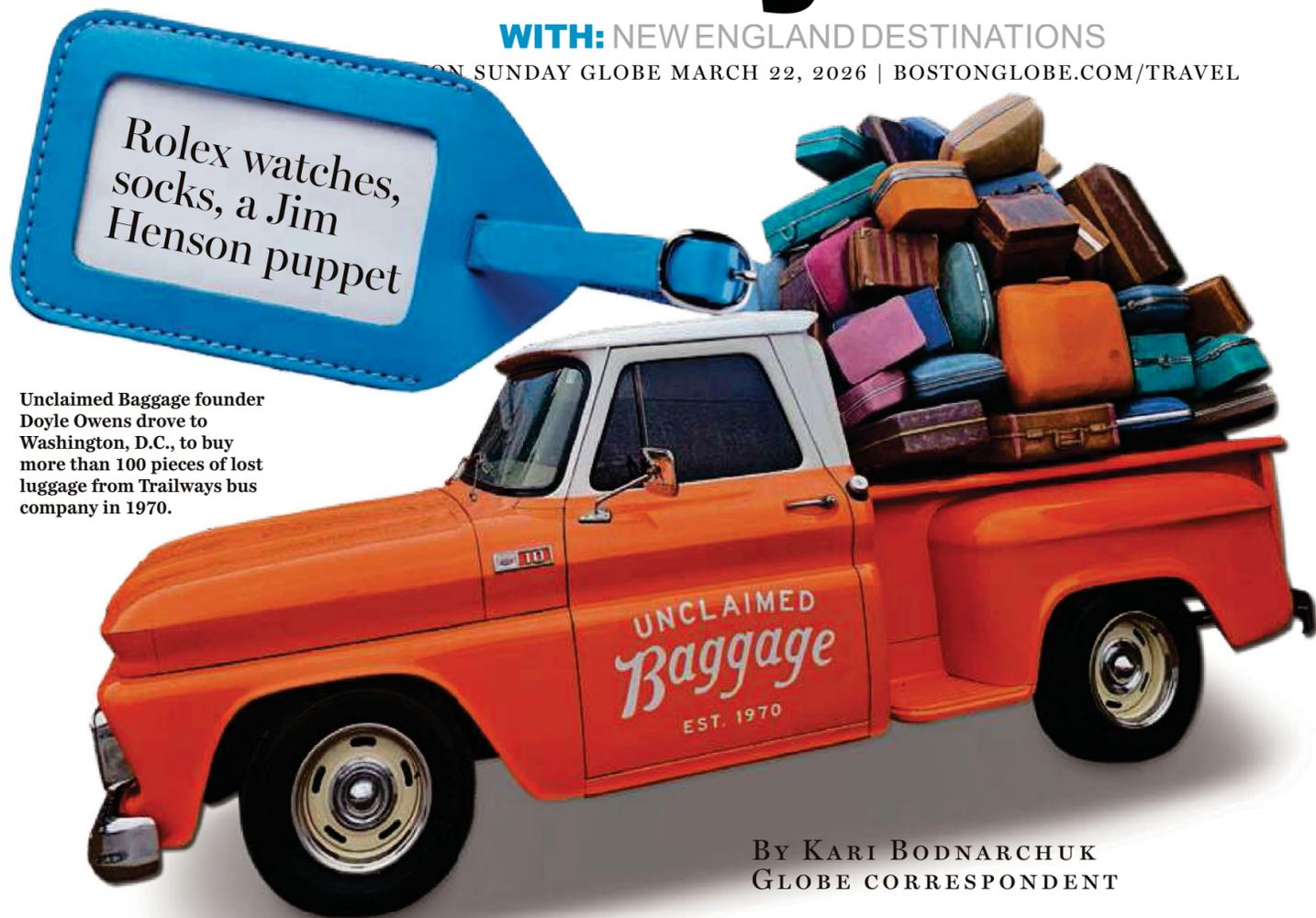


# SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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Unclaimed Baggage founder Doyle Owens drove to Washington, D.C., to buy more than 100 pieces of lost luggage from Trailways bus company in 1970.

