

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER



DAVID PAUL MORRIS/BLOOMBERG/FILE

An Avis rental counter

Avis charges nonsmoker a fee for heavy smoke smell in rental

By Christopher Elliott

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. I rented a car from Avis for a quick seven-hour trip between California airports. I returned the vehicle clean with no odors or damage. A week later, I received a \$450 cleaning fee for a “heavy smoke smell,” even though neither I nor my wife smoke. The company’s “proof” included photos of dust and a form that was dated for three days after my return, with a mileage reading that was 1 mile higher than it was at drop-off.

I fought the charge, sent time-stamped security footage of the car sitting unused in my driveway, and escalated this to the executives. But Avis still charged my card. How can a company bill me for damage that didn’t happen? And how do I make this right?

RANDALL LEE, Los Gatos, Calif.

A. Avis should have inspected the vehicle immediately upon return and notified you of any issues right away. Anything could have happened in the three days between you dropping off the car and the inspection.

Although California’s Civil Code Section 1936 doesn’t require rental companies to provide detailed invoices for post-return charges, it strictly regulates how charges must be calculated, disclosed, and justified. If you dispute a charge, the burden is on the rental company to prove its validity through itemized documentation.

You did almost everything right. You kept records, challenged the discrepancy, and contacted executives. For future rentals, take “before” and “after” photos of your car, including photos of the interior, odometer, fuel gauge, license plate, and VIN placard. Paper trails are critical, and yours made this case winnable.

Of course, there’s no way to document a strong smoke smell with an image. And there’s no way to quickly and objectively verify that you didn’t smoke in the car or that one of your passengers didn’t smoke. But in my experience of resolving hundreds of rental car smoke cases, smokers are usually pretty honest about their habits.

You were a careful renter, and it looks like you were being charged for something you didn’t do. There were also the time and mileage discrepancies, which were problematic.

I see you also appealed this case to an Avis executive. (I list the names, numbers, and email addresses of the Avis executives on my consumer advocacy site, elliott.org.) A manager should have reviewed your case and fixed it.

My advice? Document every scratch, smell, and mile on your rental car. If you catch even a whiff of impropriety, say something immediately. Don’t wait for the car rental company to write it up, because at a time when car rental companies are monetizing everything, they probably will write it up.

I thought Avis should take another look at this claim, given the inconsistencies in its files and the fact that you don’t smoke. Avis agreed to reopen your case, and it refunded the \$450 that it had charged for your car.

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

Actor Paul Melendy

on the daily crossword, narrow world views, and his role in ‘A Sherlock Carol’

Actor Paul Melendy is well-known for his comedic work on Boston-area stages, but his latest role — that of Sherlock Holmes in “A Sherlock Carol” at Lyric Stage through Dec. 21 — is more dramatic in nature and is, he said, “a life-affirming” role for him. He called the play, which was written by Mark Shanahan and debuted off-Broadway in November 2021, “a mashup” of Charles Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol” and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes tales. “Sherlock Holmes has lost his way. His nemesis [Professor James Moriarty] has died, and he has lost his mojo, his zest for life,” Melendy, 43, said in a recent phone call. “There are terrifying shadows, phantoms of Moriarty, everywhere. This is about [Holmes] taking on the role of Ebenezer Scrooge to reform and remember the old Sherlock Holmes, meeting classic characters from Dickens’s novel — including a grown-up Tiny Tim — to help him along the way.” Melendy, whose recent performances include the lead role in “Feather Baby” at Stoneham’s Greater Boston Stage Company, and one of the lead roles in “Garbologists” at Gloucester Stage Company, said this yuletide detective story “captures the holiday spirit,” as well as touching on the current political climate. “It highlights a middle-aged man who is a person of power and privilege who wants to change for the better, which is something I think is sort of missing in our society these days,” he said. “The show has a lot of holiday cheer, but it’s different than ‘A Christmas Carol.’ There are different characters and it’s very funny, with some singing and some classic literary characters. It’s just a nice, clever tale that will, I think, tickle audiences.” We caught up with the North Andover native, who lives in Peabody with his wife, Megan Grandmont-Melendy, a technology training communications manager at Wentworth Institute of Technology, and their 5-year-old son, Malcolm, to talk about all things travel.

