

What to Do If You Miss Your Flight

(Courtesy of Lane Fisher, The Discoverer)

Airports can be magical, liminal spaces where every visitor is on uneven ground between where they came from and where they're heading. But for many, seeing airports in a positive light is like asking a toddler to please practice meditation on an international flight: it's just not going to happen. Airports are loud, [crowded](#), stressful, and often confusing, and though people may be [falling in love in the air](#), it's hard to imagine forming lifetime bonds while running between gates, trying to make a flight. In these moments, when you're hauling your suitcase through security across miles of airport, towards plane doors that may already be closed, airports may feel like pure evil. Many of us have shredded tickets and struggled to breathe normally in the moments after the final boarding call has sounded. If — and when — you miss your flight, here's what you need to know.

Clarity is Key

When you miss your flight, the most important thing is to communicate effectively. It's not always easy to do, but it is crucial.

While it can be tempting to get caught up in who's to blame for the missed flight, it's also extremely counterproductive. You won't be able to handle the situation if you're blaming yourself for making an extremely human mistake and you also won't get on another flight if you're busy cursing at the airline and its staff for less-than-ideal policies and procedures (though a little venting in an airport bathroom *can* be good for the soul). Be transparent and open with the airline and its employees about why you've missed your flight. Remember, these are people just trying to get through their days, and they may be open to helping you get out of a tough spot as long as you're friendly and appreciative.

This may feel like life or death to you in the moment but to airline staff, you are one client in a long list and they don't have the capacity to be invested in every story. Whether you've simply mixed up the days or times, had a pet perform an escape-artist act, or just learned of massive road repairs, let your airline agent know as soon as possible — otherwise you may be stuck behind hundreds of other travelers all vying for those two open seats on the next flight.

When It's Out of Your Control

You've just arrived from an international red-eye in an airport you are unfamiliar with and your connecting flight leaves in an hour — not nearly enough time to make it through the airport, passport control, and another security checkpoint. Or your flight was delayed due to weather conditions or understaffed airports, meaning your connecting flight is long gone by the time you finally arrive. There are endless circumstances that may cause you to miss a flight; the good news is that many airlines understand and expect it.

THE “FLAT TIRE” RULE

Some airlines have an unwritten rule about uncontrollable situations that lead to missed flights — like a flat tire — and will try to get you on another same-day flight at no additional cost. This unofficial standard isn't something gate agents or phone-lines are likely to confirm they have, and if an airline doesn't have a flat-tire policy they'll likely handle each situation on a case-by-case basis. Chances are if you describe your situation clearly and politely, you'll find yourself with another ticket before you know it.

YOU'VE DONE EVERYTHING RIGHT, BUT THE AIRPORT HASN'T

When airports are understaffed — like on [heavy travel days](#) or in extreme weather conditions — many passengers may find themselves stranded as flights are delayed or [canceled](#). If you do miss your flight in these cases, airlines are more likely to get you rebooked as soon as possible, and may even do so without you asking. If the airport is at fault, it's common that they'll work to get you on the earliest flight, pay for your stay in your connecting city, or even refund you.

Again, it comes down to being transparent and considerate about the circumstances and expressing your needs to agents or call-centers. Travel requires some flexibility, even when all you want is to get to your destination as quickly as possible.

When It's In Your Control

Over-eager travelers aren't the only ones insistent on arriving at the airport a full day ahead of departure. Common practice dictates getting to the airport at least two hours before your boarding time, and for that reason airlines are less likely to be accommodating if you get stuck in an [absurdly long TSA line](#) or don't budget enough time to get through check-in, security, and to your gate.

If you've missed your flight because you overslept, forgot a passport or wallet, went to the wrong airport, or were stuck in traffic, the airline may not be able to do much to help. Airlines aren't exactly incentivized to be lenient on giving out free seats for passengers who have made mistakes. Even with a flat tire rule, some mishaps may not qualify, but you'll have a few options to save your vacation or to get home the cheapest and fastest way possible.

REBOOKING WITH A BUDGET AIRLINE

Your flight has left, but your vacation is still out there. In many cases, airlines aren't required to get you another ticket at a low cost even if they understand why you missed boarding. Some budget airlines, like Spirit, EasyJet, and RyanAir, may have cheap, day-of tickets for purchase. These flights aren't necessarily the most luxurious, but they will get you to your desired destination.

FLYING STANDBY

If you can't get a confirmed seat on the next flight, you have the option of flying standby. Even full and oversold flights may have no-show passengers. Ask about being put on a waitlist for the next flight and prepare to be flexible if the gamble doesn't pay off.

GET FLEXIBLE

If all else fails, now may be the time to get creative and adaptable. No flights to get you home on time? Maybe you're close enough to your destination to rent a car. Perhaps the city you're in has [a cheaper airport](#) and a car or subway can take you there with a more direct flight home.

Forced to wait until the following day for your flight? The city you're in could have a restaurant scene that you didn't know would become the highlight of your trip. [Enjoying a longer layover](#) is all about perspective. Discover an unexpected location, stay at a cheaper [microhotel](#), and turn your travel misfortune into an opportunity.

Changes in travel may feel like the end of the world, but like any unexpected life interruption, you have the ability to make the most of it. Remember: you will get home, you will have another vacation, you will make it through this, and with any luck, airports will once again become happy places.

COVID-Travel Troubles

The new (and trickier) travel situation in light of the COVID-19 pandemic requires a little more passenger awareness than before. A country's protocols will differ from its neighbor's and reading the fine print in pre-flight emails might not provide the whole picture. Not only do you need to pack, plan activities, and buy that new bathing suit, you may also need to get tested a certain number of hours before you depart. When traveling internationally, read up on all COVID-19 requirements.

For example, [the U.S. wants](#) all travelers (even those who are triple-vaxxed) to board their plane with a negative test taken within 24 hours of their departure. If you're at the airport discovering this rule in real-time, chances are there's a testing center close by or even in the terminal.

Remember: It Will Be Alright

In the long run, this will probably be [a great story](#), but in the moment it won't feel that way. While missing your flight can be a nightmare, you're not the first nor the last to manage a travel mishap. Always opt for kindness both to yourself and to the people you interact with. It may help you get to your destination quicker, and will make the experience infinitely more positive.