BY KARI BODNARCHUK  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

## Travel planning is in the bag

Follow these tips to make sure your belongings don't end up at Unclaimed Baggage

By Kari Bodnarchuk  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Once you reach the airport — after all the planning, packing, and traveling to get there — and finally hand over your luggage at the bag drop counter, you might feel a huge sense of relief, and a tinge of dread. Will you ever see that bag again? You can't control what happens after you give the airline your luggage, but here are some tips within your control to increase the chances that you will.

### Pre-trip preparation

Before you even zip up your suitcase and take off for the airport, take a picture of your bag's contents. That way, if your suitcase disappears, you have a photo to remind you of what you packed and to show the airline to help with recovery or reimbursement. If you're never reunited with your bag again, you'll have to provide the airline with receipts for any big-ticket items to get reimbursed.

Consider putting a colorful ribbon, sticker, or other unique identifier on the outside of your bag to help it stand out, especial-



SCOUT

Knog's Scout Travel is a digital luggage tag, tracker, and alarm in one.

ly if you travel with a black bag or suitcase. This will help prevent someone else from mistakenly grabbing your bag.

Choosing a nonstop route or one with the fewest number of stops reduces the risk that luggage gets delayed or lost en route. If you need to change flights, make sure you select one with a reasonable layover that gives your bag the best chance to transfer. Also, try to minimize the number of different airlines involved in a single route.

### Allow plenty of time to check your bag

Arrive at the airport with plenty of time to check your bag before the flight. You want to give the airline and baggage handlers ample time to get your checked bag to the plane, and cutting it too close just increases the chance it will get delayed or

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## Inside the massive Ala. store where things inside lost luggage get sold

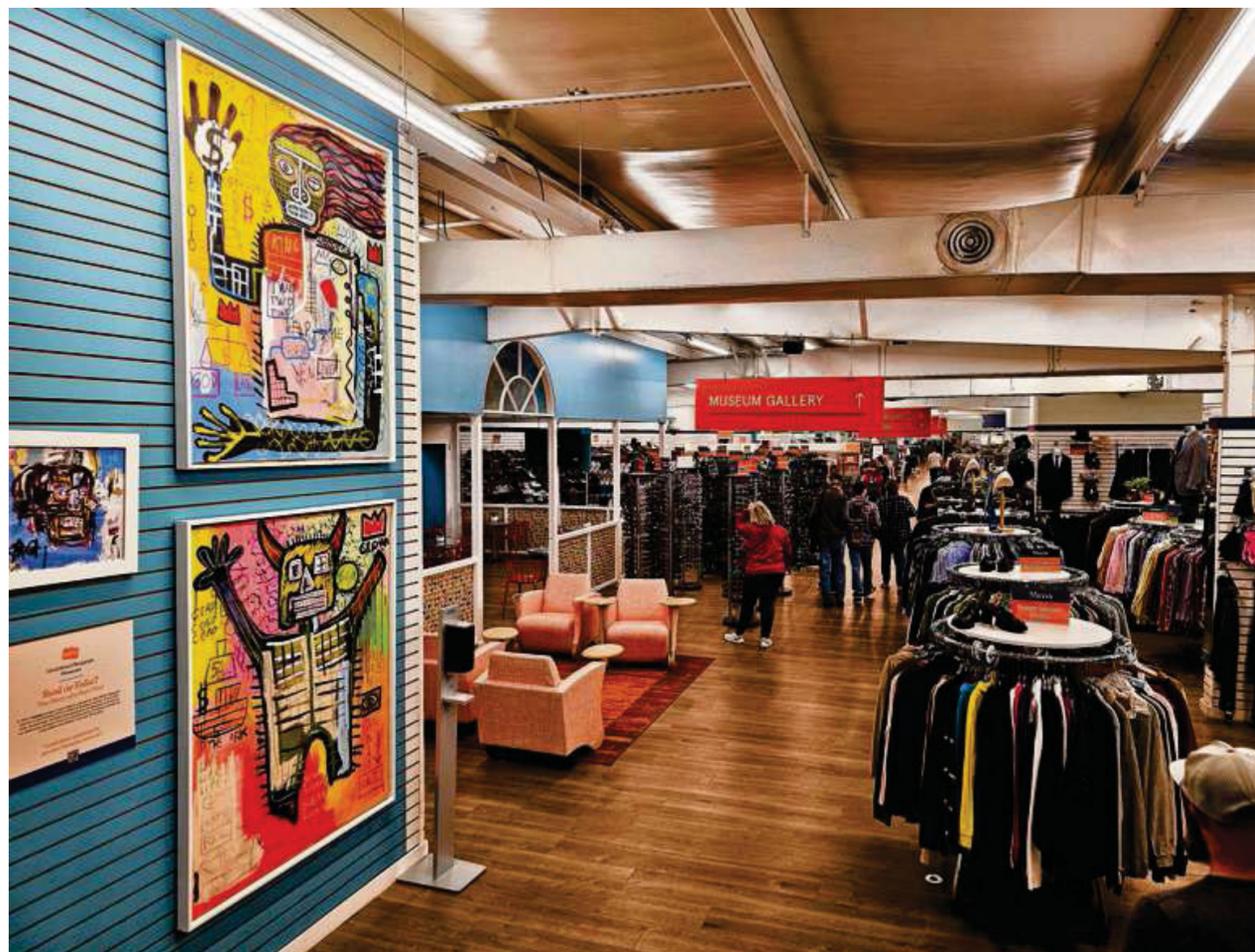
SCOTTSBORO, Ala. — A building tucked in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, three hours northwest of Atlanta, acts as a treasure chest for much of the travel industry's lost luggage. The store, called Unclaimed Baggage, receives millions of checked bags lost by airlines and items left on planes each year — belongings that can't be reunited with travelers — and sells them to new owners. Beloved jewelry, wedding dresses, cell phones, and one-of-a-kind keepsakes — maybe even something you lost on your travels and never recovered.

