

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER



ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG

A booking error leads to a nonrefundable hotel room, or does it?

By Christopher Elliott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. I'm trying to get a refund from Priceline for a booking that, on the surface, appears to be ineligible for a refund. However, it is hard for me to believe that Priceline can keep my money for this mistake.

Here's what happened: I booked a room at La Quinta in Austin, Texas, for one night. While at the hotel that night, I decided to extend my stay another night and began the process of booking the next night through Priceline's app on my mobile device.

I thought the time was just after midnight, and having used the Priceline app frequently (I'm a platinum-level member), I knew the dates for the booking would be auto-populated in the app form for the following night. But the actual time was just before midnight, so the dates were populated in the form for the current day.

As soon as I clicked the "confirm booking" button, I realized the mistake and called Priceline's customer service to report the error and request a refund for that booking. A Priceline representative told me that he would need to first contact La Quinta before he could process the refund.

I immediately went downstairs to the front desk of the hotel to let them know what had happened. The front desk representative was happy to cancel the booking and provided me with a cancellation number. The representative also told me that no one from Priceline had contacted them and that the hotel had not received any money from Priceline for my erroneous booking.

As you might have guessed, Priceline is refusing to refund the money. This is not the type of situation that these nonrefundable rates were designed for. I notified the hotel and Priceline immediately, and the hotel agreed to cancel the reservation. Can you please help me get my \$88 back?

GLEN HARTNESS, *Austin, Texas*

A. You booked a nonrefundable room rate at La Quinta through Priceline. What does nonrefundable mean? If you click on the link next to the booking, it'll tell you: "This booking is nonrefundable and cannot be amended or modified. If you fail to arrive or cancel the booking, no refund will be given." Unfortunately, it doesn't have a provision for reversing an erroneous booking such as the one you made — but you already know that.

Years ago, when Priceline had started, a company insider confided that nonrefundable doesn't really mean nonrefundable. If you make an honest mistake and call the company quickly, it can undo an erroneous reservation. Over time, though, Priceline has gotten stricter about its nonrefundability. And this brings us to the present day, when the company refuses to help an elite-level, frequent guest like you, even if you book a date that is obviously wrong and that the Priceline app shouldn't have allowed.

You could have appealed this to one of the Priceline executives whose email addresses I publish on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org. A brief, polite email might have helped them see the absurdity of the situation.

Or maybe not. Sites like Priceline rely on artificial intelligence to handle customer service problems, and chances are, your complaint would have been routed to a chatbot of some kind that would have sent you another rejection.

I reached out to Priceline on your behalf. A representative responded to me directly.

"Priceline connected with Mr. Hartness directly to resolve the issue and is processing a refund for the mistaken reservation," she said.

This is a good resolution. But what I'd really like to see is for Priceline to fix its app so that you can't make this mistake in the future.

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.

When he was 6 years old, Greg Hildreth performed in the ensemble in a production of "Fiddler on the Roof" at the Neighborhood Children's Theatre in Jamaica Plain. Fast forward 30-plus years and not only has he had more prominent roles, but many of them have been on Broadway stages. The West Roxbury native has been in six Broadway shows — including "Frozen," where he played the lovable snowman, Olaf — and will be in the world premiere of "Queen of Versailles," in its pre-Broadway run at the Emerson Colonial Theatre through Aug. 25. Starring Kristin Chenoweth and F. Murray Abraham, the musical is based on the 2012 documentary of the same name that tells the story of a wealthy Orlando family that sets out to build the largest private home — modeled after the Palace of Versailles in France — in America, but faces unexpected financial challenges when the housing market crashes and the 2008 financial crisis hits. "It's a story about American excess and greed and potentially the dangers of that," said Hildreth in a recent phone call. "I would say it's classified as a dramady for sure. I think both itches will get scratched. The very first act is very light and bubbly and super fun, and then with the plot taking place in 2008 and the recession, there is definitely a marked turn about halfway through the show as well. I know it sounds cliché but it will make you laugh and it will make you cry — if we do our jobs right." Hildreth, whose character works for Abraham's character — a billionaire "time-share king" — said he is "thoroughly enjoying" working with Chenoweth and Abraham, as well as the rest of the cast. He called composer-lyricist Stephen Schwartz — whose scores include "Pippin," "Godspell," "Children of Eden," and "Wicked," in which Chenoweth was a costar — a "genius" and said "he's just a brilliant, brilliant man. It's amazing to be in the room with him." The 2005 Boston University graduate said he is excited to be performing at the Emerson Colonial Theatre, where he saw touring musicals in his youth. "It's one of the places where my love of the theater began, so to come back and work there is really special," he said. We caught up with Hildreth, who lives in Brooklyn with his partner, Marissa Lesch, a relocation consultant, and their two cats, Pigeon and Basil, to talk about all things travel.