If you could travel anywhere right now, where would you go?

Can I give two? The No. 1 destination both my wife and I would love to visit is Japan. Everything from the vistas, the culture, the food, the entertainment — it all seems so far removed from us: an intoxicating premise. One of my best friends lives there permanently, so we would also have an insider’s perspective for a portion of the trip. The other would be a tour of the US. We have a polarized country right now, and experiencing the innumerable cultures within might afford useful perspectives.

Do you prefer booking trips through a travel agent or on your own?

I’ve never gone through an agent for any trips before. It honestly sounds like a double-edged sword: You have someone mapping out your trip, allowing you to just focus on being present with your destination, but also if it’s all plotted out within an inch of your life, does that also limit your freedom a bit? I think I’d rather do my own research and use the money for extra tchotchkes — or rather, oversee my type-A wife’s research.

Thoughts on an “unplugged” vacation?

Yes to unplugged. Sounds like a dream, but as an actor where oftentimes job offers are time-sensitive, it’s a bit of a risk. I’ve certainly missed guaranteed work from being too unplugged on a trip where I’m actively trying to stay present.

What has been your worst vacation experience?

Here’s a terrible idea: Head, for a week, to a romantic island — take your pick — with a partner



Paul Melendy and his wife, Megan Grandmont-Melendy, at the top of Arthur’s Seat in Edinburgh.

you’re 10 days away from — as Gwyneth Paltrow would phrase it — consciously uncoupling. That’ll learn ya!

What is your favorite childhood travel memory?

When I was around 5, my parents took me to Disney World. I may have had other core memories from that age percolating, but Disney completely obliterated all of them. It was truly a magical, happy time that I can still almost recall the smell of. Every inch of that park is built for an imaginative mind like mine was.

Do you vacation to relax, to learn, or for the adventure of it all?

A good vacation will achieve all three, I think. But these days, with a busy child and a hectic schedule, a trip where the only item on the agenda is to loaf and be mostly prone sounds magnificent.

What book do you plan on bringing with you to read on your next vacation?

I have a heavy Philip Pullman sequel that’s been collecting dust on my nightstand I’ve been meaning to get fully into. I read his previous fantasy title in the series on our honeymoon and there’s just something about having free space in a foreign land where a fantasy novel hits harder. I’ve also never read a horror novel and Joe Hill’s newest book, “King Sorrow,” sounds like a fun time.

If you could travel with one famous person/celebrity, who would it be?

I’d be too star-struck to travel with a celebrity I’ve never met before, I think, so I’ll say someone whom I have met: Nick Offerman. I did a show with him 10 years ago here in Boston and he’s just such a chill, funny, knowledgeable guy that I can’t imagine a trip with him to be anything other than easy. Plus, I just saw him in an ad for Carnival, weirdly, so I’m putting two and two together while also missing him.

What is the best gift to give a traveler?

A portable charger is the obvious answer. Insole

pads. Fun snack pack for the flight. A handsome picture for their home screen — so they never forget who they’re leaving behind.

What is your go-to snack for a flight or a road trip?

Anything Sour Patch has my attention, though watermelons are the GOAT. Actually, maybe the lemonade variety [of Sour Patch] Kids. ... Welp, I’ll just have to get both.

What is the coolest souvenir you’ve picked up on a vacation?

When I went to Edinburgh, Scotland, for the Fringe Festival in 2019, my wife went to Malcolm’s castle [officially Doune Castle] and bought some coconuts. This is where they filmed “Monty Python and the Holy Grail.” I’ve used those things in so many shows now.

What is your favorite app/website for travel?

Oh man, I’m such a Luddite, I have no idea. I will go with The New York Times crossword app, as I can’t breathe without my daily crossword.

What has travel taught you?

Citizens of other countries — at least those in Europe — know way more about their country’s — and also our country’s — history than most people from our country do. I’ve been gobsmacked by how narrow our world view is compared to those in the foreign countries to which I’ve traveled. I knew I would be, but not to such an extent. It’s so disheartening to know how shallow-minded some people in our country have become.