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PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Unclaimed Baggage in Scottsboro, Ala., gets more than 50,000 lost cell phones each year. Locked phones get recycled, but unlocked phones get erased and reset and are then sold. The store also has thousands of items of clothing for sale, typically organized by gender, type, size or, in some cases, color. Unclaimed Baggage received more than 40,000 pairs of headphones and thousands of Kindles in 2025. The items may have been lost on airplanes, in hotels, or on cruises — or even as part of a lost cargo shipment.



The 50,000-square-foot Unclaimed Baggage store gets millions of lost items from airlines, cruise lines, hotels, and other businesses in the travel and hospitality industry, and then resells them to customers.

## Inside

### THE VIP LOUNGE ELEVATING THE EXPERIENCE

Raffles Boston GM Carlos Bueno on Singapore, Trader Joe's trail mix, packing smart  
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### GLOBE AND COMPASS MOVE OVER, APPLE

Travelers with Android devices can now track their luggage, too  
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# Finding a home for lost bags and items

## ►UNCLAIMED

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“There’s a lost story, but there’s a found story, as well,” said Sonni Hood, who started working at Unclaimed Baggage in high school and later became its spokesperson. “We try to give something its best second life, whether that means selling it to someone so it becomes their new favorite thing, or recycling or donating it.”

About one-third of all items gets sold, one-third gets donated, and one-third gets recycled or sent to the dump.

SITA, the airline industry’s IT company, estimates that 33.4 million bags were mishandled by airlines worldwide in 2024 (the most recent statistic available). More than half of those got reunited with travelers within 48 hours, but 14.7 million did not — for longer or forever. That number doesn’t include items lost by travelers in airport terminals or “above the wing,” meaning left in overhead bins, in seatback pockets, or elsewhere onboard.

What drives the sheer volume is the “chaos factor,” according to Matt Owens, senior vice president of Unclaimed Baggage. In the chaos of travel — hectic airports, flight delays, complex luggage-tracking systems, and the vast number of bags getting transported by airlines and travelers — things get lost. In fact, Owen’s wife just lost her phone during a family trip to Mexico, as they juggled small kids and carry-on luggage while deboarding a plane (she soon retrieved it from the cleaning crew).

