



Is that trip refundable? Increasingly, the answer is 'no'

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When heavy clouds covered the sky, it forced Sheri Gatens' Sedona stargazing adventure to be canceled. Gatens thought the tour company she used would refund her the event, but the \$421 she spent on four tickets was still out there somewhere.

The tour operator claimed it had issued a refund through the third-party company Gatens booked the experience. But Viator, the booking platform, kept sending her messages saying it couldn't refund tickets canceled within 24 hours of the start of her tour.

"I've written Viator explaining that we didn't cancel the tour," said Gatens, a retired medical technician from Bluffton, South Carolina. "The company they sold the tickets for had canceled because of bad weather."

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Gatens isn't alone. As COVID-19 restrictions wind down, more travelers are finding it harder to get a refund from a travel company – even when the company promises one.

"Most travel suppliers are returning to pre-pandemic cancellation policies," explains veteran travel adviser Helen Prochilo, owner of Promal Vacations. "This is how suppliers ran their business before COVID – and travelers have to go back to the old way of doing business."

What's the old way? Fighting for every refund. Using every trick and strategy in the book to ensure you get your money back. And avoiding the biggest refund mistakes.

'They should've helped me': Booking through platforms like Expedia leaves some travelers stranded

Deals 'too good to be true': Why booking flights on third-party websites can be risky



Why are so many components of your trip nonrefundable? It's simple: Even if you cancel, the company has expenses. They have to pay their guides, cleaners and luggage handlers.

"Many guests don't have deep insight into how employees are scheduled and paid in hotels," explained Stephen Fofanoff, general manager of Domaine Madeleine, a boutique hotel in Port Angeles, Washington.

His hotel offers full refunds for cancellations made at least two weeks before your stay. He also sets his employee schedules two weeks in advance to adequately staff the hotel. This allows employees to schedule time to be with their families.

"This means that if a guest cancels within that two-week period, we still pay all of the staff associated with the canceled stay," he said.

What are the tricks for not losing your money?

You don't have to lose all your money when you ask for a refund. Here are a few strategies used by the pros:

•Know the refund rules

"A lot of people simply do not read the rules," said Stephanie Goldberg-Glazer, owner of Live Well, Travel Often, a boutique travel agency. "Read the terms and conditions. See what is refundable and what is not."

So what is and isn't? The first night of a typical hotel reservation becomes nonrefundable about 48 hours before your stay. Cruises usually become nonrefundable two weeks before you cast off.

•Book a flexible travel company

Not all companies have returned to their old ways. For example, Amtrak continued to waive its change fees into late fall, and it offered refunds on its "value" and "flex" fares. "Of course, we always refund fares when there is a cancellation," said Amtrak spokesperson Marc



•Pay more to cancel

Instead of booking the cheapest ticket, consider a more flexible but expensive fare. This works with tours, too. Edward Lyimo, owner of the African safari tour company Pristine Trails, offers a 100% refundable booking option for an additional fee. "This gives our travelers eligibility for a refund if canceling for one of many accepted reasons, including COVID, injury, pre-existing medical conditions, or death of a family member," he said.

Will Gatens get her refund?

It's true that Viator has a policy that promises a full refund for cancellations made at least 24 hours before the start date of an experience. But as Gatens noted, she hadn't initiated the cancellation. And the tour operator had already refunded Viator.

Viator says Gatens' tour was refundable.

"Oftentimes, we see traveler requests come through the wrong inbox and therefore may be overlooked," Viator spokesperson Brianna Ary said. "It's important that travelers work directly with customer care to address their concerns. Otherwise, they are unlikely to get the fast and effective response they seek."

Viator refunded Gatens' \$421.

How to get your money back (even when it's nonrefundable)

Don't wait: The best way to increase your chances of getting your tickets refunded is to request your trip cancellation as soon as possible. Airlines have a 24-hour window for canceling tickets and receiving a cash refund. "Most bus and train operators offer limited windows in which you're allowed to cancel a ticket for a refund," said Bryn Culbert, a spokeswoman for the ground transportation app Wanderu.

Get insurance: That's one of the best ways to protect yourself from a nonrefundable trip. And not just any insurance, but a "cancel for any reason," said Tom Peyton, who runs a tour operator specializing in diving. "During and after COVID, all the resorts we



Negotiate: Even though it may seem like a travel company's refund rules are set in stone, they are not. Managers can override a refund rule – if you know who to ask. I publish the names, numbers and email addresses of the customer service executives on my consumer advocacy site. A brief, polite email to one of them may get you a full refund.

Eric Goldring, president of Goldring Travel, said that too often, travelers have an all-or-nothing approach to refunds. But when a company refuses to return your money, there may be a third option. Many cruise lines will offer a future cruise credit, and airlines will offer flight credits. And in many cases, that's better than nothing.

"When it comes to obtaining the best value," he says. "It is a matter of playing chess, not checkers."

Christopher Elliott is an author, consumer advocate, and journalist. He founded Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps solve consumer problems. He publishes Elliott Confidential, a travel newsletter, and the Elliott Report, a news site about customer service. If you need help with a consumer problem, you can reach him here or email him at chris@elliott.org.