What is your best travel tip?

Mangia, mangia, mangia. Keep eating! Be a foodie everywhere you go. Take in the local area’s cuisine. Explore the flavors, as our taste and smell senses will remember the experience far better than a picture could. But also ... take many pictures. I always forget to.

JULIET PENNINGTON



HERE

TUBING UNDER THE STARS

Ready for a cosmic experience? Grab the kids and head to the Cranmore Mountain Resort in North Conway, N.H., for the late December launch of Arctic Lights Night Tubing, a glow-filled nighttime experience. Guests can tube under the stars with ever-changing, colorful LED lights and energizing music every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday and nights from dusk until 8 p.m. (9 p.m. during holidays and vacation weeks). Tickets for the Tubing and Mountain Adventure Park — open now — are sold separately, with each providing two-hour time blocks of fun. Located at Artist Falls Lodge, the park offers memorable activities for all ages, including unlimited rides for one person on the Soaring Eagle Zip Line, and Giant Swing at the Mountain Adventure Park. Tickets often sell out during peak periods, so plan ahead for the best availability.

When you’re ready to ski, Cranmore boasts 56 trails and glades with a variety of terrain for all ability levels, from a beginner-only ski area to classic New England trails. Rounding out its something-for-everyone offerings, the resort includes terrain parks designed for freestyle skiing and snowboarding. Check online for a wide variety of pricing choices, including season passes and deals for students, military, and first responders. Lessons for kids and adults, and rental equipment are also available. <https://cranmore.com>

THERE

SURPRISE TRIPS EMBRACE THE UNKNOWN

Calling all travelers who value spontaneity! YOTEL hotels have partnered with Pack Up + Go, the surprise travel agency, to launch a new experience: an impromptu getaway where guests know they’re staying at a YOTEL but won’t know the destination until just

before departure. Designed to capture the modern traveler’s craving for ease and excitement, the Pack Up + Go program provides a fun-filled getaway while removing the stress that comes with planning. How does it work? First, fill out a pre-trip survey about your interests, travel history, and the type of travel you prefer — road trips, plane trips, outdoor destinations — as well as your preferred travel dates. The planning team will then book travel and accommodations in a US destination based on the budget you select. Trips also include curated recommendations for things to do, pre-planned activities, dinner reservations, and 24/7 traveler support. A week before departure, an email will detail the weather forecast for your mystery destination; suggested packing list (i.e., down jacket or bathing suit); and what time to arrive at the airport. A few days before you leave, an envelope will arrive revealing your surprise destination with hotel directions and fun facts, but — if at all possible — restrain yourself from opening until your departure day. YOTEL users can book a trip to one of its five US ho-



tels through Pack Up + Go’s regular booking site using the promo code YOTEL on the checkout page. If you don’t request a specific hotel, Pack Up + Go offers trips to more than 300 destinations nationwide. www.packupgo.com

EVERYWHERE

LIGHTWEIGHT SNOWBOARD AND SKI CARRIERS

Winter ski season has arrived, along with new gear and gadgets for those who like to hit the slopes. Those looking for a hands-free ski carrier might want to check out the new Ski Pack offered by Pure Mountain Fun. The stylish, lightweight, tear-resistant carrier features newly enhanced eco-friendly materials such as aluminum strap adjusters, D-rings, and a durable fabric. Designed with all ages in mind — not just for kids! — the small ski pack fits shoe sizes ranging from toddler up to a youth shoe size 3. The large ski pack fits youth shoe sizes 3 to adult size 14. Designed for downhill skis, this pack also holds ski poles. Available in vibrant colors — blue, pink, purple, lavender, and gray — with straps in bright contrasting colors. Prefer snowboarding to skiing? The new Rider Pack helps kids and adults haul gear hands-free to the slopes. When you’re done using it, just stuff it into the built-in pouch that tucks easily into jacket pockets or backpacks, so there’s no need for lockers or extra bags. One safety note: It’s recommended to remove skis and snowboards before loading on chairlifts. From \$49.99. www.puremountainfun.com

NECEE REGIS