

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE

AIR TRAVEL with a guitar within the U.S. and from New York to an overseas destination has always been a tricky proposition, made much more difficult with carry-on restrictions in recent years. As Sharon Isbin had pointed out a couple columns ago, 'You're made to feel like a smuggler of your own guitar.' One of the biggest issues of air travel with a musical instrument is the overall inconsistency in policy between airlines and, even within the same airline carrier, depending on which airport hub you are in. It's unlikely any of this is going to change in the foreseeable future, especially as security policies are continuously undergoing change in order to accommodate new technology, including shoe and toupee x-raying machines and bone density scans. (I'm kidding about the last two. I think.)

From a guitarist's perspective, the primary issue of bringing a guitar on board is not about its size or being at the mercy of the reigning flight attendant, as much as the fact that other passengers are allowed to abuse the two-piece carry-on rule by dragging as much luggage as possible on board in order to avoid waiting for it at baggage claim. This was one very positive facet to flying last summer's last-minute carry-on restrictions: for once, the overhead bins were entirely empty. But we're back to life-as-usual, and until one of my neighbours peers over the edge of their 'The Wall Street Journal' to tell me about a group of venture capitalists who have **decided touring musicians deserve their very own affordable airlines**, it's worth a closer look at the **current policies in order to find informed alternatives**.

Most airlines state a size guide on **their website** of what will fit into their overhead bins. This of course will vary, according to the aircraft and carrier policy so it is best to research ahead of time. In general, overhead bin sizes vary between U.S. domestic and U.S. international flights—so it's best to research the plane models in advance in order to be prepared. Dimensions given for overhead bins are often calculated as 'linear inches.' So what looks like a generous length is actually a tally of length, width and depth added together. When a maximum of 51 inches is allowed, technically, this measurement tally would not even allow a mandolin, yet alone a guitar.

Often it is said that the best way to get your guitar onto a plane is to casually and politely assume that boarding the plane with an instrument is *something you do every day*. If you're feeling particularly nervy, the best approach is to book a seat in advance toward the rear of the plane so that you may board first and find an empty overhead bin before they are filled. If possible, choose a non-stop flight on a day and time that is considered off-peak so the plane is less likely to be oversold in seats—check with your carrier on this information.

Here is a quick look at several major U.S. airline carrier policies when it comes to boarding with musical instruments:

Delta Airlines: Rumoured to have one of the unfriendliest policies toward musicians, their website immediately confirms this under their category of 'Fragile and Bulky Items' with the curious headline, 'Should you check your guitar or buy it a seat of its own? Find the best way to handle your out-of-the-ordinary stuff.'

The subtext here is that Delta considers guitars rather oxymoronically as 'out-of-the-ordinary' and as 'stuff.' Hmm, as in 'Stuff it in there?' Delta's policy also states, 'We allow fragile items that meet baggage allowance standards as carry-on or checked baggage, as long as certain requirements are met. *This may include signing a form that limits our liability.*' Also, 'Delta is not liable for loss, damage, or delay of baggage that may result from a security search conducted by any local, state, or federal agency.'

American Airlines: Their current website policy states, 'Small musical instruments may be carried on-board the aircraft providing they meet existing carry-on size requirements and fit in the overhead bin or under the seat in front of you. Case dimensions may not exceed 45 linear inches (width+length+height), except for guitars which may be brought on board only if they can be safely stowed in an overhead bin or approved stowage location in the cabin. The instrument is considered the passenger's one allowed carry-on bag. A **personal item** is allowed in addition to the instrument. If an instrument is too large to fit in the carry-on baggage space, an additional seat may be purchased. In this case, an instrument must travel in a window, **bulkhead** seat, with the customer in the adjoining seat. Instruments may also be transported as checked baggage, however, due to their fragile nature American Airlines does not accept liability for damages and has limited liability for loss. American Airlines is also not liable for any damage to checked musical instruments not presented in a hard-sided case. If the outside of the hard-sided case does not have visible damage, American Airlines is not liable for any damage to the musical instrument inside the case.'