Most airlines work with WorldTracer (owned by SITA) or with NetTracer (owned by Unclaimed Baggage’s umbrella company, Reunitus), baggage-tracking systems that help airlines reunite luggage with owners. Some airlines, such as Alaska, have their own internal systems for handling permanently lost items. Others, including several major US airlines according to Owens, sell those items to Unclaimed Baggage.

How does someone’s favorite Canada Goose jacket, Messi-signed jersey, or diamond engagement ring end up at Unclaimed Baggage? It’s a process, and one that has evolved over time.

Scottsboro-resident Doyle Owens (Matt’s grandfather) started the business on a risky hunch back in 1970. He borrowed a Chevy pickup from a friend and \$300 and drove to Washington, D.C., to buy a heaping truckload of lost luggage from Trailways bus company. With his wife and kids’ help, he sorted, cleaned, and then sold the items on card tables from home — an instant success.

Half a century later, Unclaimed Baggage purchases lost luggage and items not just from airlines, but also casinos, hotels, train stations, cruise lines, and other hospitality groups. What started as a one-man venture turned into a thriving business that draws 1 million people from around the world to Unclaimed Baggage’s only retail store in Scottsboro, a city of 16,000 on the Tennessee River where the average home costs \$202,800 and thrift stores now abound (you’ll find He Sells She Sells, 12 Bushels Thrift Shoppe, Goodwill, and others). Downtown has a 120-year-old soda shop that serves hearty sandwiches and homemade brownies, a



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A selection of watches for sale at Unclaimed Baggage.

brick Baptist church, an open town square with a grand steepled courthouse, and a mix of boutiques and dilapidated buildings.

Doyle’s son Bryan, who grew up in Scottsboro, took over Unclaimed Baggage in 1995 and brought the business to a whole new level. He expanded the store to 50,000 square feet — bigger than a city block — added a café, and created the Museum of Lost Treasures which showcases about 100 of the most unusual items from over the years, including a live snake found in a suitcase — likely something that slithered into the bag en route to Scottsboro, rather than a critter that was intentionally transported — and Hoggle, the Jim Henson puppet from the 1986 movie “Labyrinth.”

“We always say, ‘If these bags could talk, what a story they might have to tell,’” said Bryan.

The company now ranks as one of Alabama’s most popular tourist destinations and one of its top employers with 275 “team members,” as they’re called.

With his wife Sharon’s help, Bryan, who completed a management program through Harvard Business School in 2002, launched the company’s philanthropic arm Reclaimed for Good. He also created NetTracer, a business that handles bag tracing for airlines to help reunite lost luggage with their owners, and a new umbrella organization called Reunitus for managing all these individual companies.

Bryan still shops at the store — he gave his wife three pieces of jewelry from Unclaimed Baggage this past Valentine’s Day, he said, and he wears a 1950s Rolex watch that he also purchased there — but he understands the frustration of losing something dear.

“Somehow in my travels over the last six months, I lost my favorite pair of Moscot sunglasses and I’m not sure where it was along the way,” said Bryan. “Maybe they will come through the store. We’ve actually had items come out of lost bags with our price tags on them.”

Every day, 18-wheelers wind through this quiet, rural section of northeastern Alabama — passing through leafy forests, state parks, and tiny towns with deer processing sheds and BBQ smokers — to bring ship-

ments of lost goods to Scottsboro. Here, in a 100,000-square-foot sorting facility only accessible by employees, “bag openers” wearing latex gloves open and sort through boxes and suitcases full of items.

“I think you need to have a bit of bravery to be a baggage opener — you smell a lot of smells and you see a lot of crazy things,” said Hood. “A typical suitcase is going to have what you expect — blue jeans and sweatshirts and toothbrushes — but then sometimes you open one up and it has human shrunken heads and vacuum-packed frogs, which we have found.”

Other oddball items include a giant stuffed goose, a suitcase full of rat poison, samurai swords, a bee-keeping suit, and men’s Gucci studded loafers.

Hood, a self-professed “thrifter,” shared these details as she showed me around the store in January. Her entire outfit that day, from her \$5 Celine glasses and lavender blazer down to her cute black shoes — basically everything but her underwear, she said — came from Unclaimed Baggage.

No, they don’t sell used underwear or toothbrushes — “nothing intimate in nature that has had skin-to-skin contact,” said Hood.

What surprised me the most about the store: It’s nothing fancy — more like Value Village meets the old Building 19 (or Marden’s, if you’re from Maine), with Macy’s- and REI-quality labels. It’s organized like a department store, with men’s, women’s, and children’s sections — where items are arranged by type, size, and even color in some cases (travelers do love their black jackets) — and areas dedicated to fancy gowns and formal wear, costume and fine jewelry, books, and shoes. One area had a Razor scooter, cricket bat, and ukulele mixed in with fishing gear and sleeping bags. Wandering through the jewelry section, it was hard to fathom how someone lost a Rolex watch valued at \$29,000 or diamond earrings that retail for \$13,000.

Unclaimed Baggage also receives lost, damaged, and unclaimed cargo shipments, according to Hood, which explained the 50 or more pairs of identical headphones hanging on racks. The most popular section, Electronics, stocks thousands of earbuds, Kindles, cell phones, and laptops. What happens

to electronic devices that end up here? If they’re locked, they get recycled — only unlocked devices can be wiped clean of all information and then resold. Unclaimed Baggage also runs an e-cycling program, enabling anyone to send in three or more electronic devices — from old cell phones and tablets to gaming systems — and, if they can be restored or used for parts, get cash or credit for the trade-in.

You won’t find any ski or snowboard gear here. That’s saved for the store’s annual ski sale, held the first Saturday in November, which Hood called “our busiest, craziest day of the year — like Black Friday on steroids.” Last year, customers camped overnight in the parking lot to beat the hundreds of early morning shoppers, and a Nashville singer came to perform. One customer purchased 15 pairs of skis that day. Unclaimed Baggage will hold a similar event — its first-ever golf sale — on April 11, with a pop-up store selling golf gear and clothing in the parking lot, and a putting green and golf simulator.

A meandering building next door serves as the Bargain Basement, where customers can find bins, shelves, and racks of random items all significantly marked down. It’s where locals go to buy next year’s wrapping paper and decorations or, occasionally, pay a flat \$10 for whatever they can stuff into one bag.

Fortuitously, the company launched its online store during COVID and now ships to 102 countries. Bag openers determine which items are destined for the retail store versus the ecommerce shop, with more valuable items typically ending up online.

“We know what our shoppers in California or New York or places outside of small-town Alabama would want to buy,” said Hood.

That’s why you may find a Moncler jacket online, but not a \$5 soccer jersey. Some locals, called Super Shoppers, visit the store multiple times a week, if not daily.

I met Brandon Wade, 43, a Super Shopper in the entryway to Unclaimed Baggage, wearing clothes that he had purchased, over time, from the store and holding a bag from that day’s find: A pair of On Cloud shoes, a silver chain, an Adidas hoodie, and a long-sleeve Huk fishing shirt. Wade, an auto body mechanic who grew up in Scottsboro, admitted he visits the store up to five times a week, and since staff continuously stock shelves from 6 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. — adding about 7,000 new items a day — you never know what new gems you might find.

“It really is like a treasure hunt,” said Wade, who loves shopping for jewelry and shoes (he has about 30 pairs of shoes at home from Unclaimed Baggage). “When they first started out, they were cheaper because they didn’t know what they had. Now it’s pricier, so you have to have patience and really dig through everything to get good deals.”

Unclaimed Baggage has a pricing team, said Hood, with individual experts dedicated to pricing shoes or phones, for instance, and authenticating sunglasses, perfumes, and fine jewelry. They typically list items for anywhere from 20 to 80 percent of suggest-

ed retail, meaning you may still find better deals on eBay or clearance racks elsewhere.

“The prices are based on condition, brand, and demand,” she explained, adding that “Apple doesn’t go on sale, so those [products] might be 10 to 15 percent off.”

And no, there’s no price matching or haggling for better deals.

“If we’ve mispriced something, then we’re happy to go back and address it,” said Bryan, “but if there are 5,000 to 7,000 people coming here on a Saturday and we have 7,000 new items a day, we don’t have time for (bargaining).”

One-third of all lost items the company receives get repurposed and donated to charities, schools, and individuals mostly in the Scottsboro area and in Atlanta (home to Reunitus’s corporate office), and on a smaller scale nationally and internationally.

“It’s really just finding the highest and best use of everything that comes in, so we sell a lot, but we also give a lot,” said Jennifer Kritner, a Scottsboro resident who has worked for the company for 29 years and, as vice president of retail and culture, oversees Reclaimed for Good. “Last year, more than 1 million items were given to some amazing charities.”

The foundation has donated items such as wheelchairs to Wheels for the World; back braces, syringes, and other medical supplies to Samaritan’s Purse; and, over the past three decades, more than 3 million pairs of eyeglasses to Lions Club International. It also donates headphones, backpacks, and sports equipment to local elementary schools, and toiletries and hygiene kits to the Atlanta Mission and “blessing boxes” around Scottsboro. Tattered towels get sent to animal shelters. If a local needs help — a mom with a new baby but no car seat, or a family in need of funeral clothes following a loss, said Kritner — the company will quietly gift those items.

Reclaimed for Good has started working with an organization called Odd Sock that collects gently used socks — even just single socks — for distribution in homeless shelters and day-care centers, for instance.

“Lord have mercy at how many socks people travel with,” said Kritner.

Oddly enough, the one thing you won’t find at Unclaimed Baggage: Luggage. The company gathers hard-sided suitcases and “team members” paint them for the company’s Love Luggage program. These suitcases then get donated to foster children, many of whom would otherwise carry their belongings from home to home in garbage bags, said Kritner, whose three adopted girls arrived at her house with Love Luggage.

The community benefits greatly, thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit of the Owens family, through donations, jobs, and tourism. After all, Unclaimed Baggage brings the world to Scottsboro every year, with millions of items transported here from all over the globe and visitors from 40 countries who come to find new treasures in this corner of southern Appalachia.

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## Steps to make a better trip for you — and your luggage

### ►BAGS

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lost. Airlines typically have a cutoff of 45 to 60 minutes before departure for checking in bags, but don’t push it that close. Most airlines recommend that you arrive two hours before a domestic flight and three hours before an international flight, especially if you’re checking luggage.

### Tag your bag inside and out

Make sure your checked bag has a luggage tag — separate from the airline’s ID tag — attached on the outside and another one inside your bag (ideally in an outer pocket, so no one needs to search through your bag to identify its owner), in case the airline tag gets accidentally detached. Pro tip: Use a laminator (with laminating pouches and business cards) to create your own waterproof luggage tags. Alternatively, you can write your contact info — or your name, phone number, and the hotel at your destination — on an index card, put that in a Ziplock bag in case your suitcase gets wet, and slip it into an outer pocket. Some people prefer using a work address on their luggage tag rather than their home address for added security.

### Check your surroundings

With the commotion and disorder that often comes with airline travel — weather issues, flight delays, gate changes, missed connections, hunger, fatigue, and distractions from traveling with friends or kids, or even from chatting with strangers — it’s easy to misplace or lose an item. From the minute you step out your front door at home,

make sure to check around you, especially when transitioning from one place to the next, such as getting off the airport shuttle, passing through the TSA checkpoint, getting ready to board the plane at the gate, and getting off the airplane. If it’s too dark on the plane to clearly scan for dropped items, use your phone’s built-in flashlight to look around and under your seat, on the floor of the plane, and in the seat pocket to make sure you haven’t forgotten anything.