If you could travel anywhere right now, where would you go? Tokyo has been on my list for quite some time. I have never been and would completely relish eating and drinking my way through that city. I love public green spaces and gardens and it would be fascinating to see how another major city does them. I would also be taking in some kabuki while I'm there.

Do you prefer booking trips through a travel agent or on your own? I have the great fortune of being in a relationship with someone who loves to plan trips. She loves the logistics, the planning, and finding a great deal.

Thoughts on an "unplugged" vacation? Here's another task that gives me great anxiety. However, a couple times a year I do take Instagram off my



Greg Hildreth in Giverny, France.

phone and it feels like camping. So rustic. I would be into an "unplugged" vacation, but it would not be easy for me.

What has been your worst vacation experience? I'm having trouble answering this one because generally I'm never sorry I've taken a vacation. I will say that once or twice a destination has been overhyped by friends and I've spent some time in places thinking, "This is it?" Even then, I've been able to figure things out and still have a great time.

What is your favorite childhood travel memory? When I was growing up, we used to rent a house for a couple of weeks on Cape Cod. One of my favorite things to do was to walk around in tide pools with a net to catch guppies or crabs or whatever else I could find. In those days, there were no screens for long car rides. I remember making signs that said, "Pardon me, do you have any Grey Poupon?" that I would put in the window for passing cars. Even at that age, I was a diehard "Wayne's World" fan.

Do you vacation to relax, to learn, or for the adventure of it all? I have a really hard time relaxing, so I would say that I vacation to learn and to adventure. I love exploring new places, walking around aimlessly without a plan, and seeing what I might stumble upon.

If you could travel with one famous person/celebrity, who would it be? Stanley Tucci seems to know what he's doing. If the celebrity could be dead

or alive, I'd pick Anthony Bourdain every time. I feel like he was an epicurean — and not just about food and drink, but about culture.

What is your go-to snack for a flight or a road trip? It's a toss-up between Chex Mix or Cheez-Its.

What is the coolest souvenir you've picked up on a vacation? I'm a plant-lover, so if I am traveling within the country, I usually try to find a greenhouse or a nursery. I have an extensive cactus collection with many specimens from out west. Yes, I'm the guy with a live cactus in my carry-on. I even took a couple plants through customs on my way back from Hawaii. Additionally, I'm a sucker for a museum gift shop postcard.

What has travel taught you? I think the most important thing that travel has taught me is to remain curious. It's so easy to become so myopic in our day-to-day lives. Living in New York City, it's easy to be closed off, think you're an expert, and keep your eyes on the sidewalk. The expansive act of travel forces you out of your comfort zone. You have no choice but to look around, look up, engage with strangers, and see and try things that are new and different. I always find I come home with a greater desire to be curious about the place where I live and the people around me.

What is your best travel tip? Have a plan but don't be afraid to deviate from that plan.

JULIET PENNINGTON

HERE

YOU SAY TOMATO, I SAY YES PLEASE!

