

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER



MICHAELA HANDREK-REHLE/
WASHINGTON POST

KLM branding.

KLM owes money for a refundable flight. So, where's the refund?

By Christopher Elliott
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Q. I am writing because I hope that someone at KLM will help me with a refund for a “flex” flight I purchased this summer. This email comes from a place of desperation, as I’ve had a terrible time trying to contact KLM and getting any information regarding my refund.

Last year, I booked three round-trip, “flex” refundable tickets from Washington, D.C., to Amsterdam on KLM.com. I paid \$4,907 for the tickets. In April, I had to cancel the trip, so I went to KLM.com and initiated a cancellation. The next week, KLM credited my card for \$2,293, which was less than half the amount of the original tickets.

I’ve been in contact with KLM through multiple channels, including phone, WhatsApp, and Messenger, and I’ve had a very difficult time getting any information on the status of the remaining refund. Agents don’t have the complete information and also seem to invent policies as they go.

I’ve spent hours trying to settle this issue, and each communication with KLM’s customer service leaves me more confused than when I started. By making the refund process as opaque, time-consuming, and difficult as possible, KLM is engaging in unethical and possibly fraudulent behavior. Can you help me?

MEL STEVENSON,
Takoma Park, Md.

A. You should have received a prompt refund for your ticket. KLM’s flex ticket allows you to change your flight without paying a change fee. (You only pay the difference, if applicable.) You can take an earlier or later flight without paying a change fee if seats are available. And most importantly, you can cancel your flight and get a refund without paying a cancellation fee.

So, why didn’t you get it? Sometimes airlines process their refunds in batches, and it’s possible that KLM processed two tickets and intended to do the other two later. It’s also possible that the carrier misunderstood its own ticket terms — I’ve seen this many times.

All KLM would repeatedly say was that your fare did not qualify for a refund, even though you had purchased a fully refundable flex fare.

You kept great records on your refund request. I might have limited my interaction with KLM to text messages or emails, which would ensure there’s a record of your conversation. But it’s clear that KLM sold you a fully refundable ticket and that you should have received a prompt refund.

It looks like you even appealed this to the top executives at KLM. (I list the names, numbers, and email addresses of the KLM customer service executives on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org.) But they ignored you.

Come on. Airlines can’t just sell you a fully refundable ticket, then only offer half of it. After my advocacy organization asked about this case, KLM sent you an email.

“After thoroughly reviewing your previous reservation, we have determined that your tickets are indeed fully refundable,” it said. KLM processed the rest of your refund, as promised.

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

‘A rom-com within a video game within a book’

Meet first-time novelist Tara Tai of Brookline

When they were 4 years old, Tara Tai told their mom that they were going to write a novel one day. “I’ve always been attracted to stories and storytelling,” said the 36-year-old Brookline resident and first-time novelist. “I think it’s the crux of what makes us human. There’s a quote from both ‘Dr. Who’ and Margaret Atwood: ‘In the end, we’ll all become stories.’” Tai will celebrate the launch of “Single Player” at a talk (with author Aislinn Brophy) and book signing at Brookline Booksmith at 7 p.m. on Jan. 7. While Tai calls the book “viciously funny,” they said it also tackles some serious topics like sexism and transphobia. “But I think the wrapper of the rom-com genre enables you to grapple with those topics in a lighthearted but respectful way.” The queer enemies-to-lovers workplace romance is, Tai said, “an interesting subversion of the usual rom-com genre, because it’s sort of a rom-com within a video game within a book.” They added: “East Asian representation in rom-coms — especially sapphic rom-coms — is very low. I can’t think of another adult rom-com that features two East Asian women — at least not in the traditionally published space. I’m really proud of the fact that this is going to be one of the first.” Tai said the location of the Q&A and signing — the first stop on their multi-city book tour — holds a special meaning for them. “Brookline Booksmith has been like the bedrock of my adult life, so being able to have my launch event there ... I’m just so grateful for that opportunity,” they said. The Bucks County, Pa., native moved to the area in 2006 to attend Harvard, where they earned a degree in neurobiology and later an MBA. After working in health care for more than a decade, they are currently a product manager in the hotel search division at Google. We caught up with Tai, who lives with their wife, Audrey Kao, a mental health therapist, and their 7-year-old rescue dog, Gingko (who is “super spoiled,” Tai said), to talk about all things travel.

If you could travel anywhere right now, where would you go? Honestly, the beaches of Thailand are looking pretty good right about now — probably because the heat’s been broken in my apartment for the past two weeks, and I’m craving warm weather, fresh fruit, and other Asian foods.

Do you prefer booking trips through a travel agent or on your own? Generally, on my own. If my wife and I are looking to splurge and don’t want to nickel and dime ourselves, we’ll go with an agent though.

Thoughts on an “unplugged” vacation? Wish I could do it. However, I am — for better or worse — chronically online and should probably touch grass more often.

What has been your worst vacation experience? I went to Italy a few years ago and got hit with two colds back-to-back. I think I spent more time in various *farmacie* on that trip than I did sightseeing.

What is your favorite childhood travel memory? My parents took my brother and me to England — specifically, Cambridge and Oxford — when we were



Tara Tai posing next to a Gandalf statue at Hobbiton in Matamata, New Zealand.

kids. I think they wanted us to soak in the academic atmosphere, but I mostly remember the punts ... and the rain.