United Airlines does not have a website policy posted that clearly states their stance with musical instruments as carry-ons but when I phoned, a representative informed me that guitars may be accepted as carry-on baggage, 'as long as it fits the regulated baggage allowance of 45" in linear length or if it fits in the overhead bin. Knowing that the linear measurement precludes the size of a guitar, this reminds me of a quote from Lewis Carroll's Alice-in-Wonderland, 'You may have jam tomorrow and yesterday but not today.'

Continental Airlines: According to their website, musical instruments may be carried on board or checked as baggage. 'If necessary, a seat can also be

purchased for an instrument. If carried on board, a musical instrument can be carried on in place of a carry-on bag. The maximum combined linear measurement (L + W + H) of the instrument is 51 inches (130 cm). If checked as baggage, the instrument should be in a hard shell case to protect it during normal handling. In addition to the above policies, stringed instruments should have the strings loosened to protect the neck from damage due to expansion and contraction which result from temperature variations. Continental will allow a customer to purchase a ticket for a musical instrument which is too fragile or bulky to be handled as checked baggage. Continental is not liable for damage to musical instruments and excess valuation may not be purchased for musical instruments.'

Southwest: Notorious for their 'Customers of Size' policy, I was curious to see what they had to say about allowing musical instruments on board. (Customers of Size are defined as those 'who are unable to lower the armrests, the definitive boundary between seats, and/or who compromise any portion of adjacent seating' and are required to proactively book the number of seats needed during initial reservations. Provided the flight doesn't oversell, the Customer of Size is reimbursed for the additional ticket.) Their musical instrument carry-on policy is, 'If your musical instrument does not meet the sizing requirements for carryon items (10"x16"x24"), it will be handled as checked baggage provided you do not wish to purchase a seat for the instrument.'

'In the event you are traveling with a musical instrument that is larger than our sizing requirements for carryon luggage and is fragile in nature, you may purchase a seat for the instrument and carry it in the cabin under the following conditions: (1) The instrument must fit in the seat without blocking aircraft signage and be secured with a seatbelt; (2) The instrument must be placed in a row of seats aft of a bulkhead or divider; and (3) Reservations must be made and a ticket must be purchased at a charge no greater than the Child's Fare.' Neither can you ask for your guitar's meal, crayons or a pack of playing cards, I suppose. 'Musical instruments cannot be transported in place of a free companion under any fare promotion. Instruments that are transported in a soft-sided case or other packaging that is not strong enough to protect the instrument under normal baggage handling conditions will be conditionally accepted, which means that Southwest assumes no liability for any damage sustained to the item during transport.'

JetBlue: Their website contained very detailed information on transporting antlers, hockey sticks, spear guns and cricket bats but nothing on guitars. A phone representative informed me that guitars are allowed in their closets because there are no closets.

Since few musicians can afford to purchase an additional ticket for their guitar and are unlikely to have additional guitars stashed in nearly every port of call, the remaining option is to check the guitar in a flight case and know that temperatures in the undercarriage of most planes reach -40°C at high altitudes.

For this reason, you might want to ask to have your guitar stowed where the animals are kept because that compartment is at least heated. Even with a well-insulated, solid flight case, it is advisable to cushion the interior around the headstock with bubble wrap and padding because this is the weak point of the guitar. If the case falls over, this is where the stress point is on the body of the guitar. Also loosen the strings and when the case is closed, a bungee cord wrapped around the case might come in handy should one of the clasps break. Insure your instrument because it is generally not covered under a routine renter's or homeowner's policy.

There have been musicians who advocate sneaky tactics, like poking a hole in a hardshell case and slipping a zippered garment bag over your new faux 11-lbs. 'suit' with the hanger anchored in the hardshell case. And recently, a letter submitted to the newsletter of Local 802, the New York Musicians Union, from a horn player, touted the merits of packing one's instrument inside a hardshell golf case after the musician observed how reverentially sporting equipment is treated by baggage handlers, compared to the care given to musical instruments. However, a horn is not shaped anything like a guitar, not to mention what security might think of your golfing technique after x-raying the baggage.

