was only valid for its Iraq tours. At the time you contacted me, it didn't look like there would be tours to Iraq for a while, so there was a good chance that your voucher would expire before you could use it. Also, you are 78 years old, and you suggested that you might not feel up to a tour of Iraq within the next two years.

You reached out to my advocacy team for help, and I contacted MIR Corporation on your behalf. The company agreed to offer a credit to any of its destinations for two years, and you accepted its offer.

Christopher Elliott is the founder of Elliott Advocacy (elliottadvocacy.org), a nonprofit organization that helps consumers solve their problems. Email him at chris@elliott.org or get help by contacting him at elliottadvocacy.org/help.

THE VIP LOUNGE

Lana Gordon

on 'Hadestown,' Thailand, Meryl Streep, and packing light

Lana Gordon has graced the Broadway stage in a number of musicals including "Chicago," "Jesus Christ Superstar," "The Lion King" (the original cast), and "Hadestown," where she played Persephone, the spunky and sassy wife of Hades, king of the underworld. Gordon has reprised that role in the national tour that will be at the Wang Theatre April 23 through 28. "Audiences are going to love this show and this cast, which is extraordinary. From the ensemble to the leads, they're all old souls," Gordon said in a recent phone call from Birmingham, Ala., where the show was being performed. "And a story like this, a love story, needs to be told by souls like that. It makes our [production] very magical." Winner of eight Tony Awards — including best musical — in 2019, "Hadestown" takes audiences on a musical journey to the underworld where the stories of young lovers Orpheus and Eurydice play out alongside that of the older Hades and Persephone. Gordon, who is no stranger to Massachusetts — she received an associate's degree in fine arts from Dean College in Franklin — said audiences don't have to be familiar with Greek mythology to enjoy the musical. "It's about life. It's a story about humanity, human relations, how there's judgment ... so many levels to this story," she said. "It's also healing. It heals the soul. It's a good story, a beautiful story ... a story that still exists today and will always exist." She said she hopes the audience will take away "a sense of hope and a sense that no matter what we go through in life, we can get through it, move forward, dust ourselves off, and pick ourselves back up. That's life." We caught up with the Middlefield, Conn., native who lives in New York City and Puerto Rico with her husband, Robert Perkins — a command executive officer for the Army Reserves in Puerto Rico and a father of two adult daughters — and their three cats, to talk about all things travel.

If you could travel anywhere right now, where would you go? I would go to Thailand for the people, the food, the weather, and the peace.

Do you prefer booking trips through a travel agent or on your own? Definitely on my own. I've done travel agencies when in Europe, but I love the comfort of doing it on my own and going Bohemian style.

Thoughts on an "unplugged" vacation? No phones, no emails, no self-tapes [for auditions]. ... Just me and my husband on a tropical island.

What has been your worst vacation experience? Oh, I don't have one. My bad vacations were with the wrong people, like when I went to Thailand with my boyfriend at the time and we slept in separate rooms ... he was not nice to me. I want to make up for that, though, and have been telling my husband that we have to go to Thailand.

What is your favorite childhood travel memory? Going to Alabama with my mother, aunts, and cousins. We would leave from Middlefield, Conn., and



Lana Gordon on the beach in San Juan.

take the Greyhound bus to Allenville, Ala. I remember my suitcase with flowers and sleeping in my mother's lap. We did that for years with Aunt Shirley and her three children, so seven or eight of us all traveling to Alabama. So much fun.

Do you vacation to relax, to learn, or for the adventure of it all? I do it all. I am very adventurous, and I love to explore and dive deep into the culture.

What book do you plan on bringing with you to read on your next vacation? I would love to reread "The Power of Now" by Eckhart Tolle.

If you could travel with one famous person/celebrity, who would it be? Meryl Streep because she seems like she's a lot of fun. She's an actress whom I admire, and I just want to be underneath her wing. Please be my mentor, Meryl, and drink a glass of wine with me, and let's cook together.

What is the best gift to give a traveler? Crystals.

What is your go-to snack for a flight or a road trip? Apples and nuts — Macadamia, unsalted.

What is the coolest souvenir you've picked up on a vacation? A beautiful porcelain statue made by a local in Jamaica.

What is your favorite app/website for travel? Tripadvisor.

