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## **FEATURE ARTICLE**

### **Navigating Consumer Issues in Air Travel and Travel Agent Services**

Air travel has become an integral part of modern life, providing unparalleled convenience and connectivity across the globe. As air travel continues to grow, so do the challenges and consumer issues associated with it. From booking flights to dealing with travel agents, consumers encounter a myriad of concerns that require awareness of their rights and responsibilities. The 146 airline-related complaints registered at the Council from January 2019 till June 2023 ranging from refund-related issues to lack of information, misleading information and luggage handling further reinforces this as well. As such, this article delves into the prevalent consumer issues within air travel and travel agent services, and educates consumers about their rights and responsibilities in this dynamic domain. The common airline and travel agent related issues common across the globes, not only in Fiji, can be categorized as follows:

#### **1. Booking and Cancellation Woes**

Booking flights may turn out to be a frustrating experience if plagued with hidden fees, misleading pricing, and unclear terms and conditions. Consumers should be vigilant while browsing fares and understand the various fare classes, baggage policies, and possible schedule changes or cancellation fees. Additionally, many consumers make flight bookings months in advance to get cheaper rates. Between the booking and flight, circumstances may change, resulting in the customer seeking a cancellation. At times airlines impose stringent cancellation policies or offer vouchers instead of cash refunds, leaving passengers feeling frustrated. When making a booking, consumers should familiarize themselves with the airline's cancellation policies to avoid losing money.

#### **2. Lost or Damaged Baggage**

Misplaced or damaged baggage is a recurring issue across the world that can disrupt travel plans and cause immense inconvenience. Passengers have the right to claim compensation for lost or damaged luggage, but this process can be cumbersome. It is essential for travellers to report any issues immediately to airline staff. Many airlines will require consumers to fill out a 'lost baggage' form, which will be used to process the claim. Retaining this form is important, as airlines may mishandle or lose the form, causing further delays to baggage claim. Any financial losses resulting from the lost baggage should also be included in the claim.



### **3. Transparent Pricing**

One of the primary concerns in air travel identified across the world is the lack of transparent booking and pricing processes. Many consumers find themselves lured by seemingly low fares only to discover hidden fees, additional charges or unreasonable terms and conditions. For example, international airlines often advertise cheap tickets during off-peak season. However, upon making the booking consumers may realize that the fare is only available for flights during a limited period. Some airlines have introduced varying ticket prices for different baggage allowances; travellers may have to pay more to carry multiple pieces of baggage. Travelers must read the fine print, understand fare rules, and be vigilant about any additional costs before finalizing their bookings.

### **4. Misleading Promotions and Advertising**

Airline promotions and advertisements can be enticing, promising luxurious experiences and unbeatable deals. However, some may fall victim to misleading marketing tactics that fail to deliver on their promises. The Council, through its social media platforms is raising awareness about the importance of researching and verifying the legitimacy of offers can protect consumers from disappointment and financial loss.

### **5. Overbooking and Denied Boarding**

Overbooking can lead to denied boarding for passengers even when they hold confirmed tickets. Travelers need to know their rights in these situations and be aware of the compensation they are entitled to receive, which may include alternative flights, accommodations, or financial compensation.

### **6. Travel Agent Responsibilities and Accountability**

Many travellers rely on travel agents to plan their trips and secure the best deals. However, some agents may engage in unethical practices, such as misrepresenting travel packages or failing to disclose hidden fees. This highlights the importance of choosing reputable and trustworthy travel agents, who can protect consumers from falling victim to unscrupulous practices.

### **Understanding your travel rights**

Understanding travelling rights empowers consumers to make informed decisions and protect their interests when engaging in air travel. By familiarizing themselves with cancellation policies, pricing transparency, and luggage handling regulations, travelers can ensure a smoother and more enjoyable journey. Armed with knowledge and information, consumers can



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embark on their journey with confidence and peace of mind. The following are some travellers rights which should be given due attention:

### **1. Right to redress**

Consumers may seek redress for various reasons, including flight cancellations, delays, and subpar services, which can disrupt travel plans and lead to inconveniences. Mishandled luggage, overbooking, and misleading advertising are additional factors that may require compensation or resolution. Unforeseen circumstances, price discrepancies, and breach of contract also prompt consumers to seek redress.

### **2. Proper Documentation and Receipts**

Travelers have the right to receive and retain accurate documentation and receipts for all travel-related expenses. This includes invoices, receipts, and contracts, which serve as evidence in case of disputes or discrepancies. Keeping proper documentation is especially crucial when it comes to pricing transparency, cancellations, refunds, and additional charges. It allows consumers to verify the accuracy of their purchases, track expenses, and seek redress if necessary.

### **3. Right to Cancel and Refund**

Life is unpredictable, and plans may change. It is crucial to be aware of the cancellation and refund policies of the airline or travel agent before making any bookings. In many cases, airlines offer a grace period during which you can cancel your reservation without incurring hefty fees. Additionally, certain jurisdictions may grant consumers the right to receive a full refund within a specified period after making a purchase.

### **4. Overbooking and Denied Boarding**

Overbooking is a common practice in the airline industry, which can lead to denied boarding for some passengers. In such instances, travellers have specific rights to compensation or alternative arrangements. These rights vary depending on local regulations, but they often include options such as a full refund, rebooking on the next available flight, or compensation for the inconvenience caused.

All in all, as consumers engaging in air travel or utilizing the services of travel agents, understanding our rights is paramount. Transparent information, fair pricing, and truthful advertising are the pillars of an ethical air travel industry. Additionally, knowing our rights in case of refunds, cancellations, flight disruptions, and denied boarding empowers us to seek appropriate compensation when needed.



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Airlines and travel agents play a crucial role in upholding consumer rights and ensuring a positive travel experience for all. By staying informed and assertive, we can collectively foster a consumer-friendly environment in the air travel industry. Let us remember that protecting our rights not only benefits us as individuals but also contributes to the overall improvement of air travel services for the global community.

For queries, consumers can call the toll-free number 155 or lodge a complaint via the Consumer Council of Fiji mobile app.