Do not argue with flight attendants. *The New York Times* published a feature last October on the sad story of the Russian-born jazz trumpeter Valery Ponomarev, who, at age 63, had his arm broken by French police when quibbling with an attendant about bringing his 1961 Connstellation trumpet on board an Air India flight from Paris to New York, where he lives. Italian guitarist Pino Forastiere informed me that he had no difficulty at all boarding a New York-to-Rome flight this past summer with his rare Martin guitar as a carry on. Rupert Boyd of Australia, who currently resides in New York, tells me that when he first came to the city, he was not allowed to bring his guitar on board.

'When I went home last August, I'd traveled around the world, through Europe with a stopover in Asia and Tahiti. The only flights I could not take my guitar on board was when I was flying from New York to Spain and then my last flight from Los Angeles to New York. It really just seemed dependent on who was at the check in desk. Checking my guitar, of course, is always a great concern. I'm using a Dormer case made out of carbon fiber and produced in Australia. It is quite strong for its weight. If I have to check my guitar, I ask that it be hand carried and not placed on the conveyor belts. More often than not though, it comes out at the other end on the conveyor belt. So far - fingers crossed - my guitar has always survived.'

Jorge Caballero is one rare player who has told me he is prepared to perform on any guitar given to him. When he does bring a guitar with him, Caballero says, 'I haven't had any problems, except for Delta. I think the issue is more specific to airlines than countries.'

Musicians in the U.S. often look to a letter issued by the Transportation Security Administration as a carte blanche for carrying guitars on board but really, it is

only a guideline and I've noticed the letter has been removed from the TSA's official website and replaced with a more airlines compliant policy. However, the original letter is available as a .pdf download from: <http://www.local1000.com/pdf/carryon.pdf>.

So with all your options laid out, just short of renting and borrowing an instrument, I wish everyone the best of luck with air travel and their guitars. If it looks really desperate, you might take a tip from Morgan Conatser of De Queen, Arkansas, though admittedly, it did not seem to help him much. Reported last November via several newswires, a 'guitar-shaped bulge in Morgan Conatser's clothing tipped off a music store owner that that might be a crime in progress. Clifton Lovell, owner of Guitars and Cadillacs on U.S. Highway 71 in De Queen, was talking with a customer last week when he saw Conatser, aged 29, walking out of the store.

Lovell is quoted as saying, 'I saw him walking out to his pickup truck and the bulges in his leather jacket. I said, 'Hey what have you got there?'

Conatser, replied, 'Nothing.'

Lovell pointed toward the unnatural shapes in Conatser's jacket and pants and said, 'You've got something.

Conatser then removed a solid body electric guitar from his pants leg and from underneath his jacket.

The neck of the guitar was almost down to his knee and the back of the guitar was almost up to his neck. It wasn't hard to spot. There was no way he could sit down or get into his pickup,' Lovell said.

As a postscript to my article in the last issue on the West Dean International Guitar Festival, I would like to offer a clarification on luthier Paul Fischer's lecture: Fischer delivered a lecture entitled 'The Makers Legacy', the purpose of which was to recognise in a public forum the work of probably the two most important instrument makers working in England during the 20th century: Arnold Dolmetsch (1858-1940) and David Rubio (1934-2000.) Paul Fischer was associated with these two important figures both directly and indirectly. Fischer studied with Robert Goble, who had worked with Dolmetsch from 1924 to 1937 and later Fischer joined Rubio, becoming manager of his workshops.

The study of physics and acoustics as related to instrument making was Fischer's own work, after an approach by physicist Dr. Bernard Richardson. Richardson's work was met with little interest at the time by Rubio, though he later developed his own particular approach to the subject. The work of Dr. Richardson encouraged Fischer to develop his own ideas about the guitar and not just slavishly copy the instruments of past masters.

The guitar like all instruments is not just a tool, but a beautiful object in its own right and recognised as such by the great artists of the 17th and 18th centuries. Fischer displayed three unique guitars specially constructed to celebrate his 50th anniversary year: One flamenco made of old, quality cypress and traditional pegs and spruce top; a guitar made of birdseye maple with cedar top, and a guitar made of Brazilian Kingwood, which he described 'as hard and brittle as Brazilian rosewood and from the same family. The soundboard was made of extremely high quality cypress.