What has travel taught you? I've learned powerful lessons in cultural appreciation, adaptability, open-mindedness, and independence.

What is your best travel tip? One of my favorite travel tips is to pack light and focus on bringing only the essentials. This not only simplifies your journey, but also gives you the flexibility to pick up unique souvenirs along the way without worrying about excess baggage. Additionally, I find that researching and planning in advance can make for a smoother and more enjoyable trip.

JULIET PENNINGTON



HERE

STAR-INSPIRED HOTEL OPENS ON MAINE CAMPUS

The stars shine bright in Central Maine, so it's no surprise that the Hotel Ursa was inspired by the Ursa Major and Minor constellations and the North Star that connects them. Located at the center of the campus of the University of Maine in Orono, the 95-key hotel was developed through a historic rehabilitation of two original buildings on campus, Coburn Hall and Holmes Hall. Designed in the Romanesque Revival style of the late 1870s, the transformed rooms and suites offer modern comforts along with vintage charm. A new third building, Polaris Hall, sports contemporary guestrooms. The MajorMinor is a cafe and bar (with locally roasted coffee, baked goods, Maine craft beer, snacks, and wine-by-the-glass) that serves both hotel guests and members of the university community. Guests can access the state-of-the-art New Balance Recreation Center, with a fully stocked gym and leisure pool with lap lanes, and explore the DeMerit Forest

Trail, 15-plus miles of trails for walkers, joggers, cyclists, equestrians, skiers, and snowshoe enthusiasts. Perfect for Parents' Weekend visitors, however, you don't need to be on campus-related business to stay there. Anyone exploring the area's recreational offerings — skiing, hiking, canoeing — is welcome. *April rates from \$119; May from \$169. 207-962-1313, hotelursa.com*

THERE

DRIFT DEBUTS IN NASHVILLE

If you're planning a trip to Music City you may want to check out Drift Nashville, a newly opened hotel in the heart of East Bank, a developing district located just east of the Cumberland River, a mere 10-minute drive from Nashville International Airport. A beacon of minimalist modernity, Drift Nashville breathes new life into a former 1965-era inn, retaining the building's architectural integrity while adding curated comforts in line with the brand's signature Baja flair. The spacious 87 rooms and suites feature custom walnut beds and local artwork, with warm

colors such as rust and forest green, complemented by earthen materials and textures of the Southwest and Mexico including leather, terrazzo, wood, and terracotta. The one-, two- and three-bedroom suites include kitchenettes, multiple bathrooms, desks, and dining and lounge areas. Drift bath products and bathrobes are handmade in Oaxaca, Mexico.

The seventh-floor Penthouse, an expansive 1,800-square-foot space, is considered the crown jewel of the hotel. Featuring sweeping views of the city and Nissan Stadium, the Penthouse includes a living room, large outdoor balcony, outdoor dining and lounge area, three king beds, and three bathrooms, including a primary bathroom with a free-standing tub and a powder room that features a golden toilet, paying homage to Elvis's frequent stays in the building throughout the '60s. Hotel amenities include a resort-style outdoor pool with double teak loungers and luxe cabanas, an on-site gym with free weights, squat racks, and cardio machines, and three food and beverage concepts that serve sharable small bites, grab-and-go menu items, and cocktails. *April/May rates from \$183. 884-234-2973, www.drifthotels.co/nashville*

EVERYWHERE

SLIM COLLAPSIBLE LUGGAGE

A reliable carry-on suitcase is a must-have item for those who like to pack tight and travel light. For this traveler, the three most important criteria for choosing a bag are its weight when empty (don't want to carry unnecessary pounds), durability, and ease of maneuvering when traipsing long airport corridors between gates. Happy to report that two new carry-ons by Rollink, Flex Vega and Flex Aura, meet these specifications and add another: collapsibility. When not in use, this flexible luggage folds flat to around 2 inches thick, meaning it can easily be stored in your home, vacation rental, or hotel room. The hard shells are made of durable, impact-resistant polycarbonate that come in a variety of stylish colors. Choose from three sizes: the standard domestic flight carry-on, the international flight carry-on and — if you prefer a larger size — the medium checked bag. Additional features include coated wheels for smooth and silent gliding, a height-adjustable telescopic handle, and a three-year warranty. *Flex Vega from \$185; Flex Aura from \$269. www.rollink.com*

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