Do you vacation to relax, to learn, or for the adventure of it all? I go on vacation to break out of my daily routine, which doesn’t really include relaxing, learning, or adventuring. So ... all three?

What book do you plan on bringing with you to read on your next vacation? I don’t have a next vacation planned, unless you count my book tour. But my next read in general will likely be “James” by Percival Everett or “Stay True” by Hua Hsu.

If you could travel with one famous person/celebrity, who would it be? Anthony Bourdain, hands down. I’m not sure I could keep up, but boy would I try to.

What is the best gift to give a traveler? No emails.

What is your go-to snack for a flight or a road trip? I can’t board any mode of transportation without a 32-ounce Nalgene of water on me. I sound like

a fogey, but hydration is so important to staying healthy and staving off everything from jetlag to swollen limbs.

What is the coolest souvenir you’ve picked up on a vacation? I once went to New York Comic Con and got a photo with the cast of “Critical Role,” this group of eight video game and cartoon voice actors who play “Dungeons & Dragons” online. It’s still one of my most prized possessions.

What is your favorite app/website for travel? Google is essential for everything from searching for flights and hotels to finding your way to the best hidden-gem eatery.

What has travel taught you? That I’m a speck in this wide, wonderful universe. Also, how much I love my own linens.

What is your best travel tip? Hot take that I picked up from my wife: Go for shorter than you want to. That way, you leave a place with a longing to return.

JULIET PENNINGTON

HERE

SUMMER VIBES AT THE NEW ENGLAND BOAT SHOW

Experience a splash of summer in the heart of winter at The Discover Boating New England Boat Show at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center (Jan. 8-12). Peruse a comprehensive selection of boat brands and types, from center consoles and family cruisers to pontoons and wake sports boats, while checking out the latest marine electronics and accessories. Offering nautical fun for the whole family, the show also features a variety of exhibitions and experiences, including an indoor sports pool for stand-up paddle boarding and kayaking (for guests 10 or older); live music, chef and mixology demonstrations, and an opening night oyster party at the Discover Boating Beach Club; the Art of Casting Pond, a 30-foot-long fishing tank for lessons, demos and pointers from experts; and saltwater fishing seminars, providing anglers insider tips to improve their fishing game, learn proper rigging for big game fishing, and advice on how to land a trophy tuna.

Kids can cruise around a mini lake in a paddleboat, and build their own souvenir toy boat. Vintage boat aficionados won’t want to miss the classic collection of wooden vessels dating back 80 years. In addition, practical education for new boaters is available at Fred’s Shed How-To Center, with tech experts answering questions about anything from getting started to service, maintenance, and operations. Or test your boating skills — docking, pivot turns, stopping and more — using a Mercury throttle and steering wheel at the America’s Boating Club’s simulator. No need to pack a lunch,



you’ll find a number of places to dine, drink and relax at the venue. Tickets: \$20 for adults; children 12 and under free; active/veteran military, active/retired first responders and USCG and USCGA members free on opening day. www.newenglandboatshow.com

THERE

HAWAIIAN COAST LUXURY

Those looking for an indulgent, luxurious, and laidback winter vacation (and who isn’t?) may want to consider the new Hamakua Hotel, an adults-only haven perched above a 50-mile stretch of the Hamakua Coast of Hawaii’s Big Island. Located 20 minutes from Hilo, the island’s largest city, the eight-room property is nestled on 25 lush tropical acres with sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean. The Hawaiian-inspired accommodations have king beds, oversize walk-in stone-and-glass showers, and private oceanfront lanais. Guest amenities include the Yurts Spa offering massage, yoga, and additional body and wellness treatments; one-mile rain forest hiking

trail to the beach; oceanfront infinity pool; culinary program that showcases an innovative French style infused with Hawaii’s local land-to-sea ingredients; and The Story Studio, a creative space — for writers, musicians, or anyone with a story to tell — with state-of-the-art media kits and a Proto Hologram machine for real-time coaching from global experts. Nearby activities include visiting Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, horseback riding, surfing, zip lining, hiking to waterfalls, helicopter tours, and more. Rates from \$699 per night, includes fresh breakfast treats, high-end tequila tastings, sunset happy hour with craft cocktails and mocktails served by a mixologist, and six-course gourmet dinners paired with wines. 888-742-1359, www.hamakuahotel.com

EVERYWHERE

REUSABLE ECO-FRIENDLY TRAVEL UTENSILS

Innovative outdoor lifestyle company FULL WINDSOR is touting its lines of sustainable utensils and tools de-

signed to make outdoor adventures easier and elevate al fresco dining experiences. Eliminating the need for plastic utensils and paper products, the company’s beautifully designed and lightweight reusable cutlery, bowls, and plates are perfect for backcountry meals, park picnics, camping, boating, van life, and even backyard gatherings. Crafted from aerospace-grade 7075-T6 aluminum, stronger and lighter than titanium and steel, the Magware collection features a magnetic stacking design — with embedded magnets that make storing and traveling a clutter- and rattle-free experience. The magnets also allow cutlery to attach onto the bowls and plates, ensuring they don’t fall to the ground, keeping them away from dirt, sand, or unhygienic surfaces. The plates can function as lids for bowls, and the brush polished finish simplifies cleaning. Products come with free shipping and a lifetime guarantee. Available in a variety of color combinations. Check online for sales and special deals. Cutlery from \$25; bowl/plate sets from \$42. www.fullwindsor.com

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