



AN UPDATE BY THE AIR TRANSPORT USERS COUNCIL TO ITS 2008 REPORT ON BUYING AIR TICKETS ONLINE

The Air Transport Users Council (AUC) is today publishing a report on the pitfalls of buying air tickets online. This report updates the Council's previous report on the issue in June 2008. The AUC receives many complaints from passengers who have been left out of pocket because they have made a mistake while booking a ticket or because there has been a glitch in the airline's reservation system.

In its previous report the AUC called for airlines to introduce a cooling off period in which passengers could change a reservation or get a refund within 24 hours of making a booking. A number of airlines have since introduced a "24 hour rule". It now looks to other airlines to follow their lead.

Background

In June 2008, the Air Transport Users Council (AUC) published a report on the potential pitfalls to passengers when booking tickets online. We published the report because we were becoming increasingly disappointed by the way that some airlines handled complaints where passengers had encountered problems booking tickets on the internet. We felt that the risk of something going wrong was being loaded too much onto passengers. Too many times they were left out of pocket following problems with bookings.

We accepted that an error would sometimes be the fault of the person making the booking and the airline, under its ticket conditions, could then insist that they buy a new ticket. But we wanted airlines not to penalise passengers unduly for innocent mistakes (or seek to profit from the errors). In a number of the complaints we received, the airline had not lost out



financially and the passenger had not gained any advantage (for example, if an error had caused a passenger to have more than one booking for a flight, the person could not use this ticket twice). And not all errors were the passenger's fault. Sometimes there were glitches in the airline's reservation system.

Our report aimed both to encourage passengers to notify an airline of a problem as soon as they could (by following instructions on the airline's website if available) and to persuade airlines to change their policies towards passengers who encountered problems when booking on the internet. We sent a copy of the report, with an accompanying letter, to the chief executives of eight major UK carriers asking them to review their policies. We asked them to consider putting into place policies that gave more consideration to passengers who had difficulties booking online. We recommended they introduce a cooling off period whereby passengers could cancel bookings within 24 hours of making the reservation.

A 24-hour rule?

We understand that the majority of airline tickets are non-refundable and accept that airlines should be able to charge to rectify booking errors under some circumstances; for example, if the error only comes to light very close to departure. That is why we believe that an airline rule giving passengers the chance to make changes or claim a refund (even if subject to a small administration fee) within 24 hours of making a booking would provide passengers with at least some protection against being out of pocket.

Update

The response from most airlines we contacted was positive. Virgin, BMI and Flybe have since introduced a 24-hour cooling-off period (easyJet and Jet2 already had one). British Airways and others have put into place new internal policies, or amended existing ones, to reflect a 24-hour rule. Most of the airlines we contacted also said that they would put into place a customer service ethos that was generally more sympathetic to passengers who had problems booking tickets online.

Complaints to the AUC

Since the report was published last year the numbers of complaints to the AUC about this issue has increased. In 2008/09 we received 415 written complaints about this subject compared to 318 in 2007/08. Of course, the increasing number of bookings (and changes to reservations) made online, combined with continual tinkering with booking systems may occasionally create problems. And our numbers are small compared to overall passenger numbers. But we believe that the complaints are indicative of airlines' policies.

Examples of complaints we have received are below;

A passenger was booked as part of a group on a cricket tour to Austria on British Airways. His ticket, like those of his fellow travellers, was booked by one representative of the tour party on his behalf. The passenger is known as "Harry" to family and friends but his name on his passport is "Henry". Unfortunately the person making the booking assumed that "Harry" was short for "Harold" and booked his ticket under this name. When the passenger attempted to amend the ticket, British Airways refused and made him buy a new ticket at the current price of £680, compared to £152 when his ticket was originally purchased. His ticket ended up costing £802 (£680 + £152, less a refund £30 for of taxes, fees and charges on the original ticket).

A passenger mistakenly entered his second name as his surname on his reservation with Ryanair. He noticed immediately the booking was confirmed and rang Ryanair to advise them of the mistake. It refused to amend the booking and the passenger had to purchase a new ticket for another £75.