Savor peak summer sweetness at the 9th Annual Great Tomato Tasting at the Woodstock Inn & Resort's Kelly Way Gardens (Aug. 17). Sample several heirloom varieties assembled by master gardener Benjamin Pauly (a.k.a. the "tomato whisperer") before touring the 3-acre gardens planted with more than 200 varieties of vegetables, 50 types of herbs and edible flowers, 75 varieties of berries and orchid plantings, and 51 types of heirloom tomatoes. The tomato tasting is one of three Garden Day 2024 activities in Woodstock on this date. Additional tours, live music, crafts, and activities can be found at Billings Farm & Museum and the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historic Park. <https://billingsfarm.org/events/garden-day-2024>

Looking for more to do in the area? Longer summer days allow more time for outdoor adventures, such as hiking the 60-plus miles interconnected trails that wind through Woodstock Village. Stay at the 142-room Woodstock Inn & Resort for a wide range of additional experiences and activities, such as a guided Orvis flyfishing excursion, unlimited golf on their own 18-hole course, falconry, mountain biking trails, tennis, and more. Recover with a massage, facial, manicure, and more



at the 10,000-square-foot spa facility. When you're ready to eat something more than tomatoes, the inn offers four different chef-driven restaurant concepts, all specializing in locally sourced products from New England purveyors, and produce picked daily in the Kelly Way Gardens. Rates from \$469. www.woodstockinn.com

THERE

COASTER THRILLS AND WILDLIFE AT N.J. PARK

Take a wildlife safari without needing a passport at the new Savannah Sunset Resort & Spa, located off I-195 in Jackson, N.J., between New York City and Philadelphia. One of the new attractions at Six Flags Great Adventure Resort, the African glamping experience offers guests panoramic views of open land inhabited by more than 1,200 animals from six continents. Stay in one of the couples or family suites in a custom luxury canvas tent outfitted with a private bathroom and HVAC unit, with access to outdoor entertainment, fire pits, restaurant and

bar, spa services, and more. A two-night minimum stay includes daily gourmet breakfast, giraffe feeding encounters, wild safari tour, nightly s'mores and a single day multi-park ticket per night to all three parks that encompass the Great Adventure Resort. Couples Suites from \$599/night; Family Suites from \$999/night. www.sixflags.com/savannahsunset The Six Flags Great Adventure Resort's 50th anniversary season also boasts major upgrades, including the brand-new coaster, THE FLASH: Vertical Velocity, the first super boomerang coaster to open in North America. Experience microgravity as you speed upside down, almost 100 feet off the ground, and zoom through a 180-degree twisted drop followed by a Zero-G roll back. Reaching speeds of up to 59 miles per hour, the coaster pauses and, just like its namesake THE FLASH, changes directions in a non-second to rush backward along the track. (Not for the faint of heart!) The park is also updating two original favorites: the log flume and the iconic big wheel. Additional activities in-

clude family and kiddie rides (bumper cars, spinning teacups, and carousel, to name a few); restaurants and boardwalk eateries; live music and other entertainment; and gift shops galore. Daily ticket from \$39. www.sixflags.com/greatadventure

EVERYWHERE

ADJUSTABLE PHONE HOLDER FITS IN WALLET

Here's a handy little gadget for everyone who takes smartphone photos when on vacation. (And who doesn't?) The ultra-portable Pocket Tripod provides all the essential features you'd expect from a full-size tripod with the added ability to fold down to the thickness of two credit cards — making it easy to slip into your wallet or carry in your pocket. Holds your phone in the exact angle that you want with carbon fiber legs that stay stable on any surface, including sand and rocks. Interchangeable adapters make it compatible with any phone or case. Perfect for group portraits and for framing the perfect landscape shots for your social media posts. Additionally, the Pocket Tripod makes it easy for enjoying hands-free video streaming and having video chats with family and friends. \$35. <https://pocket-tripod.com>

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