

Don't seek flight refunds on a wing and a prayer

Booking through an online travel agency can make it harder to land a cash refund if the airline bumps your trip from the schedule, writes *Eithne Dunne*

With airlines forced to cancel an unprecedented number of flights in recent months, thousands of passengers have had to seek refunds. And while in the normal run of events this would be straightforward, the sheer volume of requests has thrown up some stumbling blocks. Not least is the clash between online travel agencies (OTAs) – so-called “screen scrapers” such as Loveholidays, Kiwi and Lastminute.com – and airlines, with Ryanair, for example, claiming these services have effectively been blocking customers from getting their refunds.

They have done this, according to the airline, either by passing on to it fake email addresses and/or inaccurate payment details (“virtual credit cards”).

“When you book with Lastminute, you put in your contact details but when you hit ‘pay’ they have an automated script running in the background, which is making the booking with Ryanair using a different email address,” says Dara Brady, director of marketing at Ryanair.

“So in our system we have email addresses and payment details that don't match the passenger. We get customers calling us saying they're booked with us, but the email and payment details they give don't match any bookings.”

In July, Ryanair lost an injunction against Skyscanner that had sought to oblige the comparison site to make the OTAs it facilitates pass on genuine customer email addresses to Ryanair rather than fake addresses generated by the OTAs to book the flights.

Brady says that in some cases OTAs had given the airline the correct email address for a customer, but used a virtual credit card instead of the customer's details. As a result the airline has received many calls from customers who got an email from Ryanair to say their refund had been processed and were wondering why the money had not turned up. This, alleges the airline, is because some OTAs have been delaying passing on the refunds for cashflow purposes.

Lastminute.com did not respond to a request for comment; however, a spokeswoman for Loveholidays refuted this claim, saying that, when an airline cancels a flight, it will pass the cash refund on to its customers “within five working days of receipt from the airline”.

“We never use fake customer emails to make bookings. Due to the various payment options available on Loveholidays, most of which mean the flight will not be paid in full by customers at time of book-

ing, Loveholidays books the flights as an agent for the customer using its own corporate cards.”

Kiwi has made a name for itself by mixing and matching carriers and flights into tailored itineraries. Its head of communications Carol Barnes says the only issue with refunds for its customers who had tickets with Ryanair is that the airline offered just vouchers, not cash.

“Many of our customers wanted monetary refunds, and we have been pushing for that option. In a moment of fake gallantry, Ryanair said they would enable customers of certain OTAs, including

ourselves, to get a monetary refund if customers came directly to them. We saw this for what it was – not wanting us to hold the customer relationship – but at the same time we want our customers to get what they are owed so . . . we are not challenging it. Once the challenger to legacy and tradition, Ryanair has grown complacent, found itself being challenged – and doesn't like it.”

The airline rejects this; a spokeswoman said that it offered all the options set out under EU legislation, including free changes and refunds in the form of cash or vouchers.

What can I do?

Ryanair has stopped processing refunds via OTAs and has instead introduced a customer verification section on its website where these customers can pursue a refund. You need to provide proof of ID, address and a signed form, after which Ryanair will verify your identity and pass the refund directly to you. However, if you have already received notification that your refund has been given to your OTA, you need to take it up with that company. Note that if you get a refund directly from Ryanair you get only whatever the airline charged for your trip, which is not necessarily the same as what you paid to the OTA.

In essence, according to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, if you book a flight through a third party, your contract is with that third party, not with whatever airline it uses on your behalf.

“Therefore, if issues arise, the consumer needs to contact the business they paid to seek a resolution. Any resolution will be based on the terms and conditions of their contract,” says a spokesman for the commission.

If you are having difficulty resolving an issue with an OTA, include the service provider (that is, the airline) in any correspondence you have with that OTA.

According to Ryanair, it has processed most of its refunds backlog. If you have been told your refund has been passed on to your OTA but are not getting a satisfactory response from it, there is the option of a cross-border claim against businesses registered in other EU countries through the small claims procedure.

Contact the European Consumer Centre Ireland (eccireland.ie). Kiwi, Lastminute.com and Loveholidays are all registered in the EU – although, given that the latter is registered in the UK, it

will fall outside the remit of EU consumer legislation as of the end of this year.

How do prices compare?

While in many cases OTAs will charge the same basic flight price as if you went directly to the airline, some offer decidedly pricier extras. Take a three-day return trip from Dublin to Milan, where you want to check in one 20kg bag and choose your seat, but do not want extra cabin bags, priority boarding or flexibil-

ity. When compared with the same dates and flights, Ryanair was charging €118, Loveholidays €119 (but only as part of a flight-plus-hotel package), and Kiwi €151. Lastminute.com’s quote was €158 without seat reservations, as it did not offer this facility (at least not before payment stage).

Dispense with the bag and seat reservations, however, and Ryanair, Loveholidays and Kiwi all had the same flight price. The exception is Lastminute.com, which adds a €10 agency fee to its return flight prices. In another example of a return trip from Dublin to Rome, with the same specifications, Ryanair was charging €124, Loveholidays (again as part of a package) €125, Kiwi €157, and Lastminute.com €158 (excluding seat reservations). Again, the actual flight price was the same, apart from the extra €10 fee with Lastminute.com.

The disparity arose in the cost of baggage and seat reservations. For example, on both flights, Ryanair was charging €50 return for a 20kg check-in bag; Loveholidays €51; Kiwi €75; and Lastminute €88.

You could reserve a standard seat with Ryanair or Loveholidays for €4 on the Milan flight or €7 on the Rome flight. The cheapest with Kiwi were, respectively, €8

and €11. And if you want extra leg room, Ryanair was charging €6 for exit rows and €12 for the front row on the Milan flight; this contrasted with charges of €14 and €20 from Loveholidays, and €18 and €24 from Kiwi on the same flight. The equivalent charges on the Rome flight were €19 and €28 for Ryanair and Loveholidays; and €23 and €32 for Kiwi.

Cancellation/change fees

If you book through an OTA, you are subject to its terms and conditions.

Standard Ryanair tickets bought directly are non-refundable if cancelled, while flight change fees start at €35, plus any fare difference. Note, however, that the company has waived change fees for any flights taken until the end of September; you can rebook for any date between now and the end of the year.

Kiwi is marginally better on cancellations in that, with its saver or standard fares if you cancel, you get €10 back. Not so with changes – on the saver fare, it treats them as cancellations. In other words, you get €10 back but will have to

fork out for the new fare in full. Yet with the standard fare – €20 extra for the Milan flight, for example – if you change, you pay only the fare difference.

With Lastminute.com, cancellations on standard fares are non-refundable; changes will cost €35 plus fare difference. The website also mentions a €150 “penalty for date/time changes” but it is not clear how this is applied; a request for clarification did not receive a response. Finally, with Loveholidays, the flight portion of your booking is non-refundable if you cancel, and it applies Ryanair’s terms when it comes to changes.

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Online travel agencies such as Lastminute.com and Kiwi offer a one-stop portal to book a holiday, whereas Skyscanner aggregates flight fees from these agencies