A passenger inadvertently booked a ticket on Thomas Cook Airlines for himself under his middle name (by which he had been known all his life) and not his first name. Unfortunately he did not notice until he was refused check-in at the airport. Despite having his passport as proof of his identity and three fellow travellers who could vouch for him, he had to pay £195 to have his ticket amended.

A passenger booked a ticket on bmibaby for himself and for a friend. When he had completed the booking, the confirmation showed the same name for both reservations, despite the passenger being sure he had entered the names correctly. He immediately called bmibaby but was told he would have pay £100 to change the reservation, £14 more than the cost of the ticket. He ended up paying another £105, £5 of which was another credit card fee.

Airlines' current policies

In recent weeks, we have surveyed the current policies of selected airlines towards consumers who make errors booking tickets online. *The table below lists the policies of selected airlines. It includes all major UK carriers and many major international carriers. It is based on browsing of information for passengers on airlines' websites (it is possible that information might change or that references to booking errors are not obvious).*

Airline	24 hour rule?
Aer Lingus	No 24 rule but commitment to refund duplicate bookings
Air India	No reference to rule on website
British Airways	24-hour rule as internal policy
BMI	24-hour rule under "service commitments"
bmibaby	No reference to rule on website
Continental Airlines	24-hour rule under "service commitment"
Delta Airlines	24-hour rule under "service commitment"
easyJet	24-hour rule under "carrier regulations"
Emirates Airlines	No reference to rule on website
Flybe	24-hour rule at "airline's discretion" under terms and conditions
Jet2	24 hour rule at "airline's discretion" under terms and conditions for £40 administration fee
KLM	24 hour rule for telephone bookings
Lufthansa	24 hour rule for telephone bookings
Monarch Airlines	No reference to rule on website
Ryanair	No reference to rule on website
Singapore Airlines	No reference to rule on website
Thomas Cook	No reference to rule on website
Thomson Airways	No reference to rule on website
United Airlines	24 hour rule under "service commitment"
Virgin Atlantic	24-hour rule under "Customer charter" for administration fee of £30

Our survey showed that there appears no obvious trend for full service carriers to be more likely to include a cooling off period than no-frills airlines; easyJet, Jet2 and Flybe all include a 24-hour rule. But so do Virgin and BMI. And BA has told us that it has internal policy to refund passenger within 24 hours if a mistake has been made. It might be that those airlines that have a cooling off period are those that have most embraced new technology and altered their policies to take into account the changes to booking methods.

It is also worth noting that the US airlines included in our survey all had a 24-hour rule as one of a number of "customer commitments". Airline members of the US' Air Transport Association signed up to a number of voluntary commitments to passenger service in 1999. One of these commitments was to allow consumers to get a refund for a telephone booking within 24 hours of

making the booking. In the same year, a number of European airlines signed up to a similar voluntary scheme initiated by the European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC). This also included a commitment for a refund within 24 hours of making a telephone booking. We are disappointed that, whereas the US carriers have continued to adhere to these commitments and adapted them to fit in with new business models, including extending the 24-hour cooling off period for telephone reservations to online reservations, many European carriers have not.

What do we want?

We want more airlines to introduce a 24-hour cooling off period. And for those airlines that already have committed to a cooling off period for telephone reservations we want them to update this commitment to include online reservations.

In addition, we want them to be generally more sympathetic to those passengers who inadvertently make an error during the booking process.

What will we do?

We will continue to campaign for better practice by airlines on this issue. We think this is in the interest of both airlines and passengers. A 24-hour rule would cut out haggling between airline and complainant about where the fault lies and allow consumers to book air tickets over the internet with greater confidence.

Notes to Editors

1. *The Air Transport Users Council is the UK's consumer watchdog for air passengers.*
2. *A copy of the "Buying air tickets online – an AUC report into the potential pitfalls of booking tickets online" is available at www.auc.org.uk/docs/306/Buying%20air%20tickets%20online.pdf*
3. *For more information, contact James Fremantle, Industry Affairs Manager on 020 7240 6171.*