Regarding that seat pocket, “It’s the black hole of death,” says Matt Owens, senior vice president of Unclaimed Baggage. “Never put anything in there,” or at least make sure you check it thoroughly before leaving.

### Use a personal tracker

Airline luggage tags have barcodes (and sometimes RFID, or radio frequency ID) tags that contain digital information about your identity and your airport destination and travel route. In 2018, the International Air Transport Association (IATA), an airline trade association, introduced Resolution 753, making it mandatory for all its airline members (including all major U.S. airlines) to scan checked luggage at four critical points on its journey: At bag check, when you hand your luggage over to the airline; when it’s loaded onto the airplane; during transfers; and as it enters the baggage claim area where it gets returned to the passenger. It may also get manually checked by baggage handlers along the way. Glitches happen, though, so it helps to have other tools for helping track your bag on its route.



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Luggage left over at baggage claim at Logan Airport.

Sometimes bag tags can get pulled off luggage or the information on the tag is incorrect, according to Nicole Hogg, director of baggage for SITA, the airline industry’s IT company. Additionally, when airports experience “operational difficulties, due to weather, staffing, and, most recently, significant geopolitical events, it becomes much more complex to repatriate the baggage quickly — especially when delayed baggage numbers increase by orders of magnitude,” says Hogg. “Storage for hundreds of bags may be limited at the airport, so it becomes efficient to store, sort, and process baggage at an off-site location.

“Using a location device — such as an Apple or Google tag — can speed up locating and repatriating the baggage,” says Hogg (see this week’s Globe and Compass column on N12 to learn how personal luggage tags work — and the newest feature for Android users).

Some airlines have introduced their own baggage-tracking tool that enables passengers to follow their checked luggage from bag drop to baggage claim.

On the airline’s website, you can input your name and confirmation number (or name, bag tag number, and the date) and track your bag. Ask your airline if it offers this service.

### Avoid gate-checking your bag

Are you someone who prefers to hold onto your luggage unless an agent offers to check it for free at the gate? According to a report by Unclaimed Baggage, “Bags checked at the gate are more prone to routing issues because they bypass normal tagging processes.” If you gate check, whether by choice or because your airline requires you to do so, make sure the tag that the gate agent puts on your bag matches your destination and that you get a copy of this bag tag — or else take a photo of it before your suitcase gets whisked away. This is especially important if your bag must get checked after you board the plane, due to full overhead bin space.

### Report a missing bag immediately

The sooner you report a bag missing, the better chance you have of getting it back. If you leave something at a TSA security checkpoint, reach out to TSA at that airport (or the airport’s lost and found) to see if the item has been found (items are typically held onto for 30 days). If you lose something in a public space at the airport terminal — typically including shops, gates, bathrooms, and airport lounges — contact that airport’s lost and found, which can be anything from a bucket of lost items and a handwritten list to a highly advanced and organized system like the one at Salt Lake City International Airport, which handled 29,594 lost items in 2025, accord-

ing to Nancy Volmer, the airport’s director of communications.

Each week, a team of three to four full-time workers log and photograph 400 to 600 lost items and then post that information on Crowdfind, an online software management program (used by some other airports, too). Passengers can search for their belongings in this online database. In Salt Lake City, an item will remain in the lost and found for 30 days, according to Volmer, and “then it will be destroyed, donated, or auctioned off.”

If your checked bag never makes it to baggage claim, report it right away to the airline’s customer service agent or file a missing bag report through the airline’s app or website. Include as many details as possible, with a description of the bag (and anything notable — like a purple ribbon tied to its handle) and its contents, especially anything unique or unusual.

IATA requires airlines to hold onto lost luggage for 90 days at a minimum. At that point, if the bag hasn’t reunited with the owner, the airline must reimburse the passenger (up to \$4,700 per passenger per trip, regardless of how many bags you check, as mandated by the US Department of Transportation, but you must provide receipts for lost items and there are exclusions).

Hopefully, it won’t get to that point. Once a bag or item is deemed “truly lost,” an airline may sell or donate it locally or else sell it in bulk — with other people’s permanently lost luggage — to Unclaimed